



เอกสารประกอบการประชุม
โครงการจัดประชุมวิชาการระดับนานาชาติ
“อารยณัฐันในอาเซียน”

ชุดโครงการ เวทีวิจัยมนุษยศาสตร์ไทย
สำนักงานกองทุนสนับสนุนการวิจัย
(กลุ่มงานมนุษยศาสตร์)

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ตุลาคม 2553

ชื่อโครงการ:

โครงการจัดประชุมวิชาการระดับนานาชาติ "อารมณีสันในอาเซียน"

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1 ปี 6 เดือน (ตั้งแต่ 1 พฤษภาคม 2552 – 31 ตุลาคม 2553)

บทคัดย่อเชิงกระบวนการ

โครงการนี้เปิดโอกาสให้อาจารย์ นักวิชาการ นักวิจัย และนิสิตนักศึกษาในระดับบัณฑิตศึกษา จากสถาบันอุดมศึกษาทั้งในประเทศไทยและต่างประเทศในภูมิภาคอาเซียน ได้แก่ อินโดนีเซีย มาเลเซีย ฟิลิปปินส์ เวียดนาม สิงคโปร์ และนอกภูมิภาคอาเซียน ได้แก่ ออสเตรเลียและสหรัฐอเมริกา เสนอบทความวิชาการในการประชุมวิชาการระดับนานาชาติ เป็นบทความที่ผ่านการคัดเลือก 18 บทความ และบทความรับเชิญ 5 บทความ รวม 23 บทความ

ก่อนการนำเสนอบทความ โครงการฯ ได้รับเกียรติจาก ม.ร.ว. สุชุมพันธุ์ บริพัตร ผู้ว่าราชการ กรุงเทพมหานคร เป็นองค์ปาฐกถาถึงประสบการณ์ชีวิตทางการทูตและการเมืองที่สามารถใช้ประโยชน์จากธรรมเนียมในการแก้ปัญหาและเพื่อเอื้อให้การทำงานประสบความสำเร็จ การปาฐกถา นำติดตามด้วยการสัมภาษณ์พระมหาดมปอง พระนักเทศน์ที่ใช้อารมณีสันในการเทศนาธรรมเพื่อนำมาวให้คนรุ่นใหม่หันมาสนใจในพุทธศาสนา

การประชุมวันแรกเสร็จสิ้นด้วยการเลี้ยงอาหารค่ำที่เป็นเกียรติแก่ผู้เสนอบทความ ในการนี้ มีการแสดงละครใบ้ (pantomime) ที่สะท้อนความจริงที่ว่าอารมณีสันทำให้เกิดความสนุกสนาน แต่ในส่วนลึกอาจใช้ในการวิพากษ์สังคมได้ด้วย

การประชุมวิชาการระหว่างวันที่ 4 – 5 สิงหาคม 2553 สิ้นสุดด้วยกิจกรรมสาธิตการเล่านิทานในหัวข้อ "ASEAN Tales: Humour and More" ซึ่งผู้ฟังสนุกกับการเล่านิทานและได้เห็นความสำคัญของการรักษาเอกลักษณ์และวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นด้วย และท้ายที่สุดเป็นการบรรยายสรุปให้เห็นภาพรวมของการประชุมที่ทำให้ผู้ฟังตระหนักถึงความสำคัญ แห่งมนุ่หน้าและความซับซ้อนของอารมณีสัน เมื่อสิ้นสุดโครงการ จะมีผลงานรวมบทความ 7 บทความ รวมทั้งบทปาฐกถา นำและบทสรุป ในขั้นต่อไปจะมีบรรณาธิการปรับปรุงแก้ไขต้นฉบับให้เรียบร้อยพร้อมพิมพ์เผยแพร่ต่อไป

บทคัดย่อเชิงเนื้อหาและประโยชน์ของผลงาน

1. บทความทั้ง 23 บทความและการแสดงที่น่าสนใจ แสดงให้เห็นว่าอารมณีสันเป็นวิถีการหนึ่งที่สะท้อนวิถีการมอง การรับรู้ การให้ความหมาย และการถ่ายทอดประสบการณ์ของมนุษย์ที่ซับซ้อนอย่างมีศิลปะ

2. บทความทั้ง 23 บทความและการแสดง เป็นเครื่องมือชี้ให้เห็นว่าถ้าวิเคราะห์ให้ต้องทำ
อารมณ์ขึ้นซึ่งคนทั่วไปมักจะคิดว่าเป็นเพียงความบันเทิง สามารถเผยให้เห็นความหมาย
เบื้องลึกหรือความจริงของอารมณ์ขึ้น
3. บทความและการแสดงครั้งนี้ แสดงให้เห็นว่าอารมณ์ขึ้นเป็นตัวอย่างของความจริงที่ว่า
ประชาคมอาเซียนมีฐานทางวัฒนธรรมร่วมกันอยู่มิใช่น้อย การเข้าใจอารมณ์ขึ้นของ
ผู้คนหลากหลายเผ่าพันธุ์จะมีส่วนช่วยปลูกฝังความสัมพันธ์อันดีงามระหว่างบุคคล
ชุมชนชาติ และนานาชาติด้วย

คำสำคัญ: อาเซียน / อารมณ์ขึ้น / วัฒนธรรม / อัตลักษณ์

Project Title: International conference on “Humour in ASEAN” in the Humanities Research Forum
Project Code: PDG52H0011
Project Director: Associate Professor Pachee Yuvajita, Ph.D.
Project Period: May 1st, 2009 – October 31st, 2010

Summary of Work Process

The project served as a venue for lecturers, researchers, academics and graduate students from institutions of higher education in the ASEAN region—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore and Thailand, as well as outside the region, Australia and the United States—to present academic papers at an international conference. Twenty-three papers were presented during the two-day event, held on August 4th and 5th, 2010 at Chulalongkorn University. The presentations consisted of five papers from invited speakers from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand, and a further eighteen papers from selected participants.

The conference was inaugurated with a key-note speech from M.R. Sukhumbandhu Paribatra, the Governor of Bangkok, who demonstrated, through his personal experience, how humour plays a role in the political and administrative arena. Before the presentation of papers, there was an interview with the Reverend Phra Maha Sompong, a renowned Buddhist monk, who uses humour to great effect in teaching the Dhamma. The first day of the conference ended with a welcome dinner organized in honour of the participants. The event included a pantomime show which created an entertaining atmosphere but which could also be taken as social criticism, thus demonstrating one of the subtle functions of humour.

The conference concluded with two more activities—a demonstration of tale-telling—“ASEAN Tales: Humour and More” and some concluding remarks on the two-days of presentations. The demonstration showed that folktales not only serve the purpose of entertaining their audience but are also a means of preserving folk identity and culture. The concluding remarks focused the attention of the audience on the roles and functions of humour, highlighting its subtleties and complexities.

During the final phase, a collection of seven papers will be edited and compiled into a volume for publication.

Summary of the Contents and Relevance of the Papers

The twenty-three academic papers on humour shed light on the subject as follows:

1. All twenty three papers and performances were solid testimonies of how human beings use humour to reflect their perception and their way of thinking and both define and transmit their experience.

2. All twenty three papers and performances showed that humour, which tends to be taken lightly as mere entertainment, can, on closer observation, reveal deeper and more serious meaning beneath the amusing façade.
3. The papers and performances showed that members of the ASEAN community share some common cultural ground. At the same time, they made the audience aware that understanding humour from different social and cultural backgrounds contributes to their understanding of other people and may, eventually, be able to relieve conflict at the personal, communal, national and international level.

Key words: ASEAN / Humour / Culture / Identity

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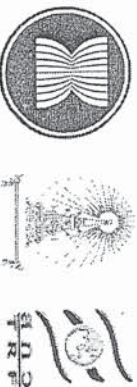
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“Humour in ASEAN” International Conference

4 – 5 August 2010

Department of English, the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University
In Cooperation with the Humanities Research Forum
The Thailand Research Fund (TRF)

Rationale

The “Language, Literature and Culture in ASEAN” International Conference organized by the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of ASEAN from 4 – 5 August 2008, has laid the basis for another international conference of a more specific theme, aiming to create another platform for academics and interested individuals to present their research on specific topics related to the ten ASEAN members and their people.

Humour is a person’s characteristic disposition, which is shared by people in the ASEAN Region and is found in various discourses—in their messages, uses of language, and styles of presentation including the nonverbal like pictures or other art forms. While works involving humour tend to be taken lightly as mere entertainment, close observations on them often reveal deeper meanings hidden beneath the amusing façade. Humour is frequently used to satirise certain truths in society one cannot openly criticise or to mock the vices one cannot directly expose. Humour can turn bad situations into positive ones or at least help make the most intolerable circumstance more bearable. Humour may cause laughter, but it also reveals an ability to comically convey life’s absurdities. Ultimately, in many cases, the sources of guffaws themselves actually laugh—unwittingly or not—at their own flaws and foibles.

The organisers of this conference believe that the diversity in race, language, history, belief and culture of the ASEAN countries can help reflect the richness of humour in the region. It is also hoped that this assembly of researchers, academics and interested individuals will contribute to the exchange of ideas and the better understanding of art, as well as the roles and functions of humour, which may eventually lead to the application of humour to relieve conflicts at the personal, communal, national and regional levels.

This international conference aims to serve as an arena for researchers and interested individuals, mainly from within Thailand and the ASEAN region, to present their works engaging the theme of humour.

Objectives

1. To serve as an international platform for specialists, academics, students and those interested in ASEAN to present their research works on humour in the media, art, literature, cartoon and other forms of presentation in the region.
2. To analyse, compare and contrast humour in different social and cultural contexts in the ASEAN region.
3. To bring forward the connection between humour, culture, identity and race both within and outside the ASEAN region.
4. To strengthen the humanities research network in Thailand, as well as networks within and outside the ASEAN region.

Venue

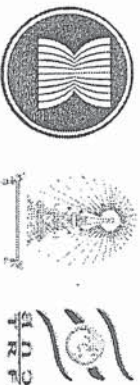
Room 105 Maha Chulalongkorn Building
The Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University
Bangkok, Thailand

Registration Fee

None

For more information, please visit our official website at
<http://www.HumourinASEAN.com>
Or contact the organizing committee, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University,
Bangkok 10330, Thailand

Tel. (662) 2182724 or (662) 2184725
E-mail: cuaseanconference@yahoo.com



Program

“Humour in ASEAN” International Conference 4 – 5 August 2010

Room 105 Maha Chulalongkorn Building
Department of English, the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University
Bangkok, Thailand
In Cooperation with the Humanities Research Forum
The Thailand Research Fund (TRF)

Wednesday, 4 August 2010

08.00 – 08.45	Registration
08.45 – 08.50	Welcome Speech by the President of Chulalongkorn University
08.50 – 09.00	Opening Speech by the Director of the Thailand Research Fund
09.00 – 10.00	Keynote Speech by M. R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra (Governor of Bangkok)
10.00 – 10.15	Break
10.15 – 11.15	The Role of Humour in Dharma Preaching An Interview with Phra Maha Sompong (Soithong Temple) Interlocutor and Translator: Dangkamon Na-pombejra
11.15 – 12.15	Invited Paper Session I <i>Notes on Comedy, Humour ... and Laugh</i> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến Center of Studies of Vietnamese Wisdom <i>Satire: The Power of the Joke</i> Kam Raslan Writer, Malaysia Moderator: Chaayan Rajchagool
12.15 – 13.15	Lunch Break
13.15 – 14.45	Invited Paper Session II

*Halakhah: Defining the “National” in the Humor of
Philippine Popular Culture*
Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta
University of the Philippines, Philippines

'Excorporation' and 'Carnivalesque' in Tactics of Humour for Nonviolent Struggle: The Case of Serbia's Student-Led Protests and the Subsequent Resistance Movement (Otpor), 1996-2000

Janjira Sombatpoonsiri

PhD candidate, LaTrobe University, Australia

Humour as a Criticism of Life, an Indonesian Perspective

Ayu Sutarto

University of Jember, Indonesia

Moderator: Chaiwat Satha-Anand

14.45 – 15.00

Break

15.00 – 16.30

Submitted Paper Session I

Humor Mechanisms in Jokes about the Aged

Siriporn Sriwarakan

Ethnic Joke in Lan Na Amusement Tales

Chalermchai Parasuk

Lao Jokes as Supplementary Materials for Teaching

Lao to Thai Learners

Varisa Kamalanavin

What's So Funny About Sri Thanonchai?

John Hartmann

Pinitbhand Paribatra

Moderator: Siriporn Phakdeephassook

Thursday, 5 August 2010

09.00 – 10.30

Submitted Paper Session II

Room 105

The Power of Humour in Redressing Social Imbalances:

The Case of an I-san Comedy Film

Amata Jantarangsee

Queer Representations and Thai Laughter:

The Iron Ladies (2000)

Oradol Kaewprasert

"Laugh and Learn" on Contemporary Thai Stage

Dangkamon Na-pombejra

Indonesian Comedy: Socio-Cultural Studies of

Dhagelan Mataram

M. Sholahuddin Nur'azmy

Moderator: Simon Wright

Room 203

The Rhythm of the Blues: Humor, Fantasy and Melancholy in Philippine and Singaporean Gay Writing in English

Miguel Antonio N. Lizada

How Can Synonyms Become Funny? A Case Study into the Use of Transformative Literary Devices in Umarut

Roy Rueng

Kanjana Srisanut

Kandaporn Jaroenkitboworn

Animation, a Seriously Funny Subject in Cross Cultural Telling Tales

Millie Young

Factors Influencing Comprehension of Comic Strips

Angvarrah Lieungnapar

Richard Watson Todd

Moderator: Wasana Wongsurawat

10.30 – 10.45

Break

10.45 – 12.15

Submitted Paper Session III

Room 105

Humor and Pathos: Filipino Diaspora Drama (Carlos

Bulosan's The Romance of Magno Rubio and Chris D.

Martinez's Welcome to Intelstar)

Carina Chotirawe

Laughing beyond Borders: P. Intharapalit's Phon Nikorn

Kim-Nguan and Its Cambodian Brothers

Klairung Amratisha

The Roles of the Comic Tales of the Thai-Khmer People in Lower Northeastern Thailand

Direk Hongthong

Moderator: Chaiyan Rajchagool

Room 203

What Ignites Humour in ASEAN?

Yong Mun Cheong

The Bright and Dark Sides of Humor

Chantima Wangsomchok

Humour in Guided Tour Discourse

Sawitri Hammond

Moderator: Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta

12.15 – 13.30

Lunch Break

13.30 – 15.00

ASEAN Tales: Humour and More (Performance)

Wajuppa Tossa and Company

15.00 – 15.15

Break

15.15 – 16.15

Closing Remarks: Are We or Are We not Amused?

Chaiyan Rajchagool, Payap University

16.15 – 16.20

Closing Ceremony by the Head of the Department of English,
the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Notes on Comedy, Humour....and Laugh

Hoàng Ngọc Hiến*

The view of comedy in man is a view about man from two aspects of dissension and incompatibility: body and soul, instinct and intellect, saying and doing, how man actually lives and how man should live. When the serious incompatibility reaches the extremity, when the distance between the two aspects reaches the limitation, comedy approaches tragedy.

Humour is the reaction (usually mild, sometimes severe) to what are objectionable deeds, those that are not correct, disagreeable, improper, odd, pointless, self-indulgent, slipshod....in short, for all thugs against the common sense of human beings. It is necessary to see that in the common sense of human beings, there are everlasting, popular elements and there are also changes that follow the era and the cultural space. Therefore, humour also changes according to the era and cultural space.

Humour is the manifestation of a controlling intelligence (with different levels), at least in the effort to dominate our direct emotional reactions in order to express them in an indirect way, by beating around the bush, double-talk, speaking in an ironical voice...., no matter how humour is expressed it also exhibits the participation of sharp intelligence, creates humorous effects, makes those who are criticized also laugh in spite of being annoyed, and laughter proves that the one who uses humour and the one who is criticized have the same language: the language of intelligence. Speaking sharply is the manifestation of a sharp intelligence but also the manifestation of bad temper. The French have a proverb: “bons mots, mauvais caractere” (meaning “using sharp words sometimes reveal a bad temper”. Especially the young sometimes use a sharp sentence to show off their sharpness, enjoy the laughter from people around responding to their sayings; they don’t care about their victims that are hurt by their sayings. So, mild indulgence is desirable in humour.

Let us analyze some funny situations, funny stories, humorous sentences and jokes in order to recognize the nature and structure of humour and witty sayings.

One speaker stands up to deliver a speech, talking about unattainable, profound things making the surrounding audience express its admiration. His friend sitting beside him pulls his chair backward while the speaker is passionately delivering the speech. After finishing his speech, the speaker goes to sit down, trips and falls to the ground. The audience bursts out laughing. Why did the audience laugh? When the speaker fell to the ground, at the same time, in the mind of the audience, the speaker is judged from two aspects, more exactly, two “frames of reference”, two “associated contexts” (the terminology of Arthur Koestler, the author “The Act of Creation” (1964), a work about the collective theory of laughter). When the speaker delivers his speech, he is judged by the frame of reference “spirit” with the most unattainable, transcendent manifestation of knowledge and intelligence; but when he takes a false step and falls to the ground, the attendants think that the speaker has fallen into the frame of “material”, he is only a block of material and like other

* Director of the Research Centre of Vietnamese Wisdom Studies

materials such as a rock, a brick falls to the ground because of its weight, inertia and the force of gravity. Noticeably, these two frames of reference (material and spirit) are disharmonious. Experiencing people, situations and things in two disharmonious frames of reference at the same time, is considered by A. Koestler as the structure of intelligence of all forms of humour, witty sayings and other kinds of jokes. This is just the basic aspect of humour. Another aspect -no less important- is kindling to create the emotional motivation of humour. The kindling is the visceral penchant to tease, to sneer, the impulses of criticism and slyness. In the case of the falling speaker, his friend who secretly pulled the chair backwards more or less must have slyly sneering "visceral penchant" to make people laugh. From now it is clear to see that in humour, the visceral penchant of sneering has different levels: the light level is a lovely joke, funny joke, playful..., the higher level is teasing, sneering..., strong and severe levels are satiric criticism,... sly thoughts also have many different nuances: sometimes ill will be expressed overtly, libellously, insultingly.....offending brutally those who are laughed at....., some ill will make people think about dirty tricks and sometimes ill will vaguely and lightly mix with good sentiments such as sympathy and friendliness.....in not all the cases of humour visceral penchant to tease, to sneer, the impulses of slyness are clear and visible. If this visceral penchant to tease, to sneer is the salt of humour, it is desirable that we taste that saltiness as if we taste dishes which are so seasoned that we don't feel the saltiness, just not thinking about salt.

Humour usually directs itself towards the laughed at object, aiming at the weakness of this object. If the author of humour has a mild indulgence towards the object, the laughter will contain warm human culture. The mild spirit can soften the penchant to tease, to sneer, the sly temper but this will not make the laughter of humor become boring. The warmth or boring nature is due to the wit and profound intelligence of the author of humour.

In general, humour is more and more humanized, that has been the progressive tendency of humour in the world cultural history. In the old age of Greece, foreigners as well as stammerers were teased and called barbaros (means barbarous). Sometimes, foreigners were not considered as human beings (called "man di"=savage). Nowadays, in less developed villages, locals who have limited thoughts ridicule and sneer at people from other villages who don't speak the same dialect as they. The humour of the old Israelites seems to be brutal. In the Old Testament, among the 29 parts mentioning laughter, there are 13 parts mentioning sneering, ridicule and scorn, and only two joyful laughs. In the old age of Greece, humour had the character of struggle, heavy criticism and therefore was compared to a dagger; coming to the classical old age, humour was compared to a poisoned nib; later on the poison was reduced with romance and imagination.

Coming back to the case of the speaker having pranks played on him by his friend. If he fell down with a serious injury to his head and was bleeding...the audiences would not laugh. The audiences would be emotional and compassionate: in laughter, humour fears compassion for the laughed at object, and laughter also fears emotion.

One play about the street children is when the streets are deserted, the children drop on the pavement a clean and neat pack (like a pack of money that someone has dropped) and they hide themselves in one place to observe. A passer-by sees that pack, looks around, bends down, picks it up joyfully, walks for a short distance, opens

the pack and throws it away.....embarrassed. At this time, the street children burst out laughing. Here is also a conflict between the two aspects of reference. Subjectively, he has the aspect of joy in getting property; objectively, he is in the aspect of a trap, trapped and embarrassed. Sometimes, children make the pack dirty. The more the contrast between embarrassment and joy, the more excitement and joy they have.

In the funny story about a mean man “it is better to die!”, laughter arises from the struggle between two logics: the friend behaves in accordance with common sense: he must save the friend’s life but the mean man consistently follows his mean logic: money is all to him, more precious than his life. One interesting thing is that the friend makes concessions: from five quan (old Vietnamese currency) to three quan while the mean man remains consistent to his mean logic. There is a contradiction between the flexibility and rigidity. This funny story finishes without a clear resolution whether the mean man is dead or saved. The saying “three quan is still expensive, it is better to die!” ends the story but it doesn’t lead to any particular solution, it just perfects his meanness, his mean logic, and highlights the contradiction between the two aspects of reference: the logic of common sense and the logic of the mean man. Supposing that the story finished with the death of the mean man, there wouldn’t be any humorous effect; the readers would feel pity for him and as we know, laughter fears emotion.

In the funny stories of Trang Quynh he entertains his lords to a “Mam Da feast”, the laughter is maintained because there are changes from this pair of contrast aspect of reference to another one. The lord waits to enjoy “mam da” - a “rare” and “wonderful” dish but in reality, it is just rice, and “water morning glory” dipped into sauce “dai phong” (the aspect of waiting and aspect of reality). The lord thinks that the sauce “dai phong” is a “rare” dish but it is just soy sauce (aspect of belief and aspect of reality). Above all is the contradiction between the prosperous life of the lord (also has its own misery) and the ordinary, simple-mannered life (also has its own happiness). In the first frame of reference, the lord likes the delicacy but it doesn’t feel delicious; in the second frame of reference, when the lord is hungry and “water morning glory” is dipped into soy sauce, the lord “feel delicious, and asks Trang Quynh to get him rice constantly”. Talking about this story, it is easy to recognize Trang Quynh’s sense of teasing and slyness towards the lord: at last, the lord is swindled. His clear mind can’t be seen in the story, and it turns out that the lord is naïve, half-witted, his high rank disappears, like other normal people. When he is hungry, whatever he eats is delicious.

Analyzing the funny story “marriage pig, new shirt” as follows:

There is a man who likes to boast of his property. One day, after getting a new shirt, he immediately wears it and stands at his front gate to wait for someone to praise him. From morning until afternoon, no one praises him, so he feels very angry.

While he is very angry, he sees another boastful man running towards him who asks loudly:

-Did you see my marriage pig running across here?

-That man immediately raises his coat-tails and says:

-Since I began wearing this new shirt, I haven’t seen any pigs running across here!
Vietnamese funny folk tale (Literature Press-1964)

Boasting is also a habit of human beings. A boastful person has the need to boast. This need expressed purely and directly makes people feel uncomfortable. But if this need connects with actions and other sayings which distract attention it will create a humorous effect. Connecting strayly, impudently and unreasonably is more ridiculous. Sayings in this kind of story perform the role of informing the contents needed to be asked and answered. In the question of the one who finds his marriage pig, the need to boast is expressed in one word: marriage (in marriage pig). The answer from the one who like to boast about his shirt is expressed in his action (showing his coat-tails) and the whole clause (since I began wearing this new shirt) overshadows the content needed to be answered. And in the context, the audience may think that this guy only thinks about showing off his shirt and can't know whether a pig runs across or not. The art of humour here is rather profound. The question (in which the need to boast is only expressed a little bit) makes people smile, it is this smile that prepares and starts a big laugh after listening to the answer (in which the need to boast is expressed). Supposing that the one finding his pig only uses a normal question (there will be no need for the interjected boast) will make the humorous effect weaken. Also in the story of a mean man "it is better to die!", the character emerges twice. The first time, he emerges with the sentence: "five quan is too expensive!", the second time with the sentence: "three quan is still expensive, it is better to die!" creates strong effect.

The funny story "marriage pig, new shirt" has basic elements of humour:

- The frame of reference "the need to boast" rushes violently and distracts attention the frame of reference "the content of informed sayings"
- Implying to sneer boastful habit
- The art of humour: first create "smile" in order to prepare and start a "bursting out of laughing"

The funny story "Prostrating Uncle De!" is a good story. The ending is about the sudden, odd clash of two associated contexts. The mother's behaviour "furiously, turning up her skirt" and what the child sees create an associated context with a ternagant, obscenity and untidiness. And the behaviour of the child "putting his hands together, politeness: - prostrating himself before Uncle De! creates an associated context differently, that is polite, stately (side-whiskers), respect ("Uncle De" double respect: age and fame)....the behaviour of the child is also expressed in another funny thing: it turns out that the child only sees his side-whiskers so far, nothing similar to what the child see when the mother turns up her dress, except his side-whiskers. From here, one funny thing can be recognized: the uncle is greatly mistaken in being satisfied with the child's greetings which he thinks are the sign of respect. In reality, that is just the stunned child's mechanical behaviour towards his side-whiskers. In the humorous art of the story, it also creates "smile" to prepare for the "bursting out of laughter" which ends the story. The mother asks her child three times to check his study result. The humour in the conversation makes us smile due to the dissension of logic which is summed up in Vietnamese idioms: head in Ngo, body in So, the husband says chicken, the wife says duck, one man's beard pitches on another woman, husband ties, wife unties....the stunned child names the simplest items incorrectly three times: he calls the pipe spittoon, he calls tea-pot portable earthen stove....here either have the preparation for the mother's anger or for the action of bursting out laughing: "prostrating uncle De!". In the treasure of Vietnamese funny

stories, the contrary motif between the hair around the mouth and “hair” in the vulva is repeated in many stories. In the story “the hair dye” (see the treasure of Vietnamese funny stories compiled by Nguyen Cu – Phan Trong Thuong, literature press, 1996, pages 313) the servant is young, the old host dyes his beard black to lure the servant. The servant disagrees. The host threatens to rape her “until your hair is grey, then let you get married” the servant curls up her lips: - I don’t need! I have the hair dye! In the story “similar to your beard” (cited book, p. 154), one mandarin of district has to work far away from home while his wife is going to give birth at home. He asks one child to go home to see whether his wife has given birth already or not. The stunned child afraid of the pregnant woman doesn’t dare to enter the house and just stands outside the fence to observe. Suddenly, the pregnant woman goes into the garden and lifts up her dress to pass water. The stunned child retells how the mandarin what he saw...the following is the conversation ends:

“After listening, he felt happy and asked:

Is it a boy or a girl?

I don’t know whether it is a boy or a girl, but I saw it is like you.

Look like me about what?

Look like your beard!”

In the story “man without a mouth”, one man with too much beard covering all his mouth is teased by the kids “man without mouth”, furiously, while uncovering his beard to show his mouth, he scolds the kids: - if it is not my mouth, is it your mama’s vulva? Vietnamese has the idiom “thick beard, deep eyes” to show the outward look of a sensual man. Does “beard” contrast with “hair” to create laugh in order to ridicule the men who have “lewdness”, “lustful habit”? To play on words, “to speak back-slang” is usually used to create a humorous effect in the funny folk tale and daily sayings. In the humorous folk-song “an old woman goes shopping at Cau Dong market”, the word *loi* in sentence 2 is understood with the meaning “benefits” in the neutral announcement of the old woman would like to get married. In sentence 4 (finish) the meaning of the word *loi* changes into a different meaning connected to “gun”, return the old woman to the actual situation of her old age. Funny and witty word-play is usually based on two completely different meanings of a word, more exactly, of two homonymous words, the two meanings of two frames of reference don’t harmonize each other, the sneering element is always associated with the second meaning. There is also the case of word-play basing on the literal and figurative meanings of a word. The plot of Trang Quynh story creates “this man, that woman” from figurative to literal meanings of the group of word “this man, that woman”. When Trang Quynh talks to those who are greedy for position and fame in the village: “...if you want to be this man, that woman, I will help you”, the word group “this man, that woman” means position, fame and social status figuratively. But when Trang Quynh plays tricks on them, “this man, that woman” means “this man” has sexual intercourse with “that woman” literally (that is another man’s wife). The plot “there are no teeth to chew” is based on the figurative and literal meaning of the word group “clench teeth”. One mother in law and her daughter in law are widows. The mother in law warns her daughter in law: “our fates are unlucky, so we have to clench our teeth to accept it!” the word group is understood figuratively. But when the mother in law has a love affair, the daughter in law recalls her warnings and she uses literal meaning of the word group to justify herself: “I only warn you, for me I don’t have any more teeth to chew”.

“To speak back-slang” is a kind of popular word-play in Vietnamese funny stories and in the daily sayings of ordinary people. “The back-slang phrase” doesn’t appear in texts or spoken words; it is inferred by speakers or listeners from “normal word phrase” existing in texts or sayings. For example, in the story Trang Quynh “kick water-fern”, “kick water-fern” is a “normal spoken phrase”. Readers or listeners must infer the back-slang phrase “having sex with a woman” from “kick water-fern”. In funny stories, using back-slang must create the context for readers (listeners) to catch “normal spoken phrase” to change to back-slang. Certainly, that person must have some experiences of speaking back-slang. In sneering back-slang, the “back-slang phrase” is usually coarse. The “Normal spoken phrase” is more elegant (from neuter to solemnly expressive aspect. For example, a pair of sneering parallel sentences is written at the pre-death tomb of a rich, arrogant deputy whose last name is Lai and who used to be engaged in the pig business:

-Brightly the western road, passers-by praises the pre-death tomb of great
mandarin Lai (Mandarin for pig business)
-Far-resounding the northern village, here and there, only respect the great-
grandfather in inhabitants (lice in penis)

Superior to humorous word-play is the humorous one in thought. The latter humour also has the partitions of different aspects, inharmonious, sometimes totally strange. It is called word-play in thought because it has the aspect of profound thought, and requires high analyzed thought to catch the ideas arising from the partition of two aspects. In the story “the complaint from Ms Trung Trac of Nguyen Ai Quoc, there is a change and contradiction from the frame of reference of eastern space and time (three drum sounds mark the watch Tung!Tung!Tung! to the frame of reference Western abstract time multiplied by 5 make 15, then change to a philosophical frame of reference (number 3, the most miserable one in the Duong Cuu and finally.....about the frame of reference concerning life of king and mandarins of southern court (“hunching back three times” of the eunuch informs An Nam king that the sky is bright). It is hard to analyze the humour created by the contradictory cross of frames of reference, but here and there appear hints of smiles, vague and secret. Especially the voice of the story teller is profound, mixed with a lot of nuances. “The night-watch has just marked three times, Tung, Tung, Tung! You are Westerners, how do you understand?” this is the scolding voice, but pretended voice, also the same as flattering a child, we pretend to scold an adult for his unforgiveable ignorance: how smart, how wise is the child and so for Western readers this world seems to be so far, so dark and mysterious.....it turns out that this world is not mysterious. In front of the readers is the scene of reality and vileness: that is “hunching back three times” of the eunuch, whose “shrill Woman voice” reports to “His Excellency Duoi” “there was an order to start away from the court handed down. This frame of reference evokes the slipshod, vile life of the king and mandarins of southern court, the previous philosophical frame of reference gives it the depressiveness of historical fate. Vu Trong Phung’s literature has extraordinarily humorous and intellectual sentences which prove that the author has a sharp, flexible intelligence, changes from this channel to another one, cross- partition of different waves and wavelength, of distant frames of reference provoke the arising the sudden meanings. In the essay “ Industry of getting married to Westerners” of Vu Trong Phung, when the author compares “the bed of a Vietnamese woman married to Frenchman” with “the police’s club”, and “the hammer of the blacksmith”, “the bed

of a Vietnamese woman married to Frenchman”-only a tool for daily life is put into the category “means of production” (in the period of Vu Trong Phung, knowing this category and parodying it is a proof of superb intelligence, and when the author compares it with “the neck of Vietnamese deputy”, this “neck” is put into the category of means of production, this time not the Vietnamese woman married to Frenchman but “nodding deputy” is ridiculed and this time also has the change of different frame of reference, the neck is the organic part of the alive body is now compared with inorganic things: bed, club, hammer.....deputy as social office requires the participation of the whole personality of human beings to work and fulfil their duties. In Vu Trong Phung’s ways of comparison, the activities of this office are finally brought together in the neck and the neck of the “nodding deputy” only plays the role of nodding, all the mechanical, simple movements like the club in police’s hand, the hammer in the hand of the blacksmith. The humoristic image of the deputy’s neck identified as inorganic tool with mechanical movements provoke laugh and here the laugh is the reaction against the materialization of human beings, the mechanization of the liveliness (once again can’t but remember the theory of Bergson about laugh). So, in the space of Vu Trong Phung’s humorous sentences we have crossing of contrasty plans, another contrast to be mentioned is the contrast between the static state (the bed of a Vietnamese woman married to a Frenchman belongs to static *in*) and the dynamic state (club, hammer, neck of police, blacksmith, deputy belongs to dynamic *yang*). We once again meet the partition between the man’s plan and thing’s plan in a sentence describing Madam Doan’ which doesn’t have any humorous elements: “Madam Doan with Japanese umbrella, leather purse, and dog steps down” (*So do*, literature press, 1998, page 26). In this sentence, “Japanese umbrella” and “leather purse” are nouns indicating the objects used as adjectives playing the role of a predicate to specify the characteristics of Madam Doan. Therefore, objects become the characteristics of human beings (humorous effect). In this sentence, the noun dog can be understood as the subject of the verb “step down”. It can be understood as a predicate playing the role like “Japanese umbrella”, or “leather purse” specifying the characteristics of Madam Doan (with this version of interpretation, the humorous effect is stronger).

To speak back-slang is a phenomenon particular to Vietnamese. Foreigners may not enjoy the humour of speaking back-slang when their language doesn’t have this phenomenon. Humour originates from climate, indigenous lifestyle, language, psychology and logic of indigenous people. It can be mentioned about the national nuance of humour. Humorous style is also related to the psychology of age groups. Children’s jests are usually related to shit, wind, making water, defecating....young people are eager for the jests about sex. In an investigation about the laughter of American children carried out in 1961, the researchers concluded: at this age, youths can laugh when others feel embarrassed, annoyed or have tricks played on them (this age has no pity on others. Michelet). At the beginning of cultural communities which have a childish psychology, the humour, laughter and ways of jesting are somewhat like children.

Notes on Vietnamese Humour

Hoàng Ngọc Hiến^{*}

I allow myself to begin with some theoretical considerations about comedy and humour.

The view of comedy in man is a view about man from two aspects of dissension and incompatibility: body and soul, instinct and intellect, saying and doing, how man actually lives and how man should live. When the serious incompatibility reaches the extremity, when the distance between the two aspects reaches the limitation, comedy approaches tragedy.

Humour is the reaction (usually mild, sometimes severe) to what are objectionable deeds, those that are not correct, disagreeable, improper, odd, pointless, self-indulgent, slipshod.....in short, for all thugs against the common sense of human beings. It is necessary to see that in the common sense of human beings, there are everlasting, popular elements and there are also changes that follow the era and the cultural space. Therefore, humour also changes according to the era and cultural space.

Humour is the manifestation of a controlling intelligence (with different levels), at least in the effort to dominate our direct emotional reactions in order to express them in an indirect way, by beating around the bush, double-talk, speaking in an ironical voice...., no matter how humour is expressed it also exhibits the participation of sharp intelligence, creates humorous effects, makes those who are criticized also laugh in spite of being annoyed, and laughter proves that the one who uses humour and the one who is criticized have the same language: the language of intelligence. Speaking sharply is the manifestation of a sharp intelligence but also the manifestation of bad temper. The French have a proverb: “bons mots, mauvais caractere” (meaning “using sharp words sometimes reveal a bad temper”). Especially the young sometimes use a sharp sentence to show off their sharpness, enjoy the laughter from people around responding to their sayings; they don’t care about their victims that are hurt by their sayings. So, mild indulgence is desirable in humour.

Let us analyze some funny situations, funny stories, humorous sentences and jokes in order to recognize the nature and structure of humour and witty sayings.

One speaker stands up to deliver a speech, talking about unattainable, profound things making the surrounding audience express its admiration. His friend sitting beside him pulls his chair backward while the speaker is passionately delivering the speech. After finishing his speech, the speaker goes to sit down, trips and falls to the ground. The audience bursts out laughing. Why did the audience laugh? When the speaker fell to the ground, at the same time, in the mind of the audience, the speaker is judged from two aspects, more exactly, two “frames of reference”, two “associated contexts” (the terminology of Arthur Koestler, the author “The Act of Creation” (1964), a work about the collective theory of laughter). When the speaker delivers his speech, he is judged by the frame of reference “spirit” with

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the most unattainable, transcendent manifestation of knowledge and intelligence; but when he takes a false step and falls to the ground, the attendants think that the speaker has fallen into the frame of “material”, he is only a block of material and like other materials such as a rock, a brick falls to the ground because of its weight, inertia and the force of gravity. Noticeably, these two frames of reference (material and spirit) are disharmonious. Experiencing people, situations and things in two disharmonious frames of reference at the same time is considered by A. Koestler as the structure of intelligence of all forms of humour, witty sayings and other kinds of jokes. This is just the basic aspect of humour. Another aspect -no less important- is kindling to create the emotional motivation of humour. The kindling is the visceral penchant to tease, to sneer, the stings of criticism and slyness. In the case of the falling speaker, his friend who secretly pulled the chair backwards more or less must have slyly sneering “visceral penchant” to make people laugh. From now it is clear to see that in humour, the visceral penchant of sneering has different levels: the light level is a lovely joke, funny joke, playful..., the higher level is teasing, sneering..., strong and severe levels are satiric criticism,... sly thoughts also have many different nuances: sometimes ill will be expressed overtly, libellously, insultingly.....offending brutally those who are laughed at....., some ill will make people think about dirty tricks and sometimes ill will vaguely and lightly mix with good sentiments such as sympathy and friendliness.....in not all the cases of humour “the visceral penchant to tease, to sneer, the impulses of slyness are clear and visible. If this visceral penchant to tease, to sneer is the salt of humour, it is desirable that we taste that saltiness as if we taste dishes which are so well seasoned that we don't feel the saltiness, just not thinking about salt.

Humour usually directs itself towards the laughed at object, aiming at the weakness of this object. If the author of humour has a mild indulgence towards the object, the laughter will contain warm human culture. The mild spirit can soften the penchant to tease, to sneer, the sly temper but this will not make the laughter of humor become boring. The warmth or boring nature is due to the wit and profound intelligence of the author of humour.

Coming back to the case of the speaker having pranks played on him by his friend. If he fell down with a serious injury to his head and was bleeding...the audiences would not laugh. The audiences would be emotional and compassionate: in laughter, humour fears compassion for the laughed at object, and laughter also fears emotion.

In the funny story about a mean man “it is better to die!”, laughter arises from the struggle between two logics: the friend behaves in accordance with common sense: he must save the friend's life but the mean man consistently follows his mean logic: money is all to him, more precious than his life. One interesting thing is that the friend makes concessions: from five quan (old Vietnamese currency) to three quan while the mean man remains consistent to his mean logic. There is a contradiction between the flexibility and rigidity. This funny story finishes without a clear resolution whether the mean man is dead or saved. The saying “three quan is still expensive, it is better to die!” ends the story but it doesn't lead to any particular solution, it just perfects his meanness, his mean logic, and highlights the contradiction between the two aspects of reference: the logic of common sense and the logic of the mean man. Supposing that the story finished with the death of the mean man, there wouldn't be any humorous effect; the readers would feel pity for him and as we know, laughter fears emotion.

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Analyzing the funny story “marriage pig, new shirt” as follow:

There is a man who likes to boast of his property. One day, after getting a new shirt, he immediately wears it and stands at his front gate to wait for someone to praise him. From morning until afternoon, no one praises him, so he feels very angry.

While he is very angry, he sees another boastful man running towards him who asks loudly:

-Did you see my marriage pig running across here?

-That man immediately raises his coat-tails and says:

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Boasting is also a habit of human beings. A boastful person has the need to boast. This need expressed purely and directly makes people feel uncomfortable. But if this need connects with actions and other sayings which distract attention it will create a humorous effect. Connecting strayly, impudently and unreasonably is more ridiculous. Sayings in this kind of story perform the role of informing the contents needed to be asked and answered. In the question of the one who finds his marriage pig, the need to boast is expressed in one word: marriage (in marriage pig). The answer from the one who like to boast about his shirt is expressed in his action (showing his coat-tails) and the whole clause (since I began wearing this new shirt) overshadows the content needed to be answered. And in the context, the audience may think that this guy only thinks about showing off his shirt and can’t know whether a pig runs across or not. The art of humour here is rather profound. The question (in which the need to boast is only expressed a little bit) makes people smile, it is this smile that prepares and starts a big laugh after listening to the answer (in which the need to boast is expressed). Supposing that the one finding his pig only uses a normal question (there will be no need for the interjected boast) will make the humorous effect weaken. Also in the story of a mean man “it is better to die!”, the character emerges twice. The first time, he emerges with the sentence: “five quan is too expensive!”, the second time with the sentence: “three quan is still expensive, it is better to die!” creates strong effect.

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Look like your beard!”

In the story “man without a mouth”, one man with too much beard covering all his mouth is teased by the kids “man without mouth”, furiously, while uncovering his beard to show his mouth, he scolds the kids: - if it is not my mouth, is it your mama’s

vulva? Vietnamese has the idiom “thick beard, deep eyes” to show the outward look of a sensual man. Does “beard” contrast with “hair” to create laugh in order to ridicule the men who have “lewdness”, “lustful habit”? To play on words, “to speak back-slang” is usually used to create a humorous effect in the funny folk tale and daily sayings. In the humorous folk-song “an old woman goes shopping at Cau Dong market”, the word *loi* in sentence 2 is understood with the meaning “benefits” in the neutral announcement of the old woman would like to get married. In sentence 4 (finish) the meaning of the word *loi* changes into a different meaning connected to “gum”, return the old woman to the actual situation of her old age. Funny and witty word-play is usually based on two completely different meanings of a word, more exactly, of two homonymous words, the two meanings of two frames of reference don’t harmonize each other, the sneering element is always associated with the second meaning. There is also the case of word-play basing on the literal and figurative meanings of a word. The plot of Trang Quynh story creates “this man, that woman” from figurative to literal meanings of the group of word “this man, that woman”. When Trang Quynh talks to those who are greedy for position and fame in the village: “....if you want to be this man, that woman, I will help you”, the word group “this man, that woman” means position, fame and social status figuratively. But when Trang Quynh plays tricks on them, “this man, that woman” means “this man” has sexual intercourse with “that woman” literally (that is another man’s wife). The plot “there are no teeth to chew” is based on the figurative and literal meaning of the word group “clench teeth”. One mother in law and her daughter in law are widows. The mother in law warns her daughter in law: “our fates are unlucky, so we have to clench our teeth to accept it!” the word group is understood figuratively. But when the mother in law has a love affair, the daughter in law recalls her warnings and she uses literal meaning of the word group to justify herself: “I only warn you, for me I don’t have any more teeth to chew”.

“To speak back-slang” is a kind of popular word-play in Vietnamese funny stories and in the daily sayings of ordinary people. “The back-slang phrase” doesn’t appear in texts or spoken words; it is inferred by speakers or listeners from “normal word phrase” existing in texts or sayings. For example, in the story Trang Quynh “Kick water-fern”, “kick water-fern” is a “normal spoken phrase”. Readers or listeners must infer the back-slang phrase “having sex with a woman” from “kick water-fern”. In funny stories, using back-slang must create the context for readers (listeners) to catch “normal spoken phrase” to change to back-slang.

Superior to humorous word-play is the humorous one in thought. The latter humour also has the partitions of different aspects, inharmonious, sometimes totally strange. It is called word-play in thought because it has the aspect of profound thought, and requires high analyzed thought to catch the ideas arising from the partition of two aspects. In the story “the complaint from Ms Trung Trac of Nguyen Ai Quoc, there is a change and contradiction from the frame of reference of eastern space and time (three drum sounds mark the watch Tung!Tung!Tung! to the frame of reference Western abstract timemultiplied by 5 make 15, that is your three hours!.....then change to a philosophical frame of reference (number 3, the most miserable one in the lots of Dzuong Cuu and finally.....about the frame of reference

concerning life of king and mandarins of southern court (“hunching back three times” of the eunuch informs An Nam king that the sky is bright). It is hard to analyze the humour by the contradictory cross of frames of reference, but here and there appear hints of smiles, vague and secret. Especially the voice of the story teller is profound, mixed with a lot of nuances. “The night-watch has just marked three times, Tung, Tung, Tung! You are Westerners, how do you understand?” this is the scolding voice, but pretended voice, also the same as flattering a child, we pretend to scold an adult for his [unforgivable ignorance; how smart, how wise is the child and so for Western readers this world seems to be so far, so dark and mysterious..... it turns out that this world is not mysterious. In front of the readers is the scene of reality and vileness: that is “hunching back three times” of the eunuch, whose “shrill Woman voice” reports to “His Excellency Duo!” “there was an order to start away from the court handed down. This frame of reference evokes the slipshod, vile life of the king and mandarins of southern court, the previous philosophical frame of reference gives it the depressiveness of historical fate. Vu Trong Phung’s literature has extraordinarily humorous and intellectual sentences which prove that the author has a sharp, flexible intelligence, changes from this channel to another one, cross- partition of different waves and wavelength, of distant frames of reference provoke the arising the sudden meanings. In the essay “ Industry of getting married to Westerners” of Vu Trong Phung, when the author compares “the bed of a Vietnamese woman married to Frenchman” with “the police’s club”, and “the hammer of the blacksmith”, “the bed of a Vietnamese woman married to Frenchman”-only a tool for daily life is put into the category “means of production” (in the period of Vu Trong Phung, knowing this category and parodying it is a proof of superb intelligence, and when the author compares it with “the neck of Vietnamese deputy”, this “neck” is put into the category of means of production, this time not the Vietnamese woman married to Frenchman but “nodding deputy” is ridiculed and this time also has the change of different frame of reference, the neck is the organic part of the alive body is now compared with inorganic things: bed, club, hammer..... deputy as social office requires the participation of the whole personality of human beings to work and fulfil their duties. In Vu Trong Phung’s ways of comparison, the activities of this office are finally brought together in the neck and the neck of the “nodding deputy” only plays the role of nodding, all the mechanical, simple movements like the club in police’s hand, the hammer in the hand of the blacksmith. The humorous image of the deputy’s neck identified as inorganic tool with mechanical movements provoke laugh and here the laugh is the reaction against the materialization of human beings, the mechanization of the liveliness (once again can’t but remember the theory of Bergson about laugh). So, in the space of Vu Trong Phung’s humorous sentences we have crossing of contrast plans, another contrast to be mentioned is the contrast between the static state (the bed of a Vietnamese woman married to a Frenchman belongs to static *in*) and the dynamic state (club, hammer, neck of police, blacksmith, deputy belong to dynamic *yang*). We once again meet the partition between the man’s plan and thing’s plan in a sentence describing Madam Doan which doesn’t have any humorous elements: “Madam Doan with Japanese umbrella, leather purse, and dog steps down” (*So do*, literature press, 1998, page 26). In this sentence, “Japanese umbrella” and “leather purse” are nouns indicating the objects used as adjectives playing the role of a predicate to specify the characteristics of Madam Doan. Therefore, objects become the characteristics of human beings (humorous effect). In this sentence, the noun dog can be understood as the subject of the verb “step down”. It can be understood as a predicate playing the role like “Japanese umbrella”, or “leather purse” specifying the

characteristics of Madam Doan (with this version of interpretation, the humorous effect is stronger).

To speak back-slang is a phenomenon particular to Vietnamese. Foreigners may not enjoy the humour of speaking back-slang when their language doesn't have this phenomenon. Humour originates from climate, indigenous lifestyle, language, psychology and logic of indigenous people. It can be mentioned about the national nuance of humour. Humorous style is also related to the psychology of age groups. Children's jests are usually related to shit, wind, making water, defecating....young people are eager for the jests about sex. In an investigation about the laughter of American children carried out in 1961, the researchers concluded: at this age, youths can laugh when others feel embarrassed, annoyed or have tricks played on them :this age has no pity . Michelet). At the beginning of cultural communities which have a childish psychology, the humour, laughter and ways of jesting are somewhat like children.

Halakhah: Defining the “National” in the Humor of Philippine Popular Culture

Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta *

Abstract

A redefinition of Filipino humor is particularly significant and necessary, given the irony of its acknowledgment as a quintessential Filipino characteristic, vis-à-vis the dearth of material studying how the “national” humor of the Philippines is molded, influenced, and how it functions to support, or repudiate, the sense of “Filipino-ness”, in a national and regionalist sense. While the laughter (halakhak) engendered by these texts could be particularly loud and raucous, the study of the value of these humorous texts is made especially difficult, given the trivialization of comic texts, seen primarily as unworthy of academic study.

The paper examines specific and strategic popular cultural texts in order to reevaluate Philippine comedy and humor, exploring how its deployment of comic strategies illuminate and underscore the creation of *communitas* in Filipino terms, by re-presenting the quirks, traditions, eccentricities of Philippine society, not now as “ersatz”, inferior versions of Western comic forms, but as reconfigurations and reconstructions of a unique Filipino cultural psyche. I wish to note in this paper how humor becomes an operating textual and cultural device that reconstitute accepted beliefs, render moot and fracture hegemonic normalcies by using comic strategies to open possibilities for deploying the comic within the nation and the region as a way of understanding a Filipino/Asian identity.

This paper reads and critiques Filipino humor by way of its examination of representative Philippine comic forms: the comic zarzuelas of the early 20th century such as “*Walang Sugar*” by Severino Reyes (ca. 1902), and Hermogenes Ilagan’s “*Dalagang Bukid*” (1917), the popular Philippine comic strips such as *Kenkoy* written from the 1920’s to the 1950’s, Nonoy Marcelo’s political parody comics of the 1970’s, and Manix Abreña’s *Kikomachine* that depicts Philippine youth culture in the 2000’s, the emerging humorous works of creative nonfiction by new writers such as Jessica Zafra, April Yap, Luis Katigbak and Charlene Fernandez, Fil-American animation in Rex Navarette and Dino Ignacio’s “Maritess vs. the Superfriends” (2002), and in Carlo Vergara’s ground-breaking transgender graphic novel *Zsa Zsa Zaturmah* (2000).

In reading these shifting cultural texts, I seek to examine how the humor theories, especially of incongruity and superiority, and the comic strategies used therein respond to the creation, or to the evolution of a hyperreal Filipino identity, one that complicates the fixing of a national identity in the face of a culture that has long grappled with this question,

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given the Philippines' own colonial and hybrid culture. And while this paper focuses mainly on Filipino texts and problematizes Filipino identity, the Asian and Third World reverberations of the possibilities and problems of this cultural reengagement and reconsolidation of identity, are significant to explore.

There is a vigorous and thriving interest in area studies in Philippine academe, which has made possible the institutionalization of courses on hitherto marginal texts---courses on women's writing, courses on the literature of writers of color, most notably Asian-American writing, courses on the American bestsellers, on science fiction, horror, fantasy writing. And so, while Philippine scholarship has not shied away from, and has, in fact, been most responsive to, the demands of theorizing cultural studies in the Philippines, there are new and emergent subgenres that now need to be considered as part of this ever-expanding canon, much of this arising from popular cultural texts, hitherto seen as "trivial" and "inferior" as these are allied with the "mass". David Chaney's view of the popular here extends this very notion:

The term "the popular" clearly points to some element of social life... which is enjoyed or practiced or celebrated by ordinary members of society. In relation to cultural forms, however, the term "popular" commonly refers to a particular mode of address identified within the text as presumed to appeal to the "common people"... indeed the popular in its ordinariness, literally its vulgarity, is self-evidently available and meaningful (189).

And it is a study of humor, and of humorous texts that is not yet a part of this academic examination, and has remained unexamined for reasons Paul Lewis has rightly cited, saying that

in a culture that celebrates humor, it is easy for people to assume that they are readily amused and frequently amusing, but also that they know intuitively what humor is. Because it is often a form of play, a release from the intensities of our stressed lives, humor can seem an inappropriate subject for serious study. From this perspective, an academic conference on humor or a psychological experiment about the content of jokes can appear absurd, a withering misapplication of intelligence. This reluctance to take humor seriously is one of the many problems that have troubled humor researchers... (1).

Nancy Walker underscores this almost pejorative status of the study of humor, noting that "in the field of literature, in particular, scholars have tended to value tragedy over comedy, viewing the comic as a form that has less to tell us about the more important moments of human experience" (WSF 6). E.B. White furthers this by commenting that "the world likes humor, but treats it patronizingly. It decorates its serious artists with laurels, and its wags with Brussel sprouts. It feels that if a thing is funny it can be presumed to be less than great, because if it were truly great, it would be wholly serious" (6). Lawrence Mintz offers a parallel commentary in his *Humor in America*, stating that it has become a norm for humor scholarship to begin with an apology for the fact that "the study of humor is not, of itself, funny", and an emphasis

on the “irony that though humor is itself trivial and superficial, the study of it is necessarily significant and complex” (vii). In another essay, Mintz expostulates on a similar point, aligning humor studies to popular culture studies. Both, according to him, were, until recently, “a suspect and neglected source for all but a few adventurous sociologists and historians”, as these areas were deemed “nonserious” and “allegedly frivolous”, but which now have gained ground because of the fact that “both are so central to virtually every culture and society, so omnipresent, powerful, and broad-based that it is absurd to try to explain culture or society without reference to them both” (HPC 130). Mintz parallels humor to popular culture even further when he notes how both “deal with every important feature of our culture... sex, violence, politics... class distinctions, racial, ethnic, and regional differences, ... values, attitudes, dispositions, ... concerns that characterize and unite us as well” (130).

In examining humor in Philippine culture, the question of deciding which texts should be focused on becomes difficult because of the paucity of studies in which Filipino humor is analyzed. The reading of Philippine popular cultural forms, like comic strips and the Filipino *komiks*, or elements of popular media forms, has been successfully done by a number of Philippine scholars, but much of this work has focused on understanding these texts to rescue them from the view that popular forms are merely “a factory of enchanting dreams” (Reyes PPKP 340; my translation), or are “instruments of entertainment, vehicle[s] for escape from the horrific realities of life” (340; my translation).

While the study of popular cultural texts in the Philippines has burgeoned into many areas using multidisciplinary cultural approaches, very few studies have dealt with the analysis of the way Filipino humor works in these texts, even while the material studied is a humorous text. Neither has there been an attempt to define Filipino humor; more often than not, humor is treated in these studies either as a peripheral issue, or worse, seen as an eternal given, an oft-vaunted characteristic of Filipinos and of their society. Having said this, though, these existing studies of early Philippine joke work, of Filipino visual arts and popular literature, serve as beacons for this particular study, first, because these do point to my contention that the study of humor in the Philippines could most easily be analyzed by way of popular comic texts, whose depictions of humor, in many cases, have functioned to interest readers and viewers in the apparently formulaic narrative strategies in these texts.

Defining the “national” humor

Walter Blair, among the pioneers of the study of American humor, in defining “American humor”, states that by this term he does not mean “all humor produced in America, since much humor originating in [this] country is not in any way marked by its place of origin. Nor does it mean humor with characteristics discoverable in the comedy of no other land... It means *humor... that... has an emphatic ‘native quality’*” (Blair 91-92; my italics). To support this point about a “national” humor, Blair quotes an 1838 statement by an English critic in *The London and Westminster Review*:

Humour [sic] is national when it is impregnated with the convictions, customs, and associations of a nation... National... humour must be all this transferred into shapes which produce laughter. The humour of a people is their institutions, laws, customs, manners, habits, characters, convictions,--- their

scenery whether of the sea, the city, or the hills, --- expressed in the language of the ludicrous... (in Blair 92).

While historians, psychologists, sociologists, literary critics have looked into the Filipino psyche and into the historical, social, and cultural experiences in the nation and have throughout made definitions of what the Filipino is, very little or no attempt has been made to analyze the nature of humor in the Philippines as a bearing a national stamp. Given that many of our popular Filipino forms become the showcase of the laughter of the “masses”, to examine how humor becomes representative of a people, what they laugh at, why they deem some instances funny and others not, counters the view that humor simply occurs, that laughter is naturally a trait of the Filipino, and therefore, makes this very act of studying this unfunny.

Aside from Walter Blair’s valuable insight into the need to define a nation’s humor as “key to its cultural codes and sensibilities of the past” (Brenner and Roodenburg xi), in attempting to define a Filipino national humor, I take my cue from Avner Ziv’s *National Styles of Humor*, a significant book in humor studies that constitutes a study of the characteristic traits of the humor that appear in the cultural forms of certain countries. While I say that this is pioneering work, Ziv himself admits that the countries which were mostly featured in this text were “western” (xi), given that these countries were mostly those that participated in the early international humor conferences when humor studies was still in its incipient form in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The country’s represented in Avner Ziv’s work--- the US, Great Britain, Canada, Israel, France, Australia, Belgium, Italy and Yugoslavia--- had humor scholars as authors who “stud[ie]d the historical development of humor with emphasis on the twentieth century and contemporary forms and trends... traditional and popular forms of humor and humor in literacy, performing and visual arts, and the mass media” (xii).

Ziv rightly states that the elements of humor--- incongruity, surprise, contextual logic are cognitive elements, and *these cognitive processes are universal* (x; my italics). But while this is so, national or cultural differences in humor use could be studied *only when we examine these within the “continuum [of] the functions of humor”* (x; my italics). It is within this continuum that we explore the Filipino contemporary experience in these essays--- in politics, in economics, in popular culture, and in everyday life, within the interstices of major life struggles with which Filipinos--- the folk, the middle-class, even the elite--- deal, and in the apparent silence of the periphery which is where the Filipino who reads and views these popular forms, and who are themselves featured in these, are relegated. What Ziv avers here is that the delineation of national humor is dependent upon a specific reading of values, experiences, beliefs, traditions, that intersect and are interwoven within a particular cultural matrix. To define a “national” humor, then, is to assert that humor is as potent a showcase of “Filipino-ness”, and is as relevant an evidence of how Filipinos maneuver within the frames of their local and national experiences, and in this paper, I shall examine three popular texts that are representative of particular historical and cultural turns in Philippine life: a popular musical drama at the beginning of the 20th century that illustrates the Philippine colonial experience under the Spanish rule, an iconic komiks/ cartoons that shows the Philippine engagement with American cultural colonization, and a web animation in the 2000’s that provides a comic depiction of the Filipino economic diaspora.

Humor and the *Sarsuwela*

The zarzuela I am examining in this paper belongs mainly to Tagalog plays which were written in the period between 1900 and 1941, the acme of the zarzuelas and dramas in the Philippines (Zamora 367). The zarzuela is generally defined as a musical play, written either in prose or verse or a “combination of both”, either serious, but more often humorous, “very like the operetta” (367). The zarzuela rose to fame together with many other dramatic forms in the 19th century to the early 20th century in the Philippines, and in a sense came into its own as part of the dramas Tagalog playwrights used “as a means of inciting armed resistance against the new colonizers” during the period of conflict between Filipinos and Americans beginning 1898 (370). Amelia Lapena-Bonifacio places the rise of the zarzuela, and its anti-colonial thrusts, in the early 1900’s with plays like *Fuera los Frailes*, openly anti-clerical plays expressing nationalism against the Spanish authorities (17). Nicamor Tiongson cites the birth of the Tagalog zarzuela “in the last years of the 19th century, with the staging of “*Budhing Nagpahamak*” [The Conscience That Led to Ruin] (ca. 1890)” (25-26). At the end of the nineteenth century and the dawn of the twentieth, Philippine theater companies saw the demise of the comedia, and the rise of the zarzuela, due too to certain factors: the disappearance of Spanish censorship that prohibited artistic presentations that could be construed as a “search for a Filipino identity in the period of Reform (1882- 1896) and of Revolution against Spain and America (1896-1901)” (27). Also, the later zarzuelas became as popularly patronized as the old comedias, once they “contented themselves with the portrayal of local customs and the problems of individuals” (27).

The early Tagalog zarzuelas, however, were truly potent dramas whose

plots... were threadbare, or at best, merely skeletal, on which hung long speeches intended to awaken antagonistic and hostile passions among the Filipinos against their new colonizers and inflame them into continuing the revolution for absolute independence for their country” (Bonifacio 24).

“Seditious”, they were called by the American colonial government in the first decades of the twentieth century, indicting these as

...inculcat[ing] a spirit of hatred against the American people and the Government of the United States... [and] incit[ing] the people of the Philippine islands to open and armed resistance to the constituted authorities, and induc[ing] them to conspire together for the secret organization of armed forces... for the purpose of overthrowing the present Government and setting up another in its stead” (Fernandez xi).

Daniel Gerould in his essay “Tyranny and Comedy” begins with a very real, but no less startling statement, that “comedy thrives on tyranny” (3). Gerould asserted that on a very shallow scale this could be seen as a way to get away from authorities, or as a manipulative device against dictators by their victims, in which “systematic repression induces laughter as a healthy outburst. (3) Tyranny here could refer to the power wielded by the “traditional targets of comedy”, such as the unbending *senex* of

Roman comedy, “despotic parents, pedants, jealous husbands” of English Restoration comedy (3). However, Gerould extends this proposition by “sing[ing] out one striking phenomenon: the comic portrayal in drama of the all-powerful political tyrant wielding the apparatus of mass oppression and ruthlessly crushing the human rights of others on a vast scale...” Gerould asks : “Can savage tyranny, with its reign of terror and death, be treated as comical? Can even the indiscriminate victimization of the guiltless be laughable?” (4)

I begin by laying down part of this paper’s problematique on what Gerould inquires into, because the zarzuelas as they were earlier studied, did not see them at all as comic apparatuses whose subtleties intend to subvert the existing power alignment in Philippine colonial history. For the most part, many of the fin-de-siecle Tagalog zarzuelas as propagandistic musical dramas not much noted for subtlety. On the contrary, these were branded as “seditious” because these were mainly seen as serious dramas, consciously advocating revolt against either Spanish or American governments, focusing Filipino individual and communal agency to overt acts of defiance.

While the zarzuela was primarily seen as propagandistic material at a time of conflict, I posit that the potency of these nationalistic plays rely on the deployment of humor and comic strategies that are particularly Filipino in nature, making these plays familiarly Filipino, underscoring the appeal of these plays by interweaving the comic with the very serious undertow of these plays. I shall examine here the most evident comic strategies here that both push the national proselytism of these plays, while also subverting these within the more communal, familiar, humorous aspects of these plays.

Othering the Antihero: Making Villainy Laughable

I begin this examination of the major comic strategies that engender *communias* in the Tagalog comic zarzuelas by the deployment of Filipino humor by way of the creation of a stereotypical villain in these four zarzuelas this paper is reading.

“*Walang Suga!*” by Severino Reyes (1902) is called by Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio as a “chameleon play”,

belong[ing] to that elusive group of dramatic presentations which changed hues, so to speak, as soon as it became apparent that immediate independence was not forthcoming and back again to its original state whenever dangers of arrests became imminent... plays which started out as anti-friars and anti-Spanish government became strongly anti-military and anti-American rule and conversely, when dangers of arrests became imminent, those plays which started out as anti-military and anti-American rule, circumvented the prohibition to stage by changing into plays that are anti-friars and anti-Spanish (30).

Bonifacio credited this change to the “bitter lessons” the Filipino playwrights of the period had experienced, and these were seen in the uses of setting, period, and antiheroic characters (30). This explains why, of the three plays that employed

disguise and deception as a main comic device in the play, “Walang Sugar” (WS) deals with anticolonial sentiments not truly covered by the “seditions” plays of the turn-of-the nineteenth century American period.

We see, though, that while the major villains of the piece consisted of the religious [Religioso], the friars [frailes], Spanish officials and soldiers, and upper class Filipinos coopted by Spanish authorities, all of them are depicted as abnormal compared to patriotic Filipinos like Tenyong and Julia. The comic rests on abnormality here, and humor is engendered by the very presentation of the villains of the piece. Amid the sweet romance of Julia and Tenyong, marked by their courtship attended by Julia’s act of embroidering a handkerchief for Tenyong, the real conflict of the play emerges, as Tenyong’s father, Kapitan Inngo, is imprisoned by the Spanish authorities in Bulacan (cf. Tiongson 28). Tenyong rightly exclaims:

Tenyong: Oh, mundong sinungaling. Sa bawa’t sandaling ligaya na tinatamo nang dibdib, ay tinutugunan kapagadaka nang matinding dusa. Magdaraya ka. Ang tuwang idinudlot mo sa min ay maitutulad sa bango nang bulaklak na sa sandaling oras ay kusang lumilipas

[Oh false world! Every momentary joy in the heart is immediately replaced by severe suffering. You cheat! The happiness you bring is comparable to the fragrance of flowers which passes with time.] (my translation; I, iii, 92).

Tenyong bitterly verbalizes the pathos of time fleeing in the midst of ephemeral joy, but he also hints here at the sad condition of the country as it impinges on his own life. “Matinding dusa” [abject suffering] is, in fact the real milieu in which they lived, given the time of strife, and the actual struggle they waged against the Spanish overlords, but the more personal suffering came in the form of Kapitan Inngo’s death at the hands of the Spanish friars. Ironically, this is also what creates the “comedy of ideas” here, in which we find the ridicule of a social problem, as we find a “comedy of darkness and absurdity”, which shows a “mixture of bizarre comic events with serious action” (Berkowitz in Rochelein 55).

We find in the portrayal of the Spanish religious, the Mayor Marcelo, the Spanish guards, one of the keenest descriptions of incongruity in these zarzuelas. On the one hand, the friars and religious are depicted as ridiculously greedy, selfish, and decidedly inhuman/ animalistic. However, the religious are depicted as abnormal in this zarzuela because of the departure of their characters from the ideal expected of them, we find foregrounded the juxtaposition of hateful ruthlessness and almost macabre cruelty, against the expectation of kindness and mercy. In dealing with Kapitan Inngo, Religioso Uno is quick to denigrate a prisoner named Capitang Luis, dismissing him right off as “masaman tao” [a bad person] (I, v, 93). The supposedly holy man continues:

Religioso 1: Kun hindi man mason, marahil filibustero, sapagka’t kun siya sumulat maraming K, kabayo ka. *[If not a mason, perhaps a filibuster, as he writes with so many K’s, you horse!]*

Marcelo: Hindi po ako kabayo Among. *[I am no horse, Father.]*

Religioso 1: Hindi ko sinasabi kabayo ikaw, kundi kun isulat niya an kabayo may K, an lahat nan C pinapalitan nan K. Masaman tao iyan, mabuti mamatay siya. *[I did not say you are a horse, but that when he writes "horse", he does so with a 'k'. All 'c's' he changes to a 'k'. He is an evil man, it would be better if he died.]*

Religioso 2: Marcelo, si Capitan Pion, si Capitan Miguel at an Juez de Paz, ay daratadagan [sic] nan racion. *[Marcelo, increase the ration of Captains Pion, Miguel and the Justice of Peace.]*

Marcelo: Hindi sila makakain eh. [But they could not even eat.]

Religioso 2: Hindi an racion ang sinasabi ko sa iyo na dagdagan ay an pagkain, hindi, ano sa akin kundi sila kumain? Mabuti nga mamatay silan lahat. An racion na sinasabi ko ko sa iyo ay an palo, maramin palo an kailangan. *[I don't mean the ration of food--- what is it to me if they do not eat? They should all die. I mean the ration of beatings... they should get more beatings.]*

Marcelo: Opo Among hirap na po ang mga katawan nila, at nakakawa po naman mangagsidaing. Isang linggo na pong paluan ito, at isang linggo po naming walang tulong sila. *[Yes, Father. But their bodies are now so weak, and when they moan so piteously. We have been beating them for a week, and they haven't slept in that week.]*

Religioso 1: Loco ito. Anon awa-awa? Nayon walang awa-awa, duro que duro... awa-awa. Ilan kaban an racion nayon? An racion nan palo, ha? *[Fool! What's to pity? No pity for them! How much beating has there been today?]*

Marcelo: Dati po'y tatlong kaban at makaitlo sa isang araw na tinutuluyan. Ngayon po'y lima nang kaban at makalima po sa isang araw. *[Thrice a day before, and now five times a day.]*

Religioso 1: Samakatuwid ay liman veces 25, at makaliman 125, ay hustong 625. (Binibilang sa daliri) Kakaunti pa... *[Therefore, five times twenty five is 125, by 5 is 625... (counts on his fingers) ... too little...]* (my translation; I, v, 93; my italics)

This exchange is blackly funny as it details an anatomy of cruelty, and this coming from a religious, exposes many levels of incongruity here. First, the religious are stereotypically depicted as heartless here, and this “typification” becomes even more strangely acceptable in that the religious are unnamed and are given a general title, which, again, is almost a sardonic acknowledgment of the “type” of people these are, and is not at all meant to treat them in the personal. This “typification” also alludes to the acceptance of these characters as types familiar to the Filipino audience of the time, thus making of this scene both a laughable one when we think of these characters as stock ones, but also as a pathos-filled one because we are able to laugh at the these characters only as contemptible ones, and in doing so, we acknowledge the pain this cruelty has meted on to a personal and national body.

This exchange also places *Alcalde* (Mayor) Marcelo in a position as native supporter and enabler of an alien regime--- corroborates too the depiction of the friars as no less bloodthirsty. The religious here, Uno and Segundo, literally verbalize the death of wisdom and compassion that makes them so inapt for the title they carry. On the part of Religioso Uno, his prejudgment of the prisoner as “bad” stems from the orthographic disparity the latter demonstrates (spelling with a K instead of a C), and while this is truly ridiculous, it does underscore the wedge between the mainstream alien colonial culture and its standards, and the defiance, however puny, of a native Filipino culture, alluded to in this complaint made by Religioso Uno. The second religious betrays his ruthlessness when he speaks of delivering an alternative “ration”, not now of food, as the meaning we expect to give to it, but as he puts it, of stripes or beatings for the prisoners. The misdirection here by way of the play on words certainly consolidates his stance as an unfeeling, merciless one (“Anon awa-awa? Nayon walang awa-awa, duro que duro...”), but it also generates a laughter of almost awed disbelief because this cruelty is magnified when placed side by side Marcelo’s temporary misgiving, when he states that the prisoners are suffering terribly. The friar exhibits an almost insatiable desire to mete out suffering, and later, this almost exaggerated cruelty, will be rendered almost unbelievable when Religioso Uno talks to the *alcalde* about Kapitan Inggo, who is about to die. Marcelo ascertains that Inggo is in a dire way---

Marcelo: Mamatatay pong walang pagsala; wala na pong laman ang dalawang pigi sa kapapalo at ang dalawang braso po’y litaw na ang mga buto, nagitgit sa pagkagapos. [*He will surely die; his sides are fleshless with the beatings and his arms all bones because of being tied by ropes.*]

Religioso 3: May buhay pusa si Kapitan Inggo. Nariyan po sa kabiliang silid at tinutuluyan uli nang limang kaban. [*Captain Inggo has cat lives. He is in the next room undergoing the beatings.*]

Religioso 1: Mabuti, mabuti. Marcelo huwag mon kalilimutan na si Kapitan Inggo ay araw-araw papaloin at ibibilad at bubusan nan tubig an ilon, at huwag bibigyan nan mabutin tulugan ha? [*Good, good. Marcelo, do not forget to beat Captain Inggo, nor to make him burn in the sun and then pour water through his nose. Do not allow him any chance to sleep well.*]

Marcelo: Opo Among [*Yes, Father.*] (my translation; I, v, 93; my italics).

This inhuman injunction is almost parodic, as it presents comically the extreme even of inhumanity itself, rendering this almost a caricature of evil unrelieved by any touch of reality, but again, the extreme irony is that this cruelty is existent. Juxtaposed against the friar’s two-faced nature later on, as he speaks to Kapitana Putin, Inggo’s wife: “...nayon makikita mo na an tao mo, dadalhin dito, at sinabi ko sa Alkayde na huwag papaluin, huwag nan ibibilad, at ipinagbilin ko na bibigyan nan mabutin tulugan... Kami ay aakyat muna sandali sa Gobernador, at sasabihin nanning na pawalan lahat an mga bianggo, kaawaawa naman sila” [*Now, you may see your husband, I ordered that he be brought here, and I asked the Mayor not to subject him to beatings, nor leave him under the sun, and to give him good beddings... We are off to see the Governor, to ask that he free all pitiable prisoners*] (my translation; I, vi,

93). The cunning nature of the friar is so evident here, as he lies so glibly in the face of the atrocity that he just ordered earlier. The tragedy of Inngo's subsequent death is overshadowed by this episode of overt oppression, because "senseless cruelty and pandemic injustice, in becoming the norm, [has] become preposterous; if whole classes of people can be arrested and liquidated for no reason, the world is a madhouse" (Gerould 11), and while Inngo's death becomes an expected rallying point for Tenyong's, and other Filipinos', revolt, this is watered down by the interweaving of the romance of Tenyong and Julia with the communal struggle against an abstract Spanish oppression, now enflashed by the friars' ethical and spiritual lack. Julia and Tenyong's romance reaches its happy conclusion, even after Julia is promised by her mother Juana in marriage to the weakling Miguel. Tenyong's comic pretense pays off, and it is this romantic end that is later celebrated in the play.

***Kenkoy* and the Ab/Use of Language**

I chose to work with the *Kenkoy* comic strips, because of the significant cultural impact this work of popular culture has had in Philippine life since the 1930's. This is not just a random choice, though. The *Kenkoy* "strip" began in *Liwayway*, a weekly variety magazine popular in the Philippines from the 1920's to the present, which incorporated short stories, advice columns on topics ranging from cookery and films, to a showcase of comic strips, featuring humor, fantasy, drama or adventure. Tony Velasquez and Romualdo Ramos collaborated on the *Kenkoy* strips which were so warmly received by *Liwayway's* readers, and Velasquez ended up continuing the writing of "Mga Kabalbalan ni Kenkoy" when Ramos passed away in 1932 (Reyes PPKP 317). The strips I am using for this paper were chosen from the first-ever collection of comic strips published in the Philippines, spanning the strips published singly in *Liwayway* from 1929 to 1934, a feat that is now so ordinarily done by other weekly newspaper comic strips all over the world.

To understand the impact of this comic strip, we have first to understand what the *komiks* [with a k] means to the Filipino. *Komiks* in the Philippines were a decidedly mass-oriented form that presented two major streams, one of realism, in comic, or action-adventure stories, and the other of romanticism, in dramatic love stories or in fantasy adventures that often featured Philippine mythological creatures. These were cheaply printed on newsprint, sold at newsstands for pennies, most of these working with drawn narratives that were meant to be serialized for months and years on end, ensuring the economic continuity of the publication, and the creation of loyal readers week after week. This has all but disappeared at present with the advent of newer, more personal, and technological gadgets. The *komiks* in the Philippines had their heyday from the 1930s to the 1970s, its demise signaled by MTV, the family computer, and other entertainment devices that have created new audiences for these new devices in the present time. *Kenkoy* was a decidedly Filipino take on a Western popular cultural form, and with its introduction in 1929,

provided a new experience for thousands of readers because the narrative was unfolded through illustrations, printed texts in balloons, and other visual strategies... its dash and color providing some contrast to the straight narrative of the printed work which was the novel and the short story" (Reyes DT 12).

Kenkoy became so popular in the Philippines that in time, the term ‘kenkoy’ began colloquially to refer to someone who was funny or amusing, a jokester. To be “kenkoy” is to be funny.

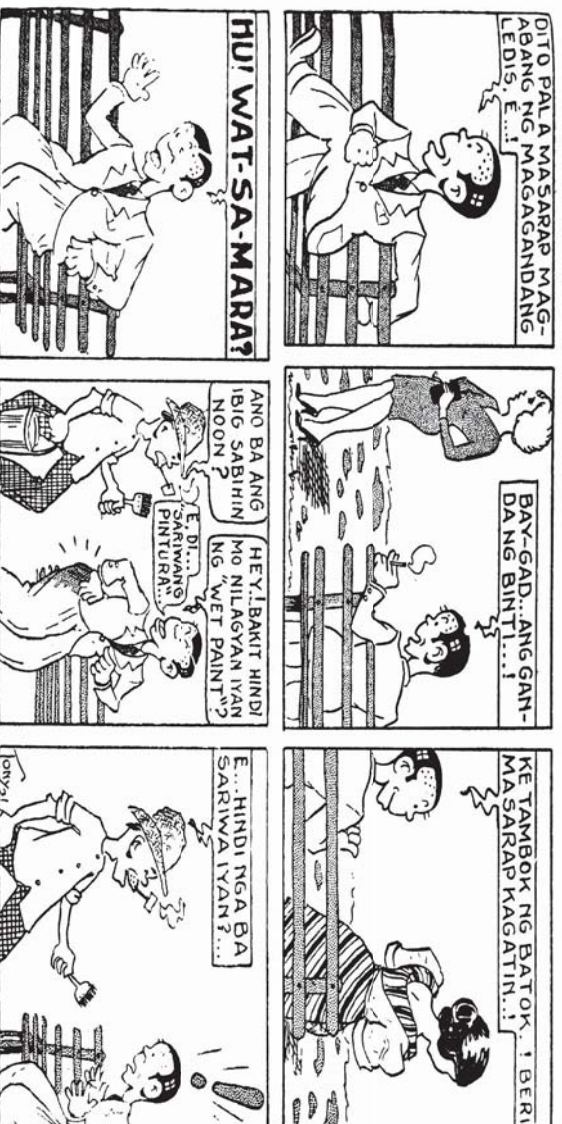
The title of the collection itself “*Album ng mga Kabalabalan ni Kenkoy*” points to the source of the humor in these strips--- “kabalabalan” is translatable as “anomaly” in English, but it is as much a chronicle of idiosyncracies in this comic character. Kenkoy is literally the odd-man-out in this community of characters, in this weekly strip which really had very simple narrative plots, in which we see Kenkoy, the “man about town [finding] himself in various situations which called on his wile and adroitness to help him extricate himself out of potentially disastrous situations” (12). Kenkoy interacts with basically old-fashioned folks, the sweet, demure Rosing, the love of his life whom he courts very assiduously, Rosing’s mother, Hule, who is not a little enamored with him herself, Kenkoy’s own parents--- Teroy the henpecked husband, and Matsay the big, domineering wife and mother, Tirso, his “humbung of a friend” (12), and a host of other characters, who personify and privilege Filipino communal traits, such as modesty, humility, respect for elders, love of the past, to which Kenkoy’s character and affinities run counter, as he embodies the encroaching modernity of the 20th century, hastened even more by the colonial legacies of the American occupation of the Philippines in the early decades of the 20th c. Kenkoy’s penchant is for the new, the shiny, taking on the trappings of urban educated folk, or even *parodying* the trappings of urban educated folk. Indeed, Soledad Reyes, a foremost Filipino critic who pioneered the study of popular cultural forms in the Philippines, states that “Kenkoy himself must have struck the readers of Liwayway as a true “colonial” who donned tuxedos [versus the native clothes constantly worn by other Velasquez characters, Rosing and her parents, for example], wore colorful Hawaiian shirts, played the ukulele, sang English pop songs... (13). Note this first strip in which Kenkoy celebrates New Year’s Eve in a decidedly western manner:



Here we find Kenkoy in his Western finery whiling the hours before the year ends, only to be followed and hounded by Hule, who in her desperation, ends up using a bullhorn to catch his attention. Kenkoy’s dancing is interrupted by Hule, who cries out: “Why did you leave me, beloved?”, to the consternation of Kenkoy and his

dancing partner. Kenkoy's response, while interspersed with Americanisms "Gaddemit" [Goddamnit!], in fact mines Philippine superstition, that the year should begin with all that is lucky, and Hule's appearance therefore, means "a year of devilish unluckiness." This strip's end is almost effaced by the "modernity" of Kenkoy's garb, the occasion in which we find him framed [Western New Year's eve dance], the elegance and sophistication of his dancing partner.

Nothing symbolizes newfangledness more than the language Kenkoy insists in using, "a kind of pidgin English--- neither English nor Tagalog--- conveniently termed by the educated elite then as "carabao English" (13), in which the "carabao" really refers to the national beast of burden, fit only to plow fields, representative of the native, uneducated Filipino, apparently. We find here a bastardized English, in which orthography is changed almost to incomprehensibility, in which we find the interspersed and insertion of Americanized phrases with very Filipino (Tagalog) expressions. This new usage of English, indeed, an ab-normal use of English is a deliberate breakage of the language which necessarily engenders laughter and humor in the comic strip. Kenkoy's use of it is meant to make him appear modern, superior, indeed elitist, in a colonial country where the educated upper classes spoke and read Spanish in the 16th to the 19th centuries, which later continued, now with English during the American colonial period from 1901 to 1946. The hierarchization of the classes is signaled by the possession of, indeed, the fluency in, the colonizers' tongue. Kenkoy epitomized the Filipino that is allied with the "native", vide his community, his affiliations, his "undisciplined", unruly, hence uncivilized penchant for pranks. This "struggle" for civilization is so keen in this strip, and language and its abuse, delineates this very fluid reckoning of how humor in these forms do not only provide visual and narrative comedy, but are in fact frames and matrices of the negotiations of people with, and within, their colonial histories and experiences. Let me work here with two strips from the collection, and start with a "tamer" joke work:



We find Kenkoy sitting on a park bench, lolling around, ogling modern Filipina women dressed in short frocks, prompting Kenkoy to exclaim: "This is the best vantage point to look at beautiful ladies... By God, what nice gams! Beautiful napes, very nice to bite..." This is as much a delineation of Kenkoy's naughtiness, as it is a

depiction of the changing times, in which women are seen to be less modest, especially as contrasted to the more elaborately clothed Rosing, who will show none of these body parts. Kenkoy is paid back for this "freshness" when he realizes that the bench he is sitting on is newly painted, and he proceeds to berate the painter--- "hey, why didn't you put a sign that says wet paint?"", only to be asked by the painter, in Filipino, "*ano ba ang ibig sabihin no n'y?*" [what does that mean?]. Kenkoy angrily and not a little snobbishly informs him: "*sariwang pintura*", literally, "fresh paint", to which the painter replies, "well, isn't that fresh?", obviously, and not a little smart-alecky saying, well, what do you want? You already know that paint's fresh, only a moron needs a sign to know that it is fresh! This linguistic quid pro quo certainly stymies Kenkoy, and turns the table on the apparently clever by countering his "language skill" with more native smarts.

We see this, too, in what I feel is a very history-laden strip:



The comic narrative here begins with Kenkoy apparently walking about town, deciding to meet the ladies. He very politely greets them in Filipino. “*Magandang araw po, Aling...*” [Good day to you, Miss...], only to be replied to by the first woman, thus: “Ol-rat, Gud morning, tenk yu...”, rather disjointed English phrases that imply social niceties. Note here that Kenkoy says “*Hindi na yata marinong magtagalog si Upeng*” [Upeng does not seem to know how to speak in Tagalog anymore]. He tries the same tack with Kikay, the next lady in the frame, who in no uncertain terms tells him to “stop”, as she “does not speak Tagalog”. [Note how the humor is played up here by wrong spellings]. Kikay admonishes Kenkoy to “always talk English” [note the “difference” in semantic usage here--- the erroneous “talk” versus the correct verb “speak”, which in Filipino is translatable only in one verb “magasalita”]. “Always talk English... because we are civilized people. Kenkoy goes home only to find his mother Matsay telling his father Teroy that she was informed by the neighbors that they need to learn English so that they [Filipinos] may be given independence by the Americans, to which Teroy replies: “Is that so? I already know some English... listen!”, and like Upeng, pronounces unrelated, and corrupted, English words such as “yes, no, oret [all right], gohet [go ahead], stop, go, up, down”. Kenkoy is arrested by this development, as we see in his expression in the strip, and

sees that even his family is coopted by this need to speak in the colonizers' language. The last frame sees him painting his resolution on the wall:

IMPORTAN NOTIS FROM DIS DEY KENKOY WIL ISPIK INGLIS
OWEYS... NO MOR TAGALOG BKOS INGLIS IS DI MODA AN
EBRIBADI ISPIK DIS LANGUAGAE OF CIVILIANSACION. VERI
RESP[E]KFOOLY KEN...

(IMPORTANT NOTICE. FROM THIS DAY [ON] KENKOY WILL SPEAK
ENGLISH ALWAYS... NO MORE TAGALOG BECAUSE ENGLISH IS
THE MODE, AND EVERYBODY SPEAKS THIS LANGUAGE OF
CIVILIZATION. VERY RESPECTFULLY, KENKOY.)

We see here in a very real sense, Kenkoy as the picture of the cooptation of the Filipino everyman by the modernization offered by, and represented by, America, under whom the Philippines has had not only a long colonial, but postcolonial history in a cultural relationship fraught with convolutions. That Kenkoy persists in a delusional superiority in his constant use of “fractured” English makes him symbolic too of a fractured Filipino identity, grounded here in idealized Filipino traits that we see in the greater communal frame of this Velasquez strip. Kenkoy is the comic braggart, who is remarkable, but perhaps not very lovable, because of his “modern” strangeness in a Philippine culture and society that is negotiating the changes brought about by political and social ramifications of American colonization in the 1920’s to the 1940’s, which we see here inscribed within the linguistic experimentation/cooptation in this comic strip. Indeed, an intrinsic part of this colonization is an economic one, in which American goods and services which were first considered luxuries, were ultimately deemed necessities (Agoncillo and Guerrero 395), and we see this illustrated in Kenkoy. This “economic invasion” is as much paralleled by the “indigenization of English” from 1925 to 1935, which Bonifacio Sibayan sees as the second period in the development of English in the Philippines, which saw the intellectualization of English “as a controlling domain” (1).

I mentioned earlier my view of Kenkoy’s character as a comic braggart, and appended to this the fact that this comic strip character’s appeal appears at first not to lie in his being a lovable character. Kenkoy is not one with whom readers will readily identify. In fact, that he is “a walking symbol of rugged individualism” (Reyes DT 13), seen here not only in his many and constant attempts to push the envelope, so to speak, of modernity and trendiness, “in his fascination of things American” (13), in contrast to the conservative and the old, does not sit well with Filipino readers. Indeed the comic resolution in these visual narratives comes many times with the comeuppance owing Kenkoy’s rowdiness, arrogance, superiority. I also posit here, however, that because of this, Kenkoy is rendered more real as a character negotiating the very real vagaries of a colonial identity, his cooptation by the modern “reflected the changes the society was undergoing and the inevitable clashes that took place as new concepts and structures were introduced, and, in some cases, imposed” (13). Kenkoy himself as a character, according to Reyes, is symbolic of many things Filipino: joking, bantering, the use of comeuppance, even the application of value [s]. Kenkoy himself is Philippine culture in its complexity and futurity, in its colorful

engagement in all kinds of experience that remain dynamic (Reyes PPKP 321-322; my translation).

The strange amalgam of English and Tagalog that Kenkoy uses, which is rendered incorrect by orthography and syntax, is not just a bastardized language, not just “carabao English”, little fit for civilization, but is indeed, a hybrid one. This “ab-used” English is itself a marker of strangeness, this “freak” of a language which was designed primarily to highlight the foibles of an “Americanized” Filipino, an image that is “wrong” and in the strip creator Tony Velasquez’s words, should not be emulated. In compiling the “album”, Velasquez prefaces this by saying that:

Tunay nga't ang “bayani” nang kasaysayang ito’y naglalarawan sa ilang kabataan nating nagpakalulong sa pagsunod sa masasagwang lakad ng “moda”; subalit inaasahan naming sa kanilang pagtungthay ng mga kabalbalang pinaggagawa ni Kenko’y, ay untiunti naman nilang huhubarin ang pangit na pananamit nila, at iawaksi ang hindi wastong kilos at pagwugali.

Iyan, tanging iyan lamang ang tunay na hangarin sa paglalathala nang “Album ni Kenko’y” ...

[It may be true that the “hero” of this story depicts some of our youngsters who are deeply addicted to following the unseemly fashions of the day; but it is hope that by seeing what Kenko’y does [here], they will slowly shed this unacceptable manner of dressing, and will flee from incorrect modes of behavior.

This, and only this, is the real aim of publishing “The Album of Kenko’y’s Anomalies”...] (Velasquez; my translation).

While the intent of Velasquez here is frankly prescriptive, and indeed moralistic, the fact stands that the character he created has taken on a life of its own, that has taken on rather ambiguous turns in terms of its identity as a Filipino. Kenko’y as parallel model of behavior and manner that is “un-Filipino” has endured as a comic figure because he has embodied the ambiguous attitude every Filipino had, and still has, with “the contrasting images illustrating the tensions and contradictions of colonial society” (Reyes DT 13), in the 1920’s, 1930’s Philippines. While the hegemonic reign of English is all but sealed during this period of the nation’s cultural and political development, and the Philippines as an American colonial stronghold is grappling with its very ready assent to “independence”, we see, as the strip we reckoned with earlier, the double-edged price the Filipino has to pay to gain this separate identity: to be free politically is to be enslaved in a new language. In the strip, Kenko’y almost nonsensically says to himself, as a non sequitur, “*Masama ang nangyayari. Panibagong krisis naman ito*” [Things aren’t going well. This is a new crisis] (my translation). And indeed, in the light of the Philippine colonial status, the assent to English usage to the detriment, and for a long time, the relegation of Filipino, in an almost pejorative state, is one lamentable “crisis”. Note then, that in Kenko’y’s assent to use English “solely” and “exclusively” he defies his own policy by hybridizing the language of the colonizer, and this is language that is made even more laughable as it is seen as a backhanded affront to the educated class, and a jolt to the native class to

which he belongs. Kenkoy challenges the very parameters set for the Filipino, by way of his language and his actuations. Where the audience of this comic strip and narrative is also the ordinary Filipino, this ambiguity in the alliance to Kenkoy, and the ambivalence about his overt subscription to the power of the dominant, dominating culture is as much the Filipino's own dilemma and misgiving, as this is effaced and at many point elided in Kenkoy's character.

Reyes speaks of Kenkoy's, perhaps Velasquez's, preoccupation with the present, and we say this present is more complexly wrought, and is more than just the juxtaposition of "chalets and bungalows with their plush living rooms an western décor, tall buildings gleaming roadsters, against the nipa or grass huts, the *carretelas* or horse-drawn carriages, the unadorned *sala* or living room of a typical Filipino home, the ubiquitous carabao" (DT 13), visually portrayed in the strip. Elliot Oring writes that for nations that area a product of colonization, "founded largely under preindustrial conditions... initially rooted in agricultural or pastoral production demanding extensive manual labor... possess[ing] indigenous populations with cultures radically different from those of the colonizers" (98), national humor "tended to play out in the humor of language, tall talk, anecdotes about civilization and the native population, and the comedy of character" (98). We find these all in Velasquez's Kenkoy, and these permutations of humor, especially that which re-creates new language, we see here as response of a people to a historical imperative that transmuted, if not, obliterated the native and his native tongue.

Susan Purdie has her own view of joking as the ab-use of language, stating that "joking violates all sorts of discursive proprieties, and its 'permission' of obscenity, aggression, and so on, is often far more conspicuous than its breach of the rule of language-as-such [the fundamental rule of language as such is that at any given moment only one signifying element functions to represent only one signified element. The breach in the rule is that the creation of excess of signifiers which in turn create transgressive energies]" (34). Following this view, where language-as-such could be seen in the light of English as the singular signifier of power in this colonial context, [see Purdie's view of cat as animal, domestic etc], the many levels of Kenkoy's fracture of English makes for many ways to foreground the transgressions he commits with and about the language. What Kenkoy does when he engages in joke work that works with the ab/use of English is to transgress linguistic [grammatical, phonetic, syntactic, semantic] rules, which by its very nature, "unravels" the "repressed Signifier" that in this context enables *acceptable* linguistic performance, American colonial power consolidating its hold on the psychical identity of a people. Turning against this psychical hold by way of joke work and humor "allows a 'play' of the energies which militate against" a colonizer's hegemonic discourse (cf. Purdie 34-35).

At the end of this paper, we find this comic text of the early decades of the Philippines under American colonial rule as apt and utile as text for study at the beginning of the 21st century. We see in Velasquez's comic strip ways by which linguistic humor is deployed in very specific, and very potent strategies, "to localize, if not resist, refashion and recreate dominant Western paradigms of understanding and analyzing language use within a multilingual context..." (Tupas 9). As Kenkoy puts it, "*is beri nesesari*" to return to these popular texts to mine the ways by which the Filipino cultural psyche is reconfigured, and this reconfiguration, as we see it in this paper, lies within the creation of hybrid language, comical, indeed, and at the time, may have been misconstrued as an ersatz version of the "civilized" colonizers'

language. We see Kenkoy's "carabao English" now as a powerful refashioning, and retooling, of an alien nation's cultural construct, seen now as a way to interrogate Philippine cultural life at this juncture of Philippine life and history.

Alien/Alienated Communities: *Maritess and the Superfriends*

In 2002, Filipino-American stand-up comic Rex Navarrete and Dino Ignacio, a Filipino-American artist, created a website called fractalcow.com, meant to be a showcase of their works. Among their most famous creations, and that which catapulted the site to fame was the short animation entitled *Maritess vs. the Superfriends*. Their short film begins with a textual teaser that also serves to introduce to us its incongruous context:

Did you ever wonder why whenever you'd watch "The Superfriends" on a Saturday morning way back in the day, that the Hall of Justice was kept so nice and clean?

Well, *it was because of their Filipina maid who you never saw*. We've all heard about the plight of the Overseas Foreign Workers leaving the Philippines in thousands just to find jobs good enough to send money back to their families in the islands. Many of them still suffer disgraceful working and living conditions beyond our comprehension, oftentimes silently.

Even our own Superfriends can treat these domestic laborers very much in the same manner and this is one of their stories... (my emphasis; Navarrete and Ignacio <http://www.dinoignacio.com/movies.html>)

The narrative begins with the Filipina Maritess, who recounts how she became a domestic helper and came to work for the Superfriends. The *Superfriends* is a weekly animated show for children produced by Hanna-Barbera that brought together the iconic American superheroes initially drawn and produced as comic book heroes by DC Comics, and who were featured later on in individual cartoon shows--- Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman and Robin, The Flash, Green Lantern, and Aquaman, banding together as the Justice League, and coming together as a group to address the problems of law and order in America. Maritess is so far removed from this hyperreal situation as she could be, as she lived in Zamboanga, in what seemed to be a very remote island [so remote she had nobody with her but a chicken, and even that was killed later on by Wonder Woman's plane]. At the beginning of the story, Maritess is depicted as a thin, bug-eyed, pimply-faced girl, saying she has worked for the Superfriends for the past eighteen months. Like all overseas Filipino workers, she saw an advertisement in a newspaper that said "Work abroad. Earn in Dollars". She was asked to work right away, and little did she know this meant she would be fetched straight away in the most extraordinary manner, as Wonder Woman came in her invisible plane and landed in her empty island. We begin to contrast what is foregrounded as Maritess's "island" ignorance here, vis-à-vis the "savvy" that allows us to "see" Wonder Woman's plane, as Maritess wails, "I cannot see it!"

At the Hall of Justice, and for much of the narrative, Maritess stays in a room with all the stereotypical accoutrement that marks her as Filipino: a rosary dangling

from around her waist, *balikbayan* boxes strewn round her room, and a big Philippine flag displayed on her wall. She continues with her tale as she details her work at the Hall of Justice: glad that there are no kids to run or clean after [except the Wonder Kids, who really are in their teens], she does have to contend with their monkey, who ends up “sexually assaulting” Marite’s leg every time it sees her. This would have been comic enough, but we juxtapose this “assault” to Superman’s lechery as he uses his X-ray vision on Marite’s as she cleans the Batmobile. While we do get to see only Marite’s skeleton every time Superman flashes his powerful gaze on her, which effaces the sexual offense here, we realize the extent of this crime when Marite exclaims: “The horror!” and “I can’t do anything!”, the latter exclamation she utters a lot. Part of this use of sexual humor is seen also in Marite’s belief that Batman is gay---“I think he is *bakla!*” [Batman seen in the animation as wiggling his hips], as she observes him “always with Robin... always going down the Batpole... always riding in the car...”. This “revelation” is itself an assault to Marite’s as she is depicted as simple and ignorant, as she says, “I don’t want to know.” In the giant robot menacing the city, power is conflated with maleness as the robot’s destructive weapon is shaped and placed like the male genitalia.

In addition to sexual humor used in the animated short, the humor in *Marite’s Us: the Superfriends* is also shown in the other problems faced by Marite’s, such as her very real need to keep up her connection with her homeland and her family, values that underlie Filipino-ness here. This, however, like all of her difficulties, are dealt with in a farcical manner. For example, she told the Superfriends that she wanted to go home for Christmas, and because they left it too late to make arrangements for her, Superman ended up flying her home, literally, paralleling Wonder Woman’s earlier attempt to “fly” her to the US. But as Marite’s puts it, even this is journey is an ordeal because Superman flew too fast, [we could actually see her being roasted by the heat], and had to put her down. However, putting her down meant leaving her “in Kenya for two days!” Like her island home, Kenya is pictured here as an empty desert with only a giraffe and a zebra, and a bug which she proceeds to eat, making of her not just simple and ignorant, but really almost subhuman. In another part of the narrative, she is shown to cook “American” food like “hotdogs, fries, hamburgers [sic]”, which she admits she does not eat. What she does eat, on the sly, when the Superfriends are not around, and with the ventilator on, is *tuyo*, the quintessential fried dried fish, to assuage her hunger for food and for connections to her Filipino identity. She would have gotten away with it, too, if not for Aquaman, with whom she already has had a previous falling out, as she uses her Filipino “*alaskador*” [smart-alecky] humor, and talks about him as “powerful only in water” and when all the Superfriends respond to a crisis, Marite’s ribs him for being left behind by saying “Aquaman go again!” [this is especially funny in the film, as Aquaman is put in a wading pool with a rubber duck.] Marite’s here figures in a long line of Filipino smart-aleck maids in television and in comic strips. When Aquaman sees her in the kitchen, he screams, “What are you doing? What are you doing?” and, whether in innocence, or in confusion, she shows him her *tuyo*, which freaks Aquaman out as he sees his minions fried to death.

We note the very real displacement of Marite’s as we see her within empty spaces--- her island, and in Kenya--- unmooring her from signals that point to her as Filipino. In fact, for most of the narrative, we take only her Visayan intonation, and her word, that she is Filipino. Even the Hall of Justice is an undefined space for her, not only because she is not aware of its import or meaning, but because she literally

does not “even know where [it] is”, as the Superfriends “don’t let [her] out”. Here we see Maritess suffering a classic plight of a Filipino domestic worker abroad. This is compounded by another perennial OFW problem: her visa ran out, and now she was a “TNT” in America, an illegal alien. In a fit of absurd logic, Maritess plaintively comments: “...Superman is from Krypton... He’s alien. He’s here... That’s not fair... That’s not right. I’m from Earth. I should be here...”, coming to the conclusion that Superman could stay on Earth, and she could not, only “...Because he’s white, that’s why” (<http://www.dinoignacio.com/movies.html>).

Even while Maritess’s plight is rendered comic because of the hyperreal and surreal circumstances in which we see her domestic work manipulated, pointing us almost to an alternative version of a domestic helper in keeping with her “super” employers, but we find at the heart of this really just another version of the thousands of stories about OFW life that contemporary Filipinos have become inured to listening to. While we laugh at the depiction of Maritess as a “working” Filipina State-side, and while we keep on looking for textual/visual signals that underline this Filipino identity, ultimately, Maritess is defined by the templates that make for the identity of a self-sacrificing, dollar-earning, victimized overseas domestic worker. The play in this animation on “alien” statuses occurs on many levels, a number of which we have begun to talk about. Maritess may have been defined by an alienating community [and how] of employers here, where strangeness and power intersect in the superheroes she works for. But we have to note that the Superfriends are also a band of initially estranged, isolated personas, who formed a group to mine their common concerns, work, and complement their superhuman experiences. Maritess, by virtue of her very difference that moves her to take on this work and move in into the Hall of Justice, creates a space for her own strangeness and power, by making herself indispensable to this community. Her own “strangeness” seep into this new alien world, whether she likes it or not, and her wrestling of the narrative makes of this both a sample of the testaments written by OFWs, and an alternative recreation and re-presentation of the iconic Superfriends, challenging in new ways this community to which she both does and does not belong.

Pathological Laughter

While we do laugh because of the obvious remarks that the characters in these popular texts make, or because of the quirks, the accompanying drawn expressions, or because of the inherent incongruous situations operating in these, we laugh at the containment of Filipino life within the textual/visual frame, allowing us to recognize the abnormality of Filipino life, lurking in the absurdity of difficulties met with trivializing laughter or quips, as we find the comic too in seeing our own responses to identical situations.

What we do see in Velasquez’s cartoon strip, and in a sense, in the Navarrete/Ignacio animation, are texts that burst their frames, and that while we laugh because of the obvious discrepant abnormalities and juxtaposed differentiae in these narrativized situations, we laugh, more significantly, because of what precisely is outside the frame, which is the actual community in which these abnormalities overlap with still even more strange “real” circumstances, pointing to **flaw** as the major arbiter of Philippine social realities. The assumption of these communal texts is in its actual depiction of Filipino community, a veritable amalgam of disparate characters, but all of these characters either defying order, or are victims of this very

defiance. Even while many of these popular texts do present quintessential, iconic Filipino values, such as *pakikibagay*, *pagbibigayan*, *pagpapahalaga sa pamilya* (keeping with the group, generosity, love for the family), even these “typical” Filipino values are skewed because they are reflected by way of a distorted mirror.

While we do laugh at the incongruities of the visual narratives here, what constitutes this laughter? While we have shown how incongruity plays a great part in unlocking this humor, we consider now too how Filipino humor here is based on the depictions engendered too by **relief or release**. The release or relief theory of humor operates on the premise that “... humor depends on a fixed background of conventional beliefs, attitudes, behavior, and that this background is considered to put constraints on the individual, the contrast to or neutralization of this background through humor may relieve the mind” (Monro qtd. in Hempelmann 10). For Freud, joking “functions as a ‘safety valve’ for forbidden thoughts and feelings, and when the person expresses what is normally inhibited, the energy of repression is released in the form of laughter... in the case of humor, the energy that is saved is the energy of emotion; the person prepares for feeling negative emotion (such as pity or fear)...” but discharges this in the form of laughter (Rokelein 178).

Laughter now is not so much only in acknowledging unexpected abnormalities, but in seeing the visual humor seen not now as “tame” or “harmless” depictions of Philippine life, but as instances of tendentious humor, categorized by Freud as the “baring obscene, the aggressive or hostile, and the cynical”, the “common denominator” of which is to “enable the satisfaction of suppressed desire, the suppressing force being the society or its internalized norms” (11). Severino Reyes’ populist drama, Velasquez’s *komiks* cartoons, and Ignacio and Navarette’s animation may seem innocuous texts, where we apparently are viewing only “slices” of familiar Philippine everyday life, but even these are strongly indicative of the difficulties the ordinary Filipino faces daily, and that which they are most powerless to address, in the main, poverty, extreme economic and social hierarchization, unstable institutions. In “Maritess”, our soundest laughter appears to be in the incongruity of a Filipina maid being in the same space as iconic American superheroes, but in fact we laugh not only because we are in collusion with the community, but also because we have to find a way to deal with the very real pathos in the community portrayed therein.

Humor does function in these texts to subvert the obvious states of social/political/ economic displacement. On the other hand, the humor engendered in its Filipino viewers is by way of reaction, a way by which the ordinary Filipino releases pent-up feelings of powerlessness, otherwise unexpressed. Laughter now becomes a way not only to acknowledge the abnormal and the carnivalesque normalized in Philippine life, but is a way to reclaim a space of power born of awareness, becoming a form of communal recognition. The experiences that we see explored in these humorous texts are part of our “**idioculture**”,

the localized culture of a group... system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction... understood by other members of the group and can be used to create meaning in the group. Humor is particularly useful in this way in that it allows the group to deal collectively

with a wide range of content that could not be expressible otherwise (Fine 170).

We look at these texts as instances of a “joking culture”, and as we negotiate the very real pathos underneath these comic texts, we see this “joking culture regulat[ing] group life, shaping and organizing interaction, softening what might otherwise be harsh and divisive relations” (Fine and de Soucey 17). This is particularly significant when we look at the kind of humor engendered by these texts, where laughter in many senses, becomes too a “social disguise, a way of evading other, more painful emotions, such as shock, offense, anger or terror” (Brottman 413). Brottman terms this as “neurotic laughter”, the “futile attempt to drive away, deny, and cast out the demons of horror by ‘rollicking in its details’... attempting to reassure himself on the subject of his most desperate fears, whistling under his rictus mask...” (413). Linda Henman speaks of this in terms of humor as a coping mechanism, and in discussing the use of this by US veterans of the Vietnam War, saw humor “as a way... to take a modicum of control and to remain connected to others”, when faced with situations that “challenged [them] to find sense in a senseless situation” (93).

The visual texts that we have examined by Reyes, Velasquez, and Navarrette and Ignacio afford us other ways to reckon with Philippine humor, exploring not just what makes us laugh in these texts, but seeing in these the “mediating inter cognitions” that allow us to “decode... consciously shared knowledge or ‘sets of meanings’ ... be these social situations, role-types, beliefs, social and individual behaviour [sic] objects, events, etc (Paton 213), and in unlocking these, we recognize how Filipino *communitas* is forged, bound and complicated by utilizing humor as a strategy to foreground the ways by which power could be recouped and reappropriated by its most ordinary citizens.

In this paper, the question may well begin with “What does the Filipino laugh at?”, but it is the answers to “Why does the Filipino laugh?” that makes this a significant new study, because the we find at many points that Filipino humor affirms a poignant negotiation within an often hostile national terrain. There is no doubt that there is truth to laughter as survival in the Philippines, but these essays explain just how these Filipino texts that so embody the “ordinary” and the “average” individual in the Philippines, trace the strength of the Filipino character, and how laughter is used to palliate many of the conflicts in which Filipinos continually find themselves embroiled. In many of these texts, I tracked how humor is both power and reaction, and it is undeniable now in this study first, that that these popular texts are themselves a potent conduit of the deeper tensions within Philippine society, whose comic treatment of national virtues, beliefs, symbols and sufferings, conceal and critique the very strategies Filipinos as cultural subjects and objects of these texts deploy, within a spectrum of power, with which they struggle to fight, or in which they struggle to fight for a place. Lastly, what seems to come out of these studies of popular cultural texts is that humor is, in fact, a Filipino national weapon--- one that is utilized not only to reflect social foibles and cultural beliefs that allow Filipinos to find belonging in using humor as a response to crippling national horrors, but one that is used too to train an apparently disparaging look at themselves as victims of embarrassing, painful historical or political circumstances. This latter ‘trick’ is exactly that--- because while Filipinos use laughter to cope with perennial national misfortunes and invite others to share this apparent self-deprecation, the appreciation of the ridiculous also keeps on

rounding to tactics of resurrection and comeuppance, maintenance of scripts of national virtue, and defenses of community and communal power. And this is precisely why defining the nature and the functions of Filipino humor becomes now utile and imperative, and nothing about it is trivial and merely funny.

If we are to begin to explore what, in Joseph Boskin's words, the "relationship between the historic moment and comedic forms" is (17), we begin, too, to understand how the humor in these forms transcend mere entertainment to become vehicles of group definition and cultural cohesion. These are texts that illustrate so clearly and incisively the culture code that bind Filipinos, where the culture code is "a [devolution] from historic patterns... buttressed by basic folk values, [the code] is a nexus of communal awareness, the elemental factor in the structure of humor" (Boskin 19). The Filipino and his idioculture forges a national identity creating a potent imagined community, "community that "offers [itself] as focal point of shared interests and outlooks, magnets for loyalty and belonging... tak[ing] concrete form in the politics and institutions of the nation state... visualised and dramatised [sic] in symbol and ritual (Medhurst 26-27).

Perhaps it would be good to end by addressing the theme of this conference. This paper, I think, has been successful in illustrating the nature of Philippine comedy and humor by choosing Filipino popular cultural texts in which this humor is so evident, and in proving the powerful function these have in Philippine society and culture. However, I fear that, in a sense, this choice of texts is itself contentious and problematic, and this too alludes to the lack of cohesion or understanding we have of the region's comic culture. Andy Medhurst refers to Jean-Pierre Jeancolas' "notion of the 'inexportable', which Jeancolas coins to refer to films which have "entertained large domestic audiences, but stood no chance of being exported to foreign markets" (205) because the appreciation of these materials is dependent not on critical appeal, but

on codes of entertainment established outside cinema... center[ing] on stereotyped figures or elaborated versions of their own already established personas which [rely] heavily on verbal and musical codes... [are] aesthetically unambitious in terms of cinematic technique... aimed squarely at popular, often regional tastes... (205).

More significantly, the irony of the inexportable is that, according to Jeancolas, these are "insignificant... unintelligible... to spectators outside a popular cultural area... uncouth... in all respects of poor quality... [having] no artistic ambition" (205), but are also successful "through mobilizing known and familiar pleasures for their destined audience, inviting that audience to participate in a process of... [reassuring] complicity" (205)---the very definition of popular culture.

This notion of the inexportable, in many permutations---inexportable because of language, of distinct national sensibilities, of different aesthetic and cultural frames in which these works are understood---is a regional hindrance that I believe we need to confront before we could actually understand how our understanding of our national humor/s could first be appreciated in our own national cultures, and how this could transcend the differences within this regional culture. The rigor with which we continue to examine the complexion of our national humor/s should, I believe, translate into an interest, an openness, an actual consciousness, of the ways by which

humorous texts in the region “[offer] solace, identification, confirmation, belonging” (205), and how these are, indeed, made complex, works which were previously “so tightly bound up with particular cultural locations that they offer no way in for outsiders.” I like to think that we are all here because we believe that our cultures’ engagement in *halakhah*, that hearty guffaw or raucous laughter, is distinct but also shared, and this is a powerful portal for “outsiders” and “others” to be let in.

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‘Excorporation’ and ‘Carnivalesque’ in Tactics of Humour for Nonviolent Struggle: The Case of Serbia’s Student-Led Protests and the Subsequent Resistance Movement (*Otpor*), 1996-2000¹

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Abstract

Tactics of humour staged in nonviolent campaigns are understudied within the literature of nonviolent action, but the way these tactics operate has been little analysed. This paper undertakes this task by demonstrating the extensive use of humour as a tactic in Serbia’s student-led nonviolent protests in 1996-7 and the subsequent nationwide resistance movement (*Otpor*) which played a crucial part in the historic overthrow of the dictatorial rule of Slobodan Milošević in 2000. In understanding the operational logic of the humour tactics presented in the case, I rely on the concepts of ‘excorporation’ and ‘carnivalesque’ emerging from popular culture studies. These concepts bring to light my argument: tactics of humour operate to weaken the opponent, and counter its propaganda and the defamation of activists by making use of the opponent’s rhetoric while deforming and re-interpreting it. But for these tactics to be effective, they have to be ‘popular’ in the sense that deconstructed rhetoric is juxtaposed with other discursive forces operative in society. Moreover, carnivalesque tactics help to generate a festive mood of protests, transcending the reality of the antagonism between the actionists and the authorities. The paper is organised into three sections. The first section touches upon the relationship between nonviolence and humour in order to locate the paper in existing scholarship. Then, humour tactics staged in Serbia’s nonviolent campaigns during 1996-2000 are detailed. The final section offers an analysis of the operational logic of humour tactics.

The relationship between nonviolence and humour: an overview

Among peace and nonviolence activists, it is recognised that humour is of use in keeping activists together, preventing the burnout caused by prolonged struggle and enlivening training.² The utility of humour, so to speak, is limited within the circle of activists. But the literature of humour and cultural studies often point out the defiant aspect of humour and even document evidence of humour used as a path of resistance for the subordinate.³ This means that there is more to know about the potential of

¹ The paper is a part of my PhD dissertation which is still in progress. Please do not cite without my permission.

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² See, for instance, Annie Alpert, "Clamshell Memories: Discipline, Humor, and the Power of Nonviolence," *Peacework* 2007, Katrina Shields, *In the Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide for Social Action* (NSW, Australia: Millennium Books, 1991), 73-5.

³ See, for instance, Antonin J Obrdlik, "'Gallows Humor' a Sociological Phenomenon," *The American Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 5 (1942), John Burma, "Humor as a Technique in Race Conflict," *American Sociological Review* 6 (1946), Egon Larsen, *Wit as a Weapon : The Political Joke in History* (London: F. Muller, 1980), James C Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New

humour when used in the course of struggle. Yet, the literature in nonviolent action has not seriously or adequately explored this potential and, more importantly, understood how the tactics of humour operate as a part of nonviolent campaigns. The scant research into the topic possibly arises from the ambivalent relationship between nonviolence and humour. This section is an attempt to provide an overview of this relationship in order to bring to the picture the *locus* of this paper within existing scholarship.

The notion of humour covers a wide range of phenomena, from the physical act of laughing to the psychological causes and effects of the cognitive perception of something funny, from social and cultural manifestations to the intellectual dimension and from the religious aspect to the realm of ethics.⁴ As a piece of social conduct, humour is recognised as laughing at oneself, with others and at others.⁵ The last has raised ethical concerns among classic philosophers who point out that ridicule and mockery of inferiors or the misfortunate should be avoided as it is associated with humiliation and the assumption that one is superior to those being laughed at.⁶ This ethical concern is particularly emphasised in studies of ethnic jokes which assert that racist jokes do not only reflect inter-group tension but also reinforce antagonism and potentially create a precondition for racial discrimination and ethnic violence.⁷

Although nonviolence scholars do not make explicit their standpoint towards ridicule, advocates for nonviolence as a moral principle rule out the act of humiliation and provocation of the opponent. For instance, Arne Naess, a prominent Gandhian scholar, concludes that the principle of Gandhian nonviolence embraces the act of non-humiliation and non-provocation as it “reduces the tendency to violence in the participations in the struggle”. Humiliating the opponent, despite the aim for a ‘good’ cause, is destructive and incompatible with a nonviolent goal.⁸ From the perspective of ‘positive nonviolence’, nonviolent methods with the focus on the mere absence of

Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990), 162-82. Marijeleint Hart and Dennis Bos, eds., *Humour and Social Protest*, vol. 15, International Review of Social History (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2007).

⁴ See, for instance, Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, trans. C. Breteon and R. Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1912), Freud Sigmund, “Humor,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9 (1928), ———, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1963), Avner Ziv, *Personality and Sense of Humor* (New York: Springer Pub. Co., 1984), Mahadev L. Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (London: Cornell University Press, 1988), Michael McKay, *On Humour: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), J.W. Barron, *Humor and Psyche: Psychoanalytic Perspective* (London: The Analytic Press, 1999), Simon Crichtley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁵ Ronald De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 275-97.

⁶ See, excerpts of classic works with regard to this view, in John Morreall, ed. *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 10-9.

⁷ Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), Michael Billig, “Humour and Hatred: The Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan,” *Discourse and Society* 12 (2001), ———, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: SAGE, 2005), 200-35. There are recent examples in which sense of humour crosses the line and generates outrage among those associating themselves with the butt of the joke. See, for instance, Matthew Diamond, “No Laughing Matter: Post-September 11 Political Cartoons in Arab/Muslim Newspapers,” *Political Communication* 16 (2002).

⁸ Arnes Naess, *Gandhi and Group Conflict: An Exploration of Satyagraha Theoretical Background* (Oslo, Bergen and Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget, 1974), 59.

physical violence and the sanction of the opponent can lead to the neglect of symbolic violence, which potentially hinders sustainable conflict transformation.⁹

In many ways, while Mohandas Gandhi's sense of humour is acknowledged,¹⁰ Gandhian nonviolence is rather tragic due to the strong trust in the 'self-suffering' of nonviolent practitioners as a catalyst for the opponent's change of view. It is believed that self-suffering can dramatise the course of a struggle because it cuts through 'the rational defenses which the opponent may have built in opposing the initial efforts of rational persuasion...' ¹¹ The tragic aspect of the self-suffering of nonviolence practitioners works further to attract sympathy and support from the populace as violence waged against nonviolent resisters that is likely to undermine its legitimacy in the sight of the general public.¹² Perhaps, it is this paramount tragedy of the principled approach to nonviolence that overshadows the possibility of using 'comic' tactics for nonviolent struggle.

A hope in coupling humour with nonviolence, however, lies in the pragmatic approach to nonviolence.¹³ In his monumental work, Gene Sharp outlines 198 methods of nonviolent action which, when carried out under the guidance of a well-calculated strategy and nonviolent discipline, operate to undercut the sources of power of the powerful opponent (mostly the state).¹⁴ By pointing out the coercion process of nonviolent methods, Sharp addresses the fact that actions of humour that are well-organised can be an effective tool for nonviolent struggle. These forms of humour include skits and pranks, mock awards, satirical songs and guerrilla/absurdist theatre.¹⁵ Given this recognition, Sharp's theory of power, which lays the foundations for a theory of nonviolent action, is influenced by Etienne de La Boétie's writing, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*. As a young French student inspired by egalitarianism, La Boétie despised popular entertainment, including comic theatre, because he saw it as a tool for the elites' manipulation of subjects.¹⁶

⁹ Joan V. Bondurant, "Satyagraha Versus Duragraha: The Limits of Symbolic Violence," in *Gandhi, His Relevance for Our Times: A Volume of Contemporary Studies in Gandhian Themes Presented to Sri R. R. Diwakar on His Seventieth Birthday by the Workers of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi*, ed. G. Ramachandran and T. K. Mahadevan (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964), Johan Galtung, "On the Meaning of Nonviolence," *Journal of Peace Research* 2, no. 3 (1965): 238-47.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Jim Douglass and Shelly Douglass, *Dear Gandhi: Now What? Letters from Ground Zero* (Philadelphia & Santa Cruz: New Society Publishers, 1988), 5.

¹¹ Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 228.

¹² Richard B. Greg, *The Power of Non-Violence* (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd. & Broadway House, Carter Lane, E.C., 1935), 76.

¹³ It should be noted that the boundary between principled and pragmatic nonviolence is problematic. The separation of principled from pragmatic nonviolence is drawn in this paper only for the benefit of the discussion. For a discussion of the problematic dichotomy of approaches to nonviolence, see Chaiwat Satha-Anand, "Overcoming Illusory Division between Nonviolence as Pragmatic Strategy and a Way of Life," in *Nonviolence Commission, the International Peace Research Association Conference* (Kyung Hee University, Seoul, South Korea 2002), Thomas Weber, "Nonviolence Is Who? Gene Sharp and Gandhi," *Peace and Change* 28, no. 2 (2003).

¹⁴ Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 1973), part one.

¹⁵ Ibid., part two, 131, 48, 51-2, 397. Worthy of note, guerrilla theatre, which will be elaborated in the following sections, can be either dramatic or comic. See more in L.M. Bogad, *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁶ Etienne de La Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz (New York: Free Life Editions, 1975), 70-2.

Modern theorists in nonviolent resistance doubt to what extent humour can ‘seriously’ contribute to overarching nonviolent campaigns. The view is reflected in Adam Roberts’ study in the techniques of civil resistance in which he asserts that the concealed ridicule of the oppressed against the oppressor “is not necessarily in itself a part of a public movement or of a serious attempt to change the situation”.¹⁷ Accordingly, he simply dismisses the fact that covert acts of resistance, or as coined by James C. Scott, ‘hidden transcript’ – which include joke-making and carnival feasts of the subordinate – have historically given rise to overt and organised resistance.¹⁸

The problem of the seriousness of humour in becoming a promising nonviolent tactic can be discerned by the scant research on the tactical use of humour in nonviolent struggle. Where the topic has drawn some interest the limited existing research focuses on the ‘functions’ or ‘utilities’ of humour.¹⁹ However, ‘utility’ should not be confused with ‘operation’ or the way things work. Utility can only tell ‘what’ a thing can do but does little to inform us ‘how’ that thing operates. Although, in this paper, I recognise that humour can serve a wide range of utilities in nonviolent campaigns as has been examined by prior research, I am more interested in understanding the operation of humour as a nonviolent tactic. The analysis derives from details of the tactics of humour staged in the Serbian student-led nonviolent protests in 1996-7 and by the subsequent resistance movement (*Otpor*) active from 1998 until the fall of Slobodan Milošević. Given the reliance on a single case study, I do not wish to generalise my analysis but rather I expound the operational logic of tactics of humour based on a particular context. The analysis of the Serbian case will also indicate the possible ‘companionship’ between humour and nonviolence.

Tactics of humour in Serbia’s student protests and their subsequent resistance movement, *Otpor*, 1996-2000

The tactics of humour stood at the core of nonviolent resistance that contributed to the removal of the authoritarian rule of Slobodan Milošević and the democratic transition of Serbia. Serbia in the 1990s experienced one of the most notoriously ruthless and yet populist leaders. Shortly after the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980, Slobodan Milošević, a former banker who had made his way to become the leader of the Socialist party (*Socialistička partija Srbije – SPS*) and the President of Serbia, strengthened his power by manoeuvring nationalist rhetoric while the emerging disintegration of Yugoslavia and the emasculation of opposition parties assisted him to mobilise the popular support.²⁰ During his rule, elections were often rigged and the police force and national media (*Radio-Televizija Srbije – RTS*) was completely monopolised by his Socialist party. Milošević also brought three wars to

¹⁷ Adam Roberts, "The Technique of Nonviolent Resistance," (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1976), 28-9.

¹⁸ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 136-82.

¹⁹ Jorgen Johansen, "Humour as a Political Force, or How to Open the Eyes of Ordinary People in Social Democratic Country," *Philosophy and Social Action* 17, no. 3-4 (1991), Maiken Jul Sørensen, "Humour as Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression" (Coventry University, 2006), ———, "Humour as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression," *Peace and Change* 33, no. 2 (2008).

²⁰ Robert Thomas, *Serbia under Milošević / Politics in the 1990s* (London: Hurst, 1999), 44-57.

the front door of Serbians in only a decade: the 1991 Croatian war, the 1992-5 Bosnian war and the 1999 Kosovo war.²¹ Corruption, cronyism and the gross expenditure on the prolonged wars aside, these wars enormously worsened the livelihoods of Serbians as they were indiscriminately affected by international sanctions. The number of refugees became unprecedentedly high, marked by 540,000 Bosnian and Croat Serb refugees in Serbia alone in mid-1993.²² Under these circumstances, young Serbians saw no future. Many fled the country or joined underworld gangs.²³

The student-led protests between November 1996 and March 1997, known as the 'winter of discontent', were augmented by the setbacks in Milošević's policies and ignited by the stolen election in November 1996, in which opposition parties' electoral victory in urban cities was falsified by the SPS-appointed Election Committee. An opposition coalition boycotted the run-off of the election and organised protests by its supporters. Simultaneously, the students called for their own demonstrations and demanded the recognition of the original election results as well as the dismissal of the unpopular rector of Belgrade University, Dragutin Velicković who had been nominated by the SPS.²⁴ Even though conventional protest repertoires (e.g. rallies and petitions) were staged, overall the protests were coloured by a festive mood due to the innovation of witty and carnivalesque actions. The protests of the opposition coalition went on until its electoral victory was recognised on February 11, 1997 while those of the students continued until the resignation of the rector of Belgrade University on March 7.

Nevertheless, after the protests, Milošević's power remained intact. By the end of July 1997, he was able to install himself as the Yugoslav president.²⁵ The opposition parties remained incapable of solving their disunity problem and the independent media and the academic circle of dissidents continued to be harassed by the regime.²⁶ In 1998, the armed struggle between the Serbian security forces and the armed Albanians in Kosovo escalated. And this was followed by the NATO's aerial strike on major cities Serbia in March 1999.²⁷ For the Serbians, a sense of hopelessness was felt as their 'lives' had not been brought back after the winter of discontent. Against these odds, veterans of the 1996-7 demonstrations began to form a movement, *Otpor!*, the Serbian word for 'resistance'. Their initial agenda was to oppose the draconian laws that severely restricted freedom of speech; however, they later realised that the only way to bring about real change was to remove Slobodan Milošević. Instead of carrying out overt protests as they had done in 1996-7, *Otpor*'s original activists pursued a 'guerrilla-based' strategy, with a hit-and-run approach that focused on less demanding, less costly and less risky, but highly participatory action.²⁸ The absurdist street theatre, a legacy from the earlier waves of protest, become relevant and appropriate to the 'new' strategy, especially in the early stages of

²¹ Eric D. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia : Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 50-1.

²² Thomas, *Serbia under Milošević / Politics in the 1990s*, 161-5.

²³ Matthew Collin, *This Is Serbia Calling*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Serpent's Tail, 2001), 87.

²⁴ Thomas, *Serbia under Milošević / Politics in the 1990s*, 285-6.

²⁵ Ibid., 338-50.

²⁶ Sabrina Ramet, *Balkan Babel : The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milošević*, 4th ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2002), 341.

²⁷ Ibid., 346, HRW Human Rights Watch, "The Crisis in Kosovo," (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2000).

²⁸ Interview, Srdja Popović, November 20, 2009. See also, Collin, *This Is Serbia Calling*, 175.

the movement's formation. Once the movement had enlarged and clearly posed a threat to the regime, humour was also tactically used to counter the regime's propagated defamiation of *Otpor*.

The following parts provide examples of the tactics of humour engineered and extensively staged in the 1996-7 student-led protests and *Otpor*'s operation in 1998-2000. These tactics can be categorised into four forms: satirical protest and absurdist street action, humorous and sarcastic slogans, carnivalesque rallies and humour in the televised media.

Satirical protest and absurdist street action

During the 1996-7 protests, one of the most famous actions was that of 'pot and pan banging.' The action was meant to make 'noise' to drown out the 'noise' of the propaganda produced by the regime through the controlled TV station. At 7.30pm, each day, the national television channel aired propaganda news that justified – if not glorified – Milošević's wars, the harassment of civilians, corruption, failed economic policies and the censorship of the independent media.²⁹ To counter this, students encouraged citizens in Belgrade and those in other cities to batter anything they could find in their kitchens, anything that created noise, as loudly as possible. Consequently, at 7.30 pm each day during the 1996-7 protests, people from all walks of life, including children, pregnant women and the elderly banged their household goods, particularly pots and pans. This scene and sound somehow became the metaphor for the 'peoples' power'. It broke the darkness and silence that had been consuming lives in Serbia.³⁰

Satirical protest staged by the 1996-7 protesters was often metaphorical with the symbolic denunciation of pro-regime organisations. One of the well-known actions included the cleaning of buildings. As dirtiness was symbolically equated with the regime, protesters offered their 'service' to get rid of this dirtiness.³¹ Among others, the rector of the University of Belgrade, nominated by the regime, was the target. He had strongly opposed the student protests. In response to his political stance, the protesters cleaned his office building so that the only remaining dirtiness was the rector. When the university staff was locked out of the Chancellorship for supporting the student protests, students conducted a ritual to 'exorcise the Devil'. They prayed and used candles and garlic to expel the bad spirit, referring to the University executives.³² The Serbian Parliament building was an additional target of the mockery. When the Parliament claimed that they had to postpone their session regarding the falsified election results due to the need for rat extermination, demonstrators sprayed rat 'pesticide' outside the building. The message was that now

²⁹ Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia : Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*, 102.

³⁰ Stef Jansen, "The Streets of Beograd. Urban Space, and Protest Identities in Serbia," *Political Geography* 20 (2001): 41. During the Soviet occupation, the Poles in Lodz carried out a similar action. So did the Chileans during their protests against the Pinochet dictatorship. See Stef Jansen, "Victims, Underdogs and Rebels: Discursive Practices of Resistances in Serbian Protest," *Critique of Anthropology* 20 (2000): 412, Howard Clark, "Introduction," in *Unnamed Resistance and Global Solidarity*, ed. Howard Clark (New York: Pluto Books, 2009), 6.

³¹ Jansen, "The Streets of Beograd. Urban Space, and Protest Identities in Serbia," 45-6.

³² Ibid.: 44.

that they had helped to eradicate the rats, the Parliament had no excuse to put off their session.³³

Absurdist street theatre was a common scene during the protests in the winter of 1996-7. For instance, Mira Marković, Slobodan Milošević's wife who concurrently held the leadership of the Yugoslav United Left party (*Yugoslovenska udružena levica – JUL*), had threatened to use violence against protesters. She announced that “a lot of blood had been shed for the introduction of communism into Yugoslavia and that [the party] would ever go without blood.” The butt of the jokes was palpable. After the announcement, a group of student protesters ingeniously set up a blood transfusion campaign to collect blood. Then, they went to the JUL headquarters with the collected blood, and mockingly asked if the party could please go now that they had their blood.³⁴

When cordons of police rounded up student protesters camping at Knez Mihailova, the main pedestrian street of Belgrade, they put on another show. Students acted as if they were being held hostage in their own city by forming a prison circle and walking around with their hands on the back of their heads. Afterwards, one of the student committees published an updated Universal Declaration of Human Rights, subtitled ‘The Latest Version for the Serbian-speaking and territorial area.’ The new cynical version of the Declaration guaranteed Serbian citizens the equal right to “a jail sentence, clubbing, molestation, repression and all kinds of battery from the persons in charge of this.” Also, they were assured “the right to death, captivity, social insecurity and lack of opinion or conscience, the right to be punished for no particular reason, to be innocent until forced to plead guilty, to be restricted in movement and residence within the boundaries of the country and to be uninformed or misinformed”.³⁵ Under the Declaration, citizens were also obliged to exercise the rights listed above at least once a year.

The 1996-7 protests also saw absurdist street action being lifted to a level of sophistication in the ‘releasing turkeys’ skit. Mira Marković, the wife of Milošević, was widely known for her fondness of placing plastic flowers around her ear. For a lot of people, this reflected bad taste in fashion, but for student protesters, it was a brilliant source for mockery. During the protests, on Mira’s birthday, they managed to get five turkeys, scotch-taping plastic flowers supposedly around their ears and releasing them on the busy pedestrian street. Passers-by and shoppers largely recognised that the turkeys represented Mira Marković. The hilarious ‘happening’ invited laughter from the public while ridiculing a powerful political figure such as Milošević’s wife. Unsure of what to do, the police subsequently ran around the street to catch the turkeys. The hilarity was at its peak when an animal rights group filed a lawsuit against the authorities, accusing them of violating animal rights by arresting the turkeys. Basically, regardless of the police response, they appeared ridiculous.³⁶

When *Otpor* was active in 1998-2000, humour constituted a vital means of gaining the movement publicity, leading to mass mobilisation and the enlargement of the movement. After the NATO strike in 1999, *Otpor* activists staged absurdist

³³ Streten Vojnović, “Protest as an Urban Phenomenon,” in *Protest in Belgrade*, ed. Mladen Lazić (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999), 201.

³⁴ Jansen, “Victims, Underdogs and Rebels: Discursive Practices of Resistances in Serbian Protest,” 397.

³⁵ *Boom!* 1996, iss. 11, cited in Ibid.: 403.

³⁶ Interview, Petar Milicević, November 19, 2009; interview Srđja Popović, November 20, 2009.

theatre, travelling throughout Belgrade and other regional cities in order to draw public attention and recruit potential members, especially in major cities such as Novi Sad, Čačak, and Užice where people increasingly directed their outrage at Milošević after the NATO bombing and organised their own protests.³⁷ The earliest absurdist street action was carried out by *Otpor* activists in Niš in August 1999 in order to ‘celebrate’ the birthday of Slobodan Milošević. Thousands of the town residents attended the party and wrote their ‘wishes’ on a birthday card for the President. Other gifts included a one way flight ticket to the Hague since he was a war criminal, a prison uniform, books by his wife Mira Marković and a pair of handcuffs. The papier maché birthday cake was also made in the shape of a five pointed star presenting the countries which had once been a part of united Yugoslavia.³⁸ The message was that, on the President’s birthday, people should remember that he caused the disintegration of Yugoslavia where they used to have a good life without wars and impoverishment. The gifts moreover implicitly reflected the desire to oust Milošević and to see him imprisoned in the Hague.³⁹

In the same month, *Otpor* staged another street skit, called ‘Telescope’, at a pedestrian street in central Belgrade. On that day, there was the forecast of a solar eclipse. A handful of *Otpor* activists managed to erect a five-metre telescope, the lens of which was replaced with Milošević’s image mockingly presented as a falling comet. The telescope was placed in the middle of the street with a placard inviting people to look through. Expecting to see the eclipse, people, instead, only found the image of Milošević. The hidden message here was that Milošević resembled a comet that darkened the lives of Serbians. His image blocking the actual lens of the telescope could also be interpreted as his obstruction of Serbian society from moving forward to a better future.

Between October and November, 1999, *Otpor* launched one of its most famous street actions: ‘a Dinar for Change/Resignation.’ The context of the action was the Government’s announcement of a new agricultural policy, an titled as ‘A Dinar for Sowing.’ The policy encouraged people to donate one dinar for sowing and planting crops. In response this policy blatantly proposed during the endemic impoverishment, *Otpor* activists twisted its title. They announced ‘A Dinar for Change/Resignation’ (*Dinar za Smenu*).⁴⁰ They placed an unused barrel of petrol at Belgrade’s pedestrian street, Knez Mihailova. In front of the barrel, there was the image of Slobodan Milošević surrounded by the target symbol. Close to the barrel were a baseball bat and a sign suggesting people should batter Milošević’s photo in front of the barrel. They were invited to hit the barrel twice if they did not have

³⁷ Matthew Collin, *The Time of the Rebels : Youth Resistance Movements and 21st Century Revolutions* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2007), 22, Srđja Popović, "Serbia Arena for Nonviolent Conflict: An Analytical Overview of the Application of Gene Sharp’s Theory of Nonviolent Action in Serbia’s Milošević," in *Whither the Bulldozer? Revolution, Transition, and Democracy in Serbia* (Belgrade, Serbia2001).

³⁸ CANVAS, "Ten Years Smarter? Otpor - Concepts and Meanings," (Belgrade: Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), 2008), Collin, *The Time of the Rebels : Youth Resistance Movements and 21st Century Revolutions*, 22.

³⁹ Steve York and Peter Ackerman, "Bringing Down a Dictator," (2001).

⁴⁰ In the Serbian language, ‘smenu’ contains various meanings such as change, resignation, dismissal, pension and purge. The naming of the action as ‘dinar za smenu’ reflected the use of parody by *Otpor* activists. In fact, it can be claimed that twisting the meanings of word, including those in the propaganda of the regime, was one of the unique characteristics of *Otpor*’s tactics. See Sørensen, "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression," 181.

money for the donation because of the economic recession under Milošević's rule.⁴¹ The barrel was left on the busy street in central Belgrade and other provincial towns for nearly two months. As the action grew more popular, the police decided to end the ridicule. However, since no one was there to be arrested, the police took the barrel instead. On the following day, *Otpor* activists organised a press conference, condemning the police's arrest of the barrel. Afterwards, they filed a lawsuit against the authority's unlawful confiscation of a citizen's property.⁴²

In the second biggest town, Novi Sad, a satirical theatrical happening was also witnessed. After the NATO air raids in 1999, Milošević initiated a grand reconstruction plan, with medals for loyal citizens and military heroes. Propaganda TV channels moreover broadcasted the image of smiling workers constructing new buildings, and benevolent officers overseeing their hard work for the beloved country. The news remarkably contrasted with the slow reconstruction that was actually underway. In response to the regime's pseudo-reconstruction plan, activists in Novi Sad managed to build a 'toy bridge' in a city centre park.⁴³ The message was sent to the populace; the government's reconstruction plan was up in the air and unlikely to be real, symbolically equivalent to a child's toy.

Absurdist street action was also carried out to poke fun at and thus undermine the regime's defamation of *Otpor*. In February 2000, *Otpor* moved from being a jocular student group to becoming the people's resistance movement. As the movement's popularity clearly posed a threat to the regime, it made the move to accuse *Otpor* activists, who were basically school and university students, of being terrorists, fascists and drugs addicts. Instead of rejecting such accusations, which could have led to the further charges from the regime and justification for harsh repression, *Otpor* activists erected a stage downtown and confirmed to the public that they were terrorists who looked like nerds wearing glasses. This meant they had read a lot, which indicated that reading was dangerous for Serbia. So, people should be worried. By ridiculing the accusation, people saw it as absurd and that "[*Otpor* activists] are not fascists. These kids are just kids." Ivan Marković, an *Otpor* founder, accordingly admitted that "it was extremely important to show how the state propaganda was ridiculous".⁴⁴

Another example of the theatrical show staged by *Otpor* activists in an attempt to 'absurdise' the state propaganda was that of 'Unload and Load 2000'. When Milošević declared the election date, prematurely taking place on September 24, 2000, *Otpor*, together with other NGOs, actively carried out resistance and voting campaigns throughout the country. Less than a week prior to the election date, *Otpor*'s headquarters in central Belgrade was raided. Badges, stickers, T-shirts, computers and other office equipment were confiscated. Activists named this outrageous action 'Unload 2000' and they planned to strike back against it by staging the 'Load 2000' action. They expected that more raids would come if the police assumed that activists would 'load' new devices and campaign gadgets in their office. Activists, accordingly, contacted national and international reporters, making sure there were sufficient witnesses for the impending circus. On the following day, they

⁴¹ Collin, *This Is Serbia Calling*, 177, Sørensen, "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression," 181.

⁴² Interview, Srdja Popović, November 20, 2009.

⁴³ Collin, *The Time of the Rebels : Youth Resistance Movements and 21st Century Revolutions*, 22.

⁴⁴ York and Ackerman, "Bringing Down a Dictator."

pretended to carry in a lot of heavy boxes. The secret police arrived and confiscated these boxes as anticipated; however, all they could find inside them were scraps of newspapers. The images and the news of sober police stunned by the empty boxes appeared in the international coverage. Srdja Popović, a founder and strategist of *Otpor*, remarked that in every action *Otpor* aimed to gain publicity in order to shift the momentum of public support to the movement.⁴⁵

Humorous and sarcastic slogans on placards and banners

The 1996-7 protests were remembered for the genuine creativity of demonstrators discernable in their witty and sarcastic or even absurd slogans which appeared on banners, placards, stickers, and badges. Messages were created anew; or else, they were adapted from the popular slogans of commercial advertisements, quotations from literature and lyrics.⁴⁶ In general, there were slogans directly attacking the regime and its entourage. For instance, when Mira Marković visited India, students, via their placards, advised her, “you’ll be safe in India, they don’t kill cows there”.⁴⁷ When the Yugoslav football team was beaten by the Spanish team in an international match prior to the protests, a demonstrator came up with a banner to satirise the Court, saying that, “Yugoslavia beats Spain 2-0. Signed. The Supreme Court of Serbia”.⁴⁸ This sarcastic message was to express popular resentment against the Supreme Court, which had been the backbone of Milošević’s regime by legally facilitating the fraudulent annulment of the elections. The placard hence portrayed the absence of the rule of law in Serbia.⁴⁹

The despised RTS could not avoid being the target of mockery either. Being a propaganda machine of the regime, the RTS belittled the demonstrations by broadcasting the news of Milošević being a peace advocate who had not only signed the Dayton Peace Agreement to terminate the Bosnian war but had also led Serbians to prosperity and ever lasting happiness. To many, this portrait was an imaginative fairy tale, some sort of hallucination. It strikingly contrasted with the harsh day-to-day reality faced by the general populace. This contrast of two realities gave rise to such banners as “I want to live in the land of RTS”,⁵⁰ or “I think; therefore, I don’t watch RTS”.⁵¹

The 1996-7 protests also saw placards and radio jingles that mocked Milošević’s populism, and countered the regime’s defamation of protesters. For instance, when supporters of Milošević, who had been bussed in from the countryside to counter the Belgrade protesters, chanted “Slobo, we love you,” Milošević bluntly replied, “I love you, too.” The rebellious radio station, B-92, poked fun at this lame response of Milošević, reproducing and using it as their jingle. On the following day, student protesters carried shields with the lettering, “I love you, too”.⁵² They also greeted each other saying, “I love you” and replying “I love you, too”.⁵³ When Dragan

⁴⁵ Interview, November 20, 2009.

⁴⁶ Collin, *This Is Serbia Calling*, 106.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Slaviša Lekić, “Svi U Napad Iz Bgd Protesta,” (BiS Press, 1997), 47.

⁴⁹ Collin, *This Is Serbia Calling*, 106.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 110.

⁵¹ Lekić, “Svi U Napad Iz Bgd Protesta,” 48.

⁵² Vojvović, “Protest as an Urban Phenomenon,” 202.

⁵³ Collin, *This Is Serbia Calling*, 118.

Tomić, the president of the Serbian Parliament claimed that the students were manipulated, the following day saw one banner mocking this invalid allegation by confirming that students “have an under-aged, retarded, impressionable, reduced, manipulated, pro-fascist temperament”.⁵⁴

Other slogans contained relatively grotesque and obscene language, with double meanings. For instance, toilet rolls were found inscribed with, “we’ve had enough shit”. Others included “When the ruler is ‘impotent’, only the people ‘arise’”,⁵⁵ and “Fifty years of sex is enough. We are in climax now” (referring to the fifty years of despair that people had been living under the communist and dictatorial rule).⁵⁶ Placards with absurd and nearly politically meaningless slogans were also shown to make the protests colourful. Examples were “Smile Serbia, you’re on candid camera!”,⁵⁷ “Yvana, I love you” and “I’ll have a better slogan tomorrow, I promise”.⁵⁸

Carnivalesque rallies

The spirit of carnival was ubiquitous in the 1996-7 protests. It mutated the protests from political activity into cheerful parades. The beginning period of the protest witnessed a Dionysian carnival combined with a Brazilian samba parade, in which participants marched around the city while drumming, whistling and battering anything they could lay their hands on. International flags were vibrantly waved, ranging from those of Yugoslavia and Serbia, France, Japan, Germany and the USA, including those with commercial logos. The inherent message of the waving of the flags was that “Belgrade is the world”.⁵⁹ Rock ‘n’ roll and punk, famous for being the music of rebels, was also loudly played in convergence with the “traditional folk rhythms of Serbian rumba to create a kind of communal trance magic [in exorcising] evil spirits”.⁶⁰ Parade marchers moreover wore ridiculous-fancy costumes, in an attempt to become anything and to mock anyone they wished, ranging from a pseudo-crown prince, wanna-be Roman gladiators, ridiculously-dressed police officers, to those with comic sunglasses, face masks and nurses’ uniforms.⁶¹ At one point, sheep were brought to the demonstrations. Poking fun at socialist voters, sheep owners hung placards on the sheep’s necks, bearing such slogans as “we support the Socialist Party of Serbia” and “the whole world is against us”.⁶² The parade would have lacked a real spirit of anti-regime demonstration without the mocking of Slobodan Milošević. Protesters managed to create a life-size sponge effigy of him, dressed in a stripped prison uniform; his small head was done in modelling clay and stuck on an umbrella and his Pinocchio-like nose was made of an inflated condom.⁶³

⁵⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Interview, Vladimir Djumić, November 15, 2009.

⁵⁷ Lekić, “Svi U Napad Iz Bgd Protesta,” 14.

⁵⁸ Collin, *This Is Serbia Calling*, 106.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 99-100, 06. Stef Jansen argues that this action indicated the way protesters re-

identified Belgrade as a cosmopolitan urban space. It symbolically opposed the widespread ultra-nationalist discourse and self-isolation from the international community. See Jansen, “The Streets of Beograd, Urban Space, and Protest Identities in Serbia,” 51.

⁶⁰ Collin, *This Is Serbia Calling*, 108.

⁶¹ Ibid., 106.

⁶² Thomas, *Serbia under Milošević / Politics in the 1990s*, 308-9.

⁶³ Voyuvić, “Protest as an Urban Phenomenon,” 201.

When the police set up a cordon to block entry into the protest site in central Belgrade, protest organisers initiated 'the Cordon of the Cordon' action, in which students, as well as professors and artists, pursued a stand-off against the police cordon. While the police were armed with batons, tear gas launchers and guns, the citizen cordons were armed with flowers and mirrors. Flowers were handed to the police by flirting female protesters. The mirrors were held up to the police, allowing them to see their own 'human' faces'.⁶⁴ Whereas the authorities stood with strict discipline and soberness, the protesters displayed a world of fun, play, and laughter. They wore comical dress and improvised all kinds of games, such as water polo in the heavy rain, "photographing themselves and drawing their portraits, playing chess, donning boxing gloves and sparring with officers and fishing fish tins from the surrounding garbage cans".⁶⁵ Jokes and burlesque dance were the 'weaponry' of the cordon of people, firing into the police, hoping to get at least one laugh from them in return.⁶⁶

The stand-off continued. As neither the police nor the protesters were willing to leave the scene in spite of the ruthless icy cold, the fear of a crackdown was on the rise. Students decided to set up a party, entitled the 'Discotheque Blue Cordon' (*Deskoteka Plavi Kordon*).⁶⁷ A provincial sound system was brought in to get the festivities started. For 178 hours, police encountered the biggest live Belgrade party with around 30,000 party goers who ceaselessly danced along to British punk mixed with traditional Balkan songs. The highlight of the discotheque was the 'Miss University Contest' organised by students in collaboration with a pro-opposition newspaper, *Demokratija*, to elect the favourite female protester.⁶⁸ The event was followed by the 'Mister Police Contest', in which the most popular police officer was selected by the protesters.⁶⁹ The stand-off lasted for seven days. Eventually, the protesters were permitted to walk through Belgrade centre as they had done initially.⁷⁰

Humour through the televised media

While there is no record of the carnivalesque features of resistance in *Otpor's* nonviolent campaigns during 1998-2000, humour appeared in the form of television advertisements. The use of media, accompanied by marketing and branding strategy, was the key means of communication and popularising *Otpor's* nonviolent campaign after the movement's enlargement in the dawn of 2000. By shifting to branding strategy, *Otpor* invented a host of catchy slogans, although not as witty as those of the 1996-7 protests, which were reproduced and disseminated through graffiti, T-shirts, badges, posters, banners, pamphlets, match boxes, stickers, flags, and mobile phone text messages.⁷¹ The strategy ensured that *Otpor* became a youth cult of nt resistance

⁶⁴ Interview, Srdja Popović, November 20, 2009; see also Jansen, "Victims, Underdogs and Rebels: Discursive Practices of Resistances in Serbian Protest," 398.

⁶⁵ Voyuvić, "Protest as an Urban Phenomenon," 203.

⁶⁶ Interview, Vladimir Djumić, November 15, 2009.

⁶⁷ Voyuvić, "Protest as an Urban Phenomenon," 203.

⁶⁸ Marina Blagojević, "The Walks in a Gender Perspective," in *Protest in Belgrade: Winter of Discontent*, ed. Mladen Lazić (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999), 121.

⁶⁹ Jansen, "Victims, Underdogs and Rebels: Discursive Practices of Resistances in Serbian Protest," 398.

⁷⁰ Voyuvić, "Protest as an Urban Phenomenon," 204.

⁷¹ CANVAS, *Canvas Core Curriculum: A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle* (Belgrade, Serbia: Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), 2007), 121.

and, as a disk jockey of the rebellious B-92 radio station commented, “Otpor made it fashionable to be against Milošević.”⁷²

The cultivation of a mass culture of resistance was also accomplished by the use of televised media, in which humour also played a role. One of the most well-known media skits was a TV commercial broadcast on the independent channel. It imitated a washing machine commercial, in which a female presenter with a housewifely appearance demonstrated how to use the machine ‘properly’. A T-shirt with the image of Milošević was shown, and then put in the washing machine. The presenter further explained the three functions of the machine but the most effective function was the one with the switch painted with the black-and-white clenched fist, the symbol of *Otpor*. She pushed the fist button. After a while, the T-shirt was cleansed, and the dirt tainting the T-shirt, a metaphor for Milošević, was totally gone.⁷³ The brand of this washing machine was ‘Gotov je’ or ‘He’s Finished’ which was the final resistance campaign prior to the ‘bulldozer revolution’ that toppled Slobodan Milošević on October 5, 2000.

‘Excorporation’ and ‘carnavalesque’ in the tactics of humour for nonviolent struggle

In the case of Serbia’s student-led protests and the subsequent resistance movement, *Otpor*, humour took a part in popularising nonviolent campaigns. Most of the skits were staged to attract popular support even when they seemed to attack symbols of Milošević’s regime. In this sense, concepts in pop(ular) culture – in which the cultural manifestation of humour, including the notion of carnivalesque is central – can provide some insights into how the tactics of humour operate in the course of resistance.

At one end of the debate, pop culture, manifested in the media, advertising, consumption, everyday life practice, and academia, is associated with mass culture and ideology. And it is the elites and bourgeois who manoeuvre and reproduce mass culture in order to normalise and sustain their domination and oppression of their subordinates or the proletariat. From this perspective, pop culture can only be a tool for hegemony.⁷⁴ At the other end, pop culture is romanticised as folk culture, created by the oppressed and used by them in the course of struggle against the dominant.⁷⁵ A way out of this dichotomy lies in the approach that considers pop culture as a site of struggle. Complete free will and ‘thick hegemony’ is irrelevant to everyday life practice in which pop culture is produced, reproduced, contested and negotiated. That is to say, while the worldviews of individuals are always shaped by values and ideologies embodied in different forms of pop culture, none of these normative forces can totalise manipulation and domination.⁷⁶ Whereas ideologies can be imposed, they are subject to constant change simply because of people’s ‘use’ of things. By using things, ideologies, norms and values are distorted, contested, re-interpreted,

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ York and Ackerman, “Bringing Down a Dictator.”

⁷⁴ See, for instance, Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paladin: London, 1979), Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁷⁵ John Storey, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Harlow, Sussex: Pearson Education Ltd., 1993), 10.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 14-5.

negotiated and changed. To use is to exercise power. However, this does not imply that users are free from being dominated by other forces of power. Rather, they 'make do' with what the dominant system provides them, juxtaposing different forces imposed on them.⁷⁷

Cultural resources, including ideas and ideologies, can be extracted and used for the purpose of resistance. Conceptualised as 'excorporation', the process denotes the way people make use of resources and commodities provided by the dominant system.⁷⁸ They extract features of system, discourses, and the contents of rhetoric that seem to sustain domination and combine the remnants of such discourse or rhetoric with other discursive forces to recreate their own rhetoric. The renewed, and often distorted, rhetoric is utilised to strike back against the dominant or the system it represents. This implies that consent of the so-called subordinate does not exist in its full form, as asserted by scholars.⁷⁹ Therefore, there is no complete consent or cooperation to be withdrawn from further the resistance against the powerful because the withdrawal of consent from one thing remains in the form of cooperation with something else. Rather, struggle takes place when people use and juxtapose different forces of power imposed on them, making do with existing discourses, belief systems and rhetoric. It is to 'tease' with symbolic domination that permeates everyday life by twisting its original meaning and re-interpreting and bouncing it back to emasculate such symbolic domination.⁸⁰

The tactics of humour work on the basis of 'excorporation'. When humour is tactically used in the course of resistance, it tends to attack the opponent or the system it represents by embracing parts of the opponent's rhetoric, and juxtaposes them with other discursive forces available in the 'market' of ideas. Indeed, the product is an idiosyncratic recreation. By 'excorporating', humour is an amalgam of incongruent elements, emerging from what it aims to attack while merging itself with other, ostensibly incompatible, ideas in order to undermine the opponent. This logic is also observed by Sigmund Freud in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* which refers to wit as a tactic that boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place and striking the hearer.⁸¹ But 'excorporation' alone does not make humour different from other forms of artistic recreation, such as music, poems and theatre, which are also the site of struggle and can be used for resistance.⁸² Another element that renders practices of humour distinct is the carnivalesque energy it generates.

The world of humour is also the world of carnivalesque in which the amusement and laughter derives its meaning from the inversion of the established

⁷⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁷⁸ John Fiske, *The Understanding of Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989), 15.

⁷⁹ See, for instance, Roland Bleiker, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 86-95.

⁸⁰ Paul Routledge, "Critical Geopolitics and Terrains of Resistance," *Political Geography* 15, no. 6-6 (1996).

⁸¹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1963), 102-15. Within humour studies, this feature of humour is acknowledged in 'incongruity theory'. See John Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986).

⁸² See, for instance the role of arts in nonviolent struggle, in T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

order and the imagination beyond the seeming reality. Carnavalesque is a cosmology, as initially present in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, wherein official seriousness is transgressed through the act of playfulness, excessive devouring and drinking, the use of scatological language, talk about the body's lower stratum (e.g. belly, excrement, and sexual organs) and the inversion of social roles.⁸³ The ancient carnivals and feasts, some of which continue to be practised in the modern day, saw women wearing men's clothes and acting like men, landlords and masters becoming slaves, priests practising forbidden activities and sinners being redeemed.⁸⁴ These are the popular practices of carnivalesque humour which transgressed the 'fixed' reality by allowing participants in the practices to take a journey to the world of utopia, the world where justice and egalitarianism can be imagined. Hence, the energy generated from carnivalesque humour is not funniness as such, rather, it is a power to create a parallel world where political imagination is made possible.⁸⁵ Expressed differently, the world of carnivalesque contains diverse realities and there are always alternatives lying in an apparent fixed situation.

'Excorporation' and carnivalesque bring to picture the operation of the tactical use of humour in Serbia's 1996-7 protests and the subsequent resistance movement, *Otpor*. Protesters and activists 'made do' with what was available in order to put together creative and humorous nonviolent action. The 'pot and pan banging' action collectively carried out during the 1996-7 protests, 'the Birthday Cake for the President' and the 'Telescope' skits, including the TV ad of the washing machine invented by *Otpor*'s activists, were prime examples of the utilisation of ordinary 'stuff' and commodities (pots and pans, birthday cakes, telescopes, washing machines) in recreating unorthodox methods of protest. The original usage of these commodities was diverted to merge with day-to-day ordinary activities – such as banging and washing clothes – in order to make possible sarcastic humour. These actions were not funny in the sense of generating a great burst of laughter, rather, the ordinariness of the equipment being used and the non-seriousness of the actions permitted the underlying political message to penetrate into people's thinking. It was a way of getting people to question their own obedience that had sustained the power of Milošević.⁸⁶

The majority of tactics of humour, presented in the case, turned the rhetoric of the regime upside down by deriving themselves from such rhetoric, taking out the core content and juxtaposing it with other discourses available in the market of ideas. The recreated rhetoric was used to hit back and undermine the original generator of the rhetoric. Instances can be discerned in the skits of cleaning the University of Belgrade rector's building, that of exorcising the 'devil' out of the building, that of releasing turkeys, the cynical version of Human Rights Declaration and the witty slogans on placards shown during the 1997-7 protests. The discourse of cleanliness was placed in contrast to that of dirtiness in order to associate the unpopular rector with (moral) dirtiness, in contrary to (moral) cleanliness of protesters. The actual meaning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was totally turned upside

⁸³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Mikhail Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 59-95.

⁸⁴ Anton C. Zijderveld, *Reality in a Looking-Glass: Rationality through an Analysis of Traditional Folly* (London: Routledge, 1982), 65-6, Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*, 156-64, Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 97-108.

⁸⁵ John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 280.

⁸⁶ Interview Milica Popović, November 21, 2009.

down. The original text that detailed the protection of basic human rights was replaced with the opposite message, urging citizens of Belgrade to exercise their rights to be abused by state authorities. Witty messages in slogans also demonstrated how 'excorporation' works. They were based on contemporary events (e.g. Mira Marković's visit in India, her fondness for placing plastic flowers around her ears, the Serbian Supreme Court's falsification of the election results, Milošević's lame greeting of his supporters). The contents of contemporary events were then twisted and incorporated into seemingly out-of context messages or events (the non-consumption of beef among the Hindu population in India, the cultural reference to an old grumpy woman as a turkey, the Serbian defeat in the international football match and protesters' 'greeting' one another with the sentence 'I love you').

'Excorporation' was also at work in tactics of humour that aimed to counter the regime's propaganda and defamation of activists. Absurdist street actions, such as blood transfusion, battering the image of Milošević attached on the barrel, building a toy bridge, staging 'terrorist nerds' theatre, and 'Load and Unload 2000', illustrate the way the gist of propaganda and defamation was twisted but not totally altered. Mira Marković's symbolic reference to the violent revolution of the communist party as 'blood' was maintained in the skit but students took the meaning of blood literally and twisted Marković's rhetoric in expressing their desire to see the regime's fall. To counter the state policy propaganda, activists managed to deconstruct the meaning of the 'A Dinar for Sowing' policy and replace it with 'A Dinar for Change/Resignation' (of Slobodan Milošević). In stead of donating their money, passersby were invited to hit the image of Milošević in front of the barrel in order to bring about 'change'. Other counter-defamation actions worked in a similar way. The original accusation, threat of repression and police abuse were twisted and mocked as the 'serious' strike back could only verify the accusation. In other words, the tactics of humour to counter rhetoric of the regime arise out of the rhetoric itself but the rhetoric was deconstructed and reinterpreted, or else it was exaggerated in the cause of sarcasm. The deconstructed rhetoric was, then, juxtaposed with incompatible elements which rendered the rhetoric even more ridiculous.

Carnivalesque features, especially those apparent in the rallies of 1996-7 protests, generated the energy of the 'other' world, the world beyond the seeming reality. Amidst the disastrous consequences of the Yugoslav wars, the economic crisis and the authoritarian regime, marchers managed to create a festive atmosphere and colour the tedious protests with a touch of carnivalesque humour. They wore fancy costumes, mocking everything and becoming anyone they wished to, and danced along to the loud eclectic sound of music. Instead of allowing the stand-off with the police to accumulate tension and the possibility of violent crackdown, protest organisers initiated 'Cordon of the Cordon' and the 'Discotheque Blue Cordon' actions, from where the festive mood was generated. Two worlds collided in these actions: the world of seriousness of the police cordon and the world of playfulness of the citizens. The victory of the latter was obtained with the laughter and smiles of the police who were expected to be sober in the world of seriousness. In this sense, the carnivalesque actions, staged by the 1996-7 protesters, helped to prevent violent clashes between the authorities and dissents mainly because the actions transcended the 'mood' of the tedious stand-off. The atmosphere was reconstructed in a way that the seriousness of antagonism between conflict parties was replaced with the playfulness, the spirit of carnivalesque humour.

Conclusion

The case of Serbia's student-led 1996-7 protests and the subsequent resistance movement, *Otpor*, brings to light how the tactics of humour work in nonviolent politics. As I demonstrated in the first section, although the relationship between nonviolence and humour can be in tension due to some rules underlying both practices being seen as incompatible, there is the recognition that humour can be used as a nonviolent tactic. However, little effort has been made to understand its operation. Collated details of the tactics of humour suggest that these tactics work on the basis of 'excorporation'. That is, they come into being by deconstructing, twisting and renewing rhetoric of the opponent which is initially aimed at generating propaganda or tainting the image of activists. In many ways, this operational logic of humour tactics resembles the concepts of 'political jiu-jitsu' and 'backfire' of nonviolent action, which assert that the opponent's strength in using violence can turn out to weaken or backfire on the opponent because the general public may perceive nonviolent actionists as more legitimate.⁸⁷ On other occasions, actions are based on the juxtaposition of the eclectic popular discourses operative in society, and that is why political messages underlying the tactics of humour can be detected by societal members. Although the tactics appear to be non-serious and absurd, their discursive codes enable the resistance message to get across to a wider audience. This can result in the accumulation of third party moral and actual support which is often stressed by nonviolent-non-violence scholars as a pivotal mechanism for the success of nonviolent campaigns.⁸⁸ Moreover, the carnivalesque rallies in the 1996-7 protests illuminated that the festive mood could transcend the conceivable reality wherein the tension between the protesters and the authorities caused by the stand-off could spiral into the violent clash. And perhaps, this is the crucial link between nonviolence and humour that has been little observed?

⁸⁷ Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 677-95, Brian Martin, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

⁸⁸ Johan Galtung, "Principles of Nonviolent Action: The Great Chain of Nonviolence Hypothesis," in *Nonviolence and Israel/Palestine*, ed. Johan Galtung (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Institute of Peace, 1989), Brian Martin and Wendy Varney, *Nonviolence Speaks: Communicating against Repression* (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2003).

HUMOR AS A CRITICISM OF LIFE

An Indonesian Perspective

Ayu Sutarto *

Introduction

A significant amount of human communication is devoted to humor. Humor influences readers' or listeners' views and persuades them to accept or reject the ideas or opinions presented. Besides giving pleasure, humor also creates playful moods and an atmosphere of conviviality, induces feelings of social solidarity, permits venting of aggression, and relieves tension (Apte, 1992:67). In Indonesia, humor is often used for social criticism or ridicule. Indonesian people like humor very much and they often use humor as a significant tool to criticize various aspects of life.

As a multiethnic and multilingual country, Indonesia is rich of humor. In the country, humor is not only a means of entertainment and enlightenment but also a means of criticism and expressing aspiration. Humor is mostly used to criticize and to ridicule himself and others. In Indonesia humor is created in oral and written forms, or through symbols that send particular messages intended by the creators. The messages found in humor usually deal with performance, action, and ideas of a certain person or community. Indonesian people love humor because it is considered as an effective means of communications. A criticism using humor is more acceptable and therefore various form of entertainments, performing arts, and political activities in Indonesia generally have a touch of humor.

Attention and appreciation for humor in Indonesia showed radiance when K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, usually called Gus Dur, was elected as the fourth president. K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) was widely known as a president who loved humor and often made use of humor to criticize social phenomena or to relieve tension in political activities. In responding a number of complicated, political issues encountered by the country, he frequently commented on them by using a famous hilarious phrase "*Gitu saja kok repot!*" (Do not make yourself panic-stricken!). An observer of humor in Indonesia stated that Gus Dur was the most humorous president in the world. Gus Dur did not only state his humor in informal events but also in the official ones. After he died in 2009, dozens of books on his humors had been published, among others are Gus Gerr "Gus Laughs", 50 Anekdot Gus Dur "50 Anecdotes of Gus Dur", Tawa Sehat Warisan Gus Dur "Gus Dur's Healthy Laughter", Koleksi Humor Gus Dur "Gus Dur's Collection of Humor", and *Gurita Gus Dur Super Lucu, Nyentrik dan Gokil* "Gus Dur's Octopus of Humor: The Funniest Craziest, and Maddest".

This paper studies the world of humor in Indonesia, for in this country humor does not only color world of show business or entertainments but also sociopolitical life. To my opinion understanding humor of a certain nation is expected to be a significant capital in understanding the nation concerned. In other words, humor can be used as an instrument for building cross-cultural understanding, because through humor other people or peoples will be knowledgeable about part of spiritual world of

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the ethnic group in which the humor grows, and what kinds and forms of humor are acceptable and unacceptable in certain communities.

Forms and Functions of Humor in Indonesia

In Indonesia, humor becomes a means of criticizing numerous aspects of life. Humor provides entertaining as well as enlightening messages, related to daily life, starting from trivial themes to political and sexual ones. The most favorable form of humor is the political one. This humor is very popular due to its dynamic and contextual characteristics. Generally, this kind of humor is enjoyed by adults even though they are not politicians. The political parties and figures often use humor to criticize or ridicule their political rivals. Democracy has been growing very amazingly and this moment is then used for expressing opinions and aspiration.

In Indonesia, humor can be distinguished into two categories; first, humor addressed to other people or communities, and second, the one addressed to oneself or one's own communities. The first form of humor can provoke horizontal conflict which sometimes disrupts political stability, while the second one gains favor because it does not insult or disrupt other people or communities. The second form of humor is even informative for it may make the others understand the cultural background of humorists better.

Humor is a two-way process of communication for it requires a sender, a receiver, a medium, and a message. Humor is overt when it is directed solely at creating mirth but is covert when it occurs as part of general social interaction, and it may include such motives and emotions as aggression, resentment, ridicule, solidarity, and criticism. The role and function of humor depend on the social context, the predisposition or the mental state of the listeners, and the ways in which messages are interpreted. Humor is generally a cooperative venture, not only in face-to-face communication but also across time and space. Since individuals differ in their perceptions of humor in both verbal and nonverbal events, humor may be intentional or unintentional either from the speaker's or from the listener's point of view (Apte, 1992:70).

In Indonesia, a number of humorists should have double qualities. They should not only be proficient in creating humorous sayings or ideas but also possessing capacity regarded as funny or amusing; such as very short body, big belly, protruding mouth, funny face, etc. For example, Ateng and UcoK for example, are two of Indonesian comedians who are very short, Pretty has a big belly, and Tukul Arwana has a protruding mouth. Besides, numerous jokes are based on imitation of speaking style of famous public figures. Among the examples are Butet, a comedian, imitates the expression and way when President Susilo Bambang Yudoyono and Habibie speak, Derry Drajat, an actor, imitates President Susilo Bambang Yudoyono's way of speaking, Kelik, a comedian, imitates the ex Vice President Jusuf Kalla's style, and Gus Pur, a comedian, imitates the late President Gus Dur's style of speaking.

Some of Indonesian folklorists have classified humor into seven categories, namely 1) religious humor: on particular religious figures and doctrines; 2) sexual humor: on sexual behavior of certain ethnic groups, religious figures, military figures, politicians, common adults, common children, etc; 3) humor of particular ethnic groups, especially regarding their cultural behavior; 4) political humor: political

figures' performance or measures, particular political views; 5) military humor: on military figures' action and what they do; 6) humor about professors: certain professors and professors in common; and 7) humor about the other elements within society (Danandjaja, 1984:123-124).

Indonesian people showed greater interest of humor after their fourth president Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur had created humors in various occasion. The late President Gus Dur was best-known for his ridiculing or laughing not only at the other people, but also himself. Strangely, many of Gus Dur's humors were acceptable, without making the receivers offended. Humor has truly made the political world of Indonesia more hospitable. Through humor, a humorist can criticize certain phenomena without sense of insult. For example, Gus Dur who appreciated and honored three previous Indonesian presidents on their services to the country criticized some their behaviors or choices of life. Gus Dur criticized Soekarno that had several wives, criticized the Soeharto family that was regarded as very rich, and criticize Habibie that was considered ambitious to become the ruler. However, although involving fames, Gus Dur's humor did not have significant negative impacts because the receivers or the family members of the receivers did not feel insulted. They knew that Gus Dur did not have such motives as aggression and resentment. He only wanted to criticize and make the listeners laugh at the phenomena.

One of Gus Dur's famous humors was one brought forward when he met President Cuba, Fidel Castro. In a formal meeting with President Castro, Gus Dur suddenly threw the political humor that apparently ridiculed the three previous presidents of Indonesia. To Fidel Castro, Gus Dur said that all the Indonesian presidents contracted lunacy. The first President, Soekarno, was said as mad about women, the second president, Soeharto, mad about money, the third president, Habibie, was really mad, whereas Gus Dur called himself as the fourth president who often made the people mad because those who chose him were also mad people (Almagety, 2010:10). Gus Dur was appointed to be a president by the political parties that did not win the general election.

Gus Dur honored Soekarno because Soekarno was the big leading figure in the Indonesian history. But indeed Soekarno had several wives and this fact was often used by Soekarno's political rivals to attack him. His having several wives was regarded as Soekarno's weak points. Soeharto was also criticized by his political rivals because his wife and children ran various sorts of business and was categorised as the wealthy dynasty. Habibie was known as the figure having different ideas from Gus Dur's. Habibie's step of establishing the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectual (ICMI) was regarded as the sectarian movement and Gus Dur did not like it. Gus Dur's humor was very actual and factual. He also stated that he was the one who made the others mad because those who chose him were also mad people. Humor can be a pleasant as well as very effective form of communication in a variety of settings. In many situations when direct communication is not possible, communication through humor may be more acceptable.

However, while visiting the ex President Habibie in Germany and was asked to repeat the same humor, Gus Dur changed the content. Feeling uncomfortable to mention that Habibie was really "mad", Gus Dur modified this story. To Habibie, Gus Dur said that the previous presidents of Indonesia were very great. Gus Dur pointed out that President Soekarno was a statesman "negarawan"; President Soeharto was a wealthy person "hartawan"; President Habibie was a scientist "ilmuwan", while Gus

Dur was a tourist “wisatawan”. Habibie was not mentioned being truly mad, and as a substitute, he called Habibie a scientist. Gus Dur even ridiculed himself as a tourist because he was criticised by his political rivals as the president who liked traveling to foreign countries.

After President Soeharto resigned in 1998, Indonesian people were increasingly free to speak and dared to state their opinions. People easily brought up criticism to anything or anyone disliked or disagreed. The presidency was no longer the sacred institution. Anyone could criticize it and was free to disagree to any policy. There is again the humor related to the presidency which is very widely known. The humorist connected the role of woman with presidents’ personal life. The humorist said that the first president, Mr. Soekarno, was loved by woman; the second, Mr. Soeharto, was conquered by woman; Mr. Habibie was regarded as a woman; Gus DUR was taken by the woman’s hand (Terry P, 2010:30). Gus Dur could not see and when walking he was always taken by one’s hand. Mr. Soeharto was said to be controlled by his wife.

When Gus Dur was elected the President of Indonesia, he sent the economic team to the USA to meet and ask for of President Bill Clinton’s opinion about economic crisis in Indonesias. Arriving in the USA, the team was welcomed in the White House, but with the very pessimistic tone.”We, in the USA, have Johnny CASH (an actor in Las Vegas), Stevie WONDER (a famous singer), and Bob HOPE (a famous comedian),” said Clinton. “You, in Indonesia, do not have CASH, and WONDER, so you do not have HOPE. In other words your country is CASHLESS, WONDERLESS, and HOPELESS!” The Indonesian economic team then went back home with the tired bent face. Arriving at the Merdeka Palace where the President stayed, the chairman of the team reported to Gus Dur: “It is horrible, Mr. President! According to President Clinton, Indonesia does not have Johnny CASH, Stevie WONDER, and Bob HOPE. Therefore, we are CASHLESS, WONDERLESS, and HOPELESS”. Gus Dur was not surprised. He said humorously and cleverly: “Don’t make yourself panic-stricken”. We indeed do not have Johnny CASH, Stevie WONDER, and Bob HOPE but we have many SLAMET “salvation”, HARTO “treasure”, and UNTUNG “profit”!” (Jabriks, 2010:58-59). In Indonesia many people, especially in Java, are named Slamet, Harto, dan Untung.

The late president Gus Dur was not only good at ridiculing the other persons but also himself. While delivering a speech before his people, for example, Gus Dur asked the people to read *shalawat* (short prayer usually consisting of verses from the Holy Koran), to know how many people were present. “From the ricochet of the *shalawat*, I can know how many people are present.” You know I cannot see. So, I could know how many people present by asking them to read *shalawat* aloud,” he explained (Almagety, 2010:12).

Ethnic humor is very popular in Indonesia. The ethnic groups which are often used as the objects of humor are Madurese and Chinese. Ethnic humor, like all other types of humor, may be considered as an integral part of expressive culture. It reflects a group’s perception and evaluation of other groups’ personality traits, customs, behavior patterns, and social institutions by the standards of ingroup culture, with its positive or negative attitudes toward others. Judgments proceed from intergroup interaction, but once established, they tend to become a part of cultural heritage and do not change substantively unless they are affected by significant historical events (Apte, 1985: 121).

There are more than 500 ethnic groups in Indonesia, but in this paper I only present the Madurese and Chinese. Madurese people are known as temperamental but also smart. Statements given by Madurese people in responding to various matters were considered as very smart and funny. Many Madurese people were economically successful, but part of them were unlucky and worked in the informal sector or as manual laborers or pedicab drivers. There is a popular humor showing the expertise of a Madurese pedicab driver in defending himself when he was reprimanded by the police. When breaking the traffic rule, a Madurese pedicab driver was reprimanded by a policeman.

"Didn't you see the traffic rule? It says pedicabs are not allowed to pass by the main road," said the policeman angrily. "Oh, I see it, Sir", but I think it is only for an empty pedicab without a driver. My pedicab has got a driver, and therefore it could pass by," replied the pedicab driver. "Hey stupid, can't you read it? There is a notice saying pedicabs may not go," snapped the police again. "No, Sir, I cannot read. If I could read, I would be a policeman like you, not a pedicab driver," replied the pedicab driver while jeering. The Madurese pedicab driver, in the Indonesian perspective, is considered to give a smart answer.

In Indonesia, many men have more than one wife because polygamy is permitted, especially for those who are moslems. There are plenty of stories about how a polygamist responds to his second wife in order to avoid household conflicts. There is a humor on a polygamist's trick to make his two wives stay harmonious and admire him. The humor is as follows.

On the beginning days of the month when money was still abundant, a man having two wives expended his money on the needs favored by his second wife who was younger and more beautiful. He spent his money on expensive clothes and jewelries. To the second wife, the polygamist said: "Darling, I have bought you expensive clothes and jewelries because you are my prettiest, youngest, and most passionate wife. I will not buy expensive goods for my first wife because her skin has already been wrinkled. There is no use dressing her with expensive clothes and jewelries. She is not attractive anymore". At the end of month, the polygamist visited his first wife and said, "Honey, you are quite extraordinary. The age evidently could not hide your beauty. Despite wearing inexpensive clothes and jewelries, you still look very pretty. Unfortunately, I'm just an ordinary man that could do wrong of being forced to marry another woman. If I were an extraordinary man it would be impossible for me to marry again and to hurt you, Honey." The trick is evidently effective. The two wives felt really flattered because of being regarded as quite special. The polygamist was happily understood and accepted by his two wives.

Chinese people frequently become the object of humor. In spite of being minority group, the Chinese in Indonesia control the sector of economy. In Indonesian humor, Chinese are always said being unlucky under any government because the rulers always cut their wealth. This ethnic group is often asked for money for various reasons. This humor is addressed to the rules or members of society who frequently ask for money to Chinese. According to the humor the Chinese people always suffer from the cut off, as follows.

During President Soekarno's administration, when Indonesia had just declared its independence and required big fund to establish the country, the Chinese were asked to give assistance in the form of money as the development tax. To the Indonesian eyes, the Chinese's wealth was cut.

During President Suharto's administration, Chinese social and political rights as citizens were also cut with various reasons. In the era of President Habibie, although their social and political rights are paid attention. Their wealth was still "cut" for the development of the country. In the era of President Gus Dur, they were frightened that their "birds" should also be cut (circumcised) because Gus Dur was a Moslem figure.

Indonesian people believe that wealth, throne, and woman could bring misfortune to men. Therefore people should be very careful with the three "dangerous" things. There are a lot of humors related to the belief. Here is the humor about the three men with three different backgrounds, namely playboy, businessman, and politician as follows. They were asked to choose one of three worldly things: wealth, throne (power), and pretty woman. Then, each person chose and delivered his arguments on why they chose one of the choices. The playboy said, "I like pretty women. What is the point of having wealth and power? My destiny is to get the pretty woman and enjoy life with her. The businessman said, "Really? You are stupid, friend. I will choose the wealth. With wealth, I can buy both power and woman." The politician smiled and said, "Both of you are stupid. I choose power. With power, I can get everything. Wealth? Wealth is only a trivial problem, because wealth comes along with power. Pretty woman? People who are interested in me would immediately offer pretty women suitable for me for I have power and money. The playboy and the businessman nodded, "You're right". This humor is addressed to those who love power, especially politicians who sometimes try to gain power through any ways they like without considering ethics.

Humor in Indonesia also often involves sex. In Indonesia the male sex organ, penis, is called bird as an euphemism. When rumors of bird flu "H₁N₁ spread, the disease is related to man's bird "penis". Here is a humor on why bird contracted bird flu. The humor says that the research on bird flu concludes that there are seven causes of bird flu and seven methods to prevent bird flu, as follows. The seven causes of bird flu H₁N₁ are 1) The bird often goes sight seeing at night; 2) The bird often gets up and sleep less; 3) The bird does not get enough energy; 4) The bird is often asked to come into any places; 5) The bird is often asked to come into the humid/wet places; 6) The bird does not get adequate care; and 7) The bird often vomits.

Preventions of contracting bird flu are 1) The bird must be well guarded; 2) The bird is given enough time to rest; 3) The bird is not supposed to come into wet places very often; 4) The bird is wiped if already wet, but should not be dried in the sun; 5) The bird is carefully treated in a routine; 6) The bird is given tonic in order to immune to diseases; and 7) For those who are married should ask their wife to care of it. The message of this humor is addressed to those who accept free sex. Free sex is considered to be dangerous to man's bird.

Despite the fact that Indonesian people like humor, they could not create humor as they like. They must pay attention to the elements of SARA, that is *Suku* "ethnic group", Agama "Religion", Ras "Race", and Golongan "Community or Party". It means the humors created are not allowed to offend or insult certain ethnic groups, certain religion, certain races, and certain communities/parties. If the rule of the game is broken, the government and the society are afraid it may cause horizontal conflicts and disrupt political stability and the unity of the nation. Therefore, people must be very careful to create humor.

The Closing Remark

From the Indonesian perspective humor is a very fruitful communication because it is not only a means of entertainment but also enlightenment. In this context enlightenment is related to social criticism found in humor. The hospitable criticism may make people aware of their mistakes and then try to renew their life. Therefore as a social criticism humor is expected to be a means of ennobling life.

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Humor Mechanisms in Jokes about the Aged

Siriporn Sriwarakan *

Abstract

This paper aims to study jokes popularly circulating in Thailand about the aged, jokes concerned with health deterioration, sexual orientation and desire. The selected jokes are focused on humor mechanisms. I suggest that we laugh at these jokes as a result of feelings of incongruity and superiority. On the one hand, the humor involved in these jokes in its first analysis is a perception of the incongruous. Laughter is derived from the experience of an incongruity perceived between expectation and actuality. On the other hand, a superiority-based explanation is proposed, using the categories of “self-ridicule” and “ridicule of other people”. These integrated views of incongruity and superiority are strongly bound by a common underlying resolution: normalization. Furthermore, relief theories must also be examined in yet another possible analysis of these jokes. They will help to locate these jokes as imaginary spaces for issues involving the aged violating sexual taboos

I. Introduction

Nowadays we find jokes on many websites in Thai language. For example, www.pagclubonline.com, board.narak.com/joke, www.joejamsai.com, www.siambee.com, etc. However, most of jokes in the past are orally told in a local area because people have a close connection in their community or the same ethnic group. Contrary to the situation in the past, it is nowadays increasingly turning into a heightened interconnectivity between people and a loosening of boundaries between countries. This leads to facilitate the flow of people, ideas, and goods between regions. Most of jokes on internet could be seen as a form of global flow. Also they have blurred the congruence of social context and geographical location. Thus we could understand these jokes without linking specific nation-state boundary. I might say that most of jokes on Thai websites are translated and adapted from English into Thai. Because most of jokes on Thai websites haven't got their roots in Thai culture, I couldn't say that these jokes are Thai humor. In this paper I look at jokes popularly circulating in Thailand about the aged, jokes concerned with health deterioration, sexual orientation and desire. The selected jokes contain the following humor mechanisms: incongruity, superiority and relief.

II. Deviation of expectation

A popular theory of why we find jokes funny revolves around the concept of “incongruity” (1). According to Kant and Schopenhauer, the incongruity theory of

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humor specifies a necessary condition for the object of humor (2). This leads to the explanation that humour is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke (3). In other words, we might say that many jokes are funny because they involve ideas that run against our expectations (4). Such an experience of incongruity can be found in the following joke:

Granddaughter: Hallo...Yai Ni Nu Eng Na Ka.
 (Hallo...Grandma! Here I am speaking)
 Grandma: Or...Nu Eng Ror Ja
 (Hallo my dear.)
 Granddaughter: Ton Ni Nu Dai Pen Freshy
 (Now I am a first-year student.)
 Grandma: Oh! Pai Pen Ka Ri Tham Mai La Luk
 (Oh! Why are you doing prostitute?.)
 Granddaughter: Mai Chai. Nu Yu Pi Nung
 (No. I am a first-year student.)
 Grandma: Thuk Kao Jab Kung Duay Ror Luk
 (You have been tied?)
 Granddaughter: Yai Ka Kue ... Nu Pen Run Nong
 (It is my freshman year.)
 Grandma: Pai Tham Yang Ngai Thong La Luk
 (You are pregnant.)
 Granddaughter: Nu Pen Nong Wit Com
 (I am studying computer science.)
 Grandma: Orr? Don Kao Mom Ror Luk
 (You have been drugged.)

The humor involved in this joke is highly context-specific. It plays upon the same Thai vowels. This joke is written as a form of dialogue between a grandmother and her granddaughter. The granddaughter told her grandmother that she passed the entrance examination. Now she is a first-year student. But her grandmother misunderstood because she cannot hear well. I argue that we laugh as a result of the dialogue spoken in a congruous form with incongruous content. What the grandmother says is different from what we expect. Instead of saying congratulation to her granddaughter she starts talking about sex. The underlined words in each pair have the same vowels in the Thai language. But the meaning of each pair is absolutely different. “Freshy”, “Pi-Nung”, “Run-Nong refer to a first-year student. “Kari” refers to prostitute. “Jab Kung” refers to the action of someone being tied up to be raped. “Wit-Com” is Computer Science. “Mom” refers to someone being drugged. The misunderstanding in the dialogue produces the humor. Beyond that, we hardly expect someone’s grandmother to have so many sexual situations in her imagination. This grandmother is quite beyond our expectation. Thus, we might say that this joke contains an incongruity that makes us laugh.

The incongruity can be found in the next joke too.

There was a robber who made it a rule to rape his victim after he robbed them. One day he robbed a castle. Then he saw that

the eighty-year-old virgin nurse-maid of the princess was one of those to be raped. The princess felt pity for her so she asked the robber not to rape her. But before the robber could say anything, the nursery-mom said: “No. Rules must be followed.”

We laugh as a result of our perception of the incongruous. What we expect is that the elderly nurse-maid will be frightened. Common sense dictates that no one wants to suffer the pain and repulsion of being raped. However, what actually takes place in the joke is different from what the common-sense world. Our laughter comes from the incongruity of finding sexual desire in the elderly. Elderly people are always expected to be without desire, to become more religious as their physical powers decline. The incongruity of this nursemaid's desire makes us laugh.

In these two jokes a character does something which deviates from our expectations. “Expectations” here refers to various elements including laws, customs, political and social rules, moral and religious understandings. As the characters in the above jokes deviate from the common practices or images it creates a humorous situation.

III. Competing Ideologies

Besides the theory of incongruity, another well known theory of humor is that of superiority. This theory goes back to Plato, Aristotle and Quintilian. Thomas Hobbes developed the most well known version of the superiority theory. (5) He defined humor as “the suddaine glory arising from the suddaine conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our owne formerly.” We laugh from feeling superior to other people. (6) In this paper I am interested in the superiority theory. This applies to studying the relationship between ourselves as readers and figures in these selected jokes. Superiority dwells in the reader and inferiority is located in the various characters who appear in these jokes. And the technique of “self-ridicule” is used, denigrating the aged character or other figures of fun in the jokes.

Two jokes below are cases of humor where I as reader laugh from feeling of superiority.

There was a pair of grandparents whose memory got worse. They came to see a doctor. The doctor suggested that they should keep a notebook to write something down in. Then they went back home. In the evening the grandpa wanted to have some drinking water. Grandma told him to get a box of ice cream. Later the grandpa got some sausage and bacon for his wife. Then the grandma said that she had told him to get her a piece of bread not sausage and bacon.

I argue that this joke makes me feel superior as I laugh. Because I as reader haven't got any memory problems severe as those grandparents in the joke. The grandparents presented as inferior fall into the category of “self-ridicule”. Jokes about the aged involving similar health deterioration can be found in the following jokes.

An advance in medical technology leads to a sixty-five-year-old woman's getting pregnant. Her relatives come to offer their congratulations to her. Also they want to see the baby. But she keeps repeating: "In a minute." No matter how many times they ask her, she replies, "In a minute." Finally, her relatives asked impatiently when they will be able to see the baby. She replies that they have to wait until the baby cries" When the astonished relatives ask her why, she replies that she doesn't remember where the baby is.

This joke, much like the one just above, relies upon the technique of ridicule for its effect. Medical advances might make it possible for an elderly woman to become pregnant. But the problem of the failing memory remains. The joke also ridicules the confidence of those who believe in or work for such scientific advances. As the joke suggests that deterioration is a natural process, can we go so far as to say it sanctions the natural life cycle?

While the two previous jokes about the aged concern health deterioration, the next joke deals with male impotence..

There was a ninety-year-old widowed millionaire wanting to get married with a beautiful eighteen-year-old girl. So he gave her one hundred million baht as his marriage proposal and she accepted his claim. During the first night on their honeymoon he got himself drunk five bottles of liquor. Then he showed his 5 finger to his bride.

The bride: "You mean you want it five times?"

The aged millionaire: "Yees.sss.Darr.ling..

Whhh..ichh.finn.gerrss.doo..yoo..wann..t.firr..st..ly?"

The aged millionaire is made inferior. Many bottles cannot help him in making love to a young girl. Although he has a lot of money, he can't buy everything. He is still impotent.

The humor involved in these previous jokes involves the perception of a superiority-based explanation. In the next joke I argue that we laugh as a result of feelings of both incongruity and superiority

A sixty-year-old married couple was holding their 25th wedding anniversary. An angel came to see them and blessed them.

"I want to travel around the world".the wife said.

"PING" The first class plane ticket was put in her hand.

The husband dreamed of a younger woman. "Oh I want a woman who is younger than me by thirty years"

"PING" The husband became a ninety year-old man.

On the one hand, the humor involved in this joke in its first analysis is the perception of the incongruous. What we expect is that the husband's wish will be granted in the same way as his wife's. However, what actually takes place in the joke is different from what we expect. Instead he becomes a ninety-year-old man. Now his wife is younger than he is by thirty years. Might the angel be a feminist? On the other hand, the feeling of superiority is proposed, using the category of "self-ridicule". The

husband is made to seem inferior. He has to face up to his age. His wish is fulfilled half way. I might say that becoming a ninety-year-old contains some ridicule that disapproves of his greed.

Analyzing these jokes might help us see that the aged are presented as inferior. They have to face the problem of health deterioration. Or aged male has to confront the issue of male impotence. The ridicule we perceive in the jokes comes from the deviation of the aged from their common-sense acceptance of their failing powers. On the other hand, the next jokes concern the issue of the intelligence of the aged. I might say that the aged person in the next joke is represented as a quick-witted person.

An old woman carrying a big bag walked in a bank office and told a clerk that she wanted to deposit 3 million baht. Also she wanted to meet the manager

Manager: "How did you earn the money?"

Grandma: "I gambled and won."

Manager: "Which kind of gambling?"

Grandma: "If you want to know, I'll have a bet with you. I bet ten thousand baht that tomorrow your genitals will become square"

Manager: "Ha Ha Ha! You're joking"

Grandma: "No. I have enough money. Here!

The manager thought that it was quite impossible. So he took the bet. During the day the manager couldn't concentrate on his work. He touched his genitals. They were still round. So he felt happy and thought that tomorrow he would win the bet. At 9.00 am the old woman and a man came to the bank and walked in the manager's office.

Manager: "Hallo Grandma! Who is this man?"

Grandma: "My lawyer. Because the sum is very large I brought the lawyer with me.

Manager: "Hu! Hu! I am sorry. You lose the gamble. My genitals are round. Then the manager permits Grandma to touch his genitals. She touched his genitals for a moment and said: "Uml! They are still round. I lose" As she talked with the manager, the lawyer banged his head against the wall.

Manager: "Why does he do it?"

Grandma: "He lost a bet. I told him that today I would touch the genitals of a bank manager in his office. He didn't believe it. So we bet twenty thousand baht."

Taking a gamble on genitals may symbolize an expression of sexual desire of the aged female. This issue is analysed in the next section. It's clear in this joke that the aged female is represented as superior. The lawyer is defeated or looks stupid. Normally, a lawyer in our expectations is brave and quick-witted. Despite the splendid image the lawyer enjoys in our expectations, in this joke he is duped by the elderly woman's tricky plan. This leads to our questioning the traditional stereotype of the aged. Is the image of the aged in this joke new? I argue that the shrewdness of the elderly woman here reflects some truth that we should not overlook. This is the unquestionable fact

that they have more experience and have been accumulating a shrewd wisdom for a long time.

The aged are presented as superior in the joke below.

In a village a Lady was talking to an aged woman. While they were talking the Lady ate all of the woman's peanuts.

"Oh! I ate up all of your peanuts!" The Lady said

Grandma: "It doesn't matter. After I lost my last tooth I started just sucking the chocolate off and spitting the peanut part out.,

The Lady is duped by the silence of the aged female. She says nothing as the Lady is eating peanuts. The Lady is shown as inferior, even though she has more physical and social power than the aged woman. The elderly woman's silence is amounts to the category we have mentioned above, ridicule of the other. The "other" here is the Lady who gobbles up what the elderly has spat out. In other words, the Lady loses face because of her greed. I might argue that the ridicule involved in this joke contains a disapproval of greed. The same category is seen in the next joke.

Ten years ago an old man walked along Cha-Am beach. He saw a woman who was wearing a bikini and sunbathing on the beach. He turned and headed for her. He said with greedy eyes: "May I touch your breast?"

"Go away! You are an aged sexual maniac"

"May I touch your breast for 100 baht?"

"100 Are you crazy? Go away!"

"May I touch your breast for 500 baht?"

"No. Go away!"

"1000 baht"

She hesitated before replying "NO"

"5000 baht"

She thought that he was very old. He might not behave in a dangerous way. And 5000 baht is not a small sum. So she accepted his offer.

Then the old man touched her breast and said "Oh my God! Oh my

God! Oh my God!..."

"Why did you say Oh my God!?"

He still touched her breast while he said "Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! How am I going to earn 5000 baht?"

The aged man in this joke is tricky. He has proposed paying money to touch a woman's breast, although he hasn't got any money. At the same time, the young woman is greedy for money so she is duped. This joke overturns the image of the aged as too cautious to do something risky. On the other hand, it brings to mind stories of the aged abusing women or children. It breaks one stereotype as it calls up yet another.

The jokes presented in the third section do exactly this, either reinforcing stereotypes about the aged or breaking them. Stereotypes about the aged include issues of health deterioration and male impotence. One group of jokes above reproduce these issues. The aged in these jokes is shown as inferior or as the butt of

the joke. They lack of physical and social power. On the other hand, another set of jokes breaks stereotypes about the aged. The aged in this group are shown to be superior. They can dupe younger victims possessed of much more physical strength and social position. Their victims lose face or are shown as stupid. The aged are not victims or the butt of a joke anymore. We might want to dub this second stereotype “the aged as trickster.” An interesting question is which stereotype is older. If “the aged as trickster” stereotype precedes the other, it might be evidence that the elderly have long been overturning the expectations of those around them by using the shrewd wisdom they accumulated over the years.

IV. Release from repression

The relief theory emerges in the nineteenth century in the work of Herbert Spencer, where laughter is explained as a release of pent-up nervous energy, but the theory is best known in the version given in Freud’s 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious*, where the energy that is released and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity. (7) Such a theory is demonstrated in the following joke:

There was a man who got fired from his job. He felt depressed because he wanted money to cure his sick mother. One day he came across an aged female.

“Why are you so sad?” she asked him so he told her his problem.

“You will be blessed in three areas. But you have to stay with me tonight.”

In the morning he asked for her blessing. The aged touched his shoulder and said “You are grown up. Why so you believe in blessing?” And she smiled before she walked past him.

This joke follows the pattern of some of the jokes we have discussed above. An aged woman is possessed of strong sexual desire and succeeds in tricking a young man into bed. This is similar to the eighty year old who insisted on her rape, or the shrewd woman who touched the bank manager’s genitals. Such behavior violates our stereotype of the elderly heading into old age graciously, having discarded any remnant of sexual desire as they crowd religious services and prepare to depart this world. From the point of view of the elderly, these stereotypes constitute a kind of oppression, and jokes such as the ones mentioned bring a kind of relief from the cultural oppression of expectations. The jokes create imaginary spaces for issues involving the aged violating sexual taboos. The pleasure of these jokes is assumed to lift the unconscious self-censorship of the repressed and the conscious self-restraint of the suppressed, offering guiltless or fearless relief. (8)

Besides the theme of sexuality, the selected jokes have the theme of rebelliousness. The lawyer and the Lady are duped by the aged female, though they have more social power than she does. These jokes might be the weapon of the weak. They provide a safety-valve within the social machinery, allowing subordinates a release and token expression of rebelliousness without relieving their position of subservience.(9)

Christopher Wilson suggests that themes of sexuality and rebelliousness describe impulses that are normally subject to suppression or repression. Joke content depicting suppressed behaviors may offer pleasure of fantasy or indirect expression of the impulse through the approval implied by overt responses of smiling or laughter.(10) In other words, imagining or approving a theme of anti-social or injudicious behaviour may offer a safe and gratifying half-way house between rigid suppression and direct action. The audience may then defend its motives to others by pretending that the pleasure derived from the content is actually provoked by the form of the humour.(11)

V. Conclusion

This paper looks jokes about the aged concerning health deterioration, sexual orientation and desire. The selected jokes focus on certain humor mechanisms. I suggest that we laugh at these jokes as a result of feelings of incongruity and superiority. On the one hand, the humor involved in these jokes in its first analysis is a perception of the incongruous. Laughter is derived from the experience of an incongruity perceived between expectation and actuality. On the other hand, a superiority-based explanation is proposed, using the categories of “self-ridicule” and “ridicule of other people”. These integrated views of incongruity and superiority are strongly bound by a common underlying resolution: normalization. Furthermore, relief theories must also be examined as yet another explanation for these jokes. Such a theory helps us to see these jokes as imaginary spaces for issues involving the aged violating sexual taboos. As we have seen above, these theories are not water-tight, and overlap with each other. In some jokes we can see how more than one theory of humor applies.

Finally, I want to state my awareness that all these jokes may not be Thai in origin. They were retrieved from the internet, and may well be translations from other languages. The case involving a lawyer, or the inclusion of such dietary items as bacon or sausage seems to indicate a non-Thai origin. My intention is to analyze jokes used for popular consumption in the Thai context, and I want to avoid any claim to the Thai-ness of the jokes involved.

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Ethnic Joke in Lan Na Amusement Tales

Chalermchai Parasuk*

Abstract

Lan Na society is not only the long established society but also a multi racial community. There are a great number of ethnic races live in Lan Ma society, for instances, Chinese, Karen, Tai or Ngiew (Thai races living in Shan State, Myanmar), Hill Tribe Minorities, and Khamu (Kmere or Cambodian people). It is a normal phenomenon that the dominant culture will fell superior to the minorities in the society. As a result that felling is reflected through story telling tales both in written and oral tradition. Lan Na Amusement Tales is a kind of Lan Na oral tradition. The tales have been told among Lan Na grass root people for a long time. The main purpose of the tales is to entertain and relax after hard working in the day time. In addition, the tales also reflexes way of lives of Lan Na grass root people.

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship of Lan Na people who are the dominant culture and the minorities in Lan Na society through Ethnic Jokes in Lan Na Amusement Tales.

The author found that the three main racial groups who are the target of the mockery by Lan Na people are Chinese, Yang or Karen, and Khamu (the minority in Northern region who are Khmere or Cambodian dissonant). Other racial groups who are ridiculed in the jokes are Ngiew or Tai, Loa (Mon descendant who live in Lan Na region), and Hill tribe minorities such as Hmong and Lee Saw. Besides, there are also few Ethnic Jokes about the Westerner and Indian people. Almost of humor context which Lan Na people prefer to make fun with these minorities are about their absurd and innocent behaviors. Lan Na people view that those absurd and innocent behaviors show that these people are uncivilized and stupid. Consequently, this thinking makes Lan Na people feel superior and civilized than those minorities.

The ethnic jokes is not only play a vital role of entertaining, it also portrays the suppress emotion of both the teller and the target of the joke.

Introduction

Lan Na society is a long established society. The society consists of multi ethnic group; for instance, Chinese, Yang (Karen), Yong (Tai), Khamu (Khmer), Loa, and hill tribe minorities living peacefully together in community. Undoubtedly, the dominant ethnic group in Lan Na society is “Khon Muang” or Lan Na people, whereas other racial groups are minorities. Hence, the unequal treatment and practice or superior felling of the dominant culture is a normal social phenomenon.

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One method to view people's way of life is through "Literature". Literatures do a function as the mirror of society. It reflects people's way of life and social situations in society at the period that those "Literatures" were created. Oral tradition is a kind of literature which has special character that they are inherited by telling from mouth to mouth and generation to generation.

Lan Na oral traditions is an enchanting Lan Na heritage. It included fables, amusement tales, puzzles, proverbs, and songs. Lan Na amusement tales or in Lan Na language called (hia Khom is one type of Lan Na oral tradition. The amusement tales are popular telling among Lan Na grass root people. The tales usually tell in the evening for their entertainment after finishing their hard work during the day time. It is a customary for Thai people especially in countryside that they always have a little party in the evening after their dinner. The purpose of "the little party" is for relaxing and socializing. However, it is obvious that most of party's members are men. Women rarely attend this kind of party, or else, women will held another party which the party's members are all women. Consequently, the men's party is inevitably having alcohols drinking as main beverage in the party. In this relation, Lan Na Amusement Tales performs it's function by making colorful to the party.

Lan Na people use the Tales as the entertainment for social occasions both in auspicious and inauspicious ceremonies. In auspicious ceremonies such as wedding ceremony or new house celebration, the amusement tales help the celebration more colorful and joyful. On the other hand, in inauspicious ceremonies, for example funeral ceremony, the Tales will assist to reduce the grievous atmosphere in the ceremony

One noticeable character of Lan Na Amusement Tales is that most of them are short stories. The reason is that the Tales is oral tradition, therefore, short story is easy to remember more than a long one.

Another apparent characteristic of Lan Na amusement tales is that the Tales are created to serve the purpose of releasing suppressed emotion of Lan Na grass root people which derived from hardship life both in terms of politics and economics. Consequently, the ethnic jokes in Lan Na Amusement Tales have a purpose to ridicule the minority groups in Lan Na community. The reason is that Lan Na grass root people is a group of people who obtain the lower social status in Lan Na society. According to superiority theory, people have to find some objects or targets to release their suppressed emotion occurred from the suppression they received. Therefore, Lan Na grass root people have to find some groups of people who are inferior to them and make those people being a joker in society in order that they will not feel they are the lowest class in society.

In 1983, the Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University examined Lan Na folk tales and songs in ten provinces in northern Thailand, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Prae, Nan, Lam Poon, Lam Pang, Mae Hong Son, Payao, Uttaradit, and Tak. The institute recorded those tales and songs on 1,500 cassette tapes. Of the 1,500 cassette tapes, 455 cassette tapes recorded Lan Na jokes which contained a total of 871 jokes. Moreover, during 1984-1988, the institute published five books of Lan Na folk tales, and some of the Lan Na jokes were included in those books.

Asst. Prof. Hattwan Chaiyakul is the first researcher who conducted a study of Lan Na amusing tales, in 1996. Her thesis "The Use of Humor in Lan Na Jests" (1996) used the data from "the Collection of Lan Na Jokes" which was collected in

1983 by the Social Research Institute of Chiang Mai University. Asst. Prof. Hataiwan has gathered and selected Lan Na Amusement Tales from Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University, more than 700 jokes in the Appendix section in her thesis. The author has used the jokes in the Appendix section of Asst. Prof. Hataiwan's thesis as a data for analyzing.

Theories

Since ancient times, humor has been used as a mental mechanism to release their suppressed emotions caused by various factors such as political suppression, social suppression and economic hardship. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the prominent psychologist of our age, defined humor as a type of 'energy release.' People who have undergone some strain will sometimes burst into laughter if the strain is suddenly removed. Freud's concept of humor is that it is a human mental defense mechanism to transform pain into happiness. To quote Freud from his book, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1966), humor is "pain changed to pressure." Aristotle, one of the greatest of Greek scientists and philosophers, on the other hand, termed humor as "an object-oriented of something misery". Aristotle comments that "Comedy is an imitation of men worse than the average," (worse in the sense of the ridiculous), which is a species of the ugly. The ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity which is not productive of pain or harm to others. Aristotle's idea of laughter is that humor is caused by ugliness or deformity in the object we laugh at. (Wickberg, 1998: 47)

Superiority theories of humor emphasize the negative attitude of the producer or user of humor towards its target and the often aggressive character of laughter. We often laugh at people because they have some failing or defect, or because they find themselves at a disadvantage in some way or suffer some small misfortune (Monro cited in <http://F:\Monro's Theories of Humor.htm>, accessed on Dec. 7, 2006).

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), an eminent philosopher, states that laughter is a kind of "sudden glory." People laugh at the misfortunes or infirmities of others, or at their own past follies and how they have now surmounted them, and also at the unexpected successes of their own. While Alexander Bain (1818-1903), another superiority theorist, states that humor involves the degradation of something. Bain expands Hobbes's explanation of humor in two main directions. Firstly, we need not be directly conscious of our own superiority; we may laugh sympathetically with another who scores off his opponent. Secondly, it need not be a person that is ridiculed. It may be an idea, a political institution, or anything at all that makes a claim to dignity or respect. In relation to superiority theories of humor, the laughter always looks down on whatever he/she laughs at, and judges it inferior by some standard.

Freud considers humor as one of the so-called 'substitution mechanisms' which enable one to convert one's socially tabooed aggressive desires into acceptable ones and thus avoid wasting additional mental energy to suppress them. Humor is, thus, a type of "energy release". It is pain changed to pleasure. We develop painful blocks which must be overcome to achieve such pleasure. The purpose of harmless jokes is to produce pleasure. But otherwise, two purposes given are: a) to relieve aggressiveness, as defense (the hostile joke), and b) to expose, as with the obscene

joke. It is thought that the enjoyment (release) of aggressive humor decreases aggressive tendencies. (qtd. in www.facstaff.uww.edu, accessed on Dec. 7, 06) According to the humor theory of relief, humor often calls conventional social requirements into question; it may offer people relief from the restraint of conforming to those requirements. Moreover, people who have undergone some strain or stress will sometimes burst into laughter if the strain is suddenly removed.

In summary, Freud views humor as a mental defense mechanism of human to transform the pain into happiness. This theory is focused mainly on the recipient of humor, specifically on the psychological effects humor allegedly brings about in the recipient. (Krikmann qtd. in www.foldlore.cc/~kritku/humor/, accessed on Dec. 21, 06)

In this study apart from the above mentioned theories, the author also use sociology and humanity theories analyze Lan Na Amusement Tales to view social phenomenon in Lan Na society.

Ethnic groups in Lan Na society

As mentioned in the Introduction part, Lan Na society is multi racial society. Many ethnic groups live in the same society peacefully. Nonetheless, this study will investigate the relationship among Lan Na people and other major ethnic groups in Lan Na society. The four major ethnic groups in Lan Na society whose investigated are Lan Na people or Khon Muang, Chinese, Karen or Yang, and Khamu (Cambodian descendant living in Lan Na region)

Lan Na people or Khon Muang

Lan Na people claimed themselves as Khno Muang or “City people” in English. The word “khno Muang” or “City People” identifies that Lan Na people think they are civilized people because only civilized people live in city, whereas uncivilized people live in rural area. Definitely, Lan Na people is the dominant culture group in Lan Na community, In the past, Lan Na used to be the independent state called ‘an Na Kingdom’. The Kingdom had her own king, culture, and language. Unfortunately, Lan Na kingdom could not protect her sovereignty for a long time. She was invaded and colonized by both Burma and Siam for thundered years. Around 100 years ago Lan Na kingdom was annexed to Siam. Since that time, Lan Na kingdom lost her own sovereignty and became only one province in Siam. In this relation, Lan Na society received some influences in culture, tradition, and language from both Siam.

Due to being under Siam controlled, Lan Na people reflected their unsatisfied feeling in Lan Na Amusement Tales as the following anecdotal joke.

Anecdotal Joke No.1
Lan Na Buddhist monk and Thai Buddhist monk

A Thai monk respects to Bodhi tree (pipal tree), while a Lan Na monk respects to Wan Hang Chang Rong (a kind of sedge). One day the Lan Na monk talks to the Thai monk about the magic tree. After chatting for a while, the Lan Na monk takes a Bodhi tree's leave to rub his ass. The Thai monk feels dissatisfied with the Lan Na monk's behavior. So he takes Wan Hang Chang Rong's leave to rub his ass as well. But Wan Hang Chang Rong's leave is itch. So the Thai monk asks the Lan Na monk- "Do you know how to get rid of the itch? I feel so regret with my behavior."

The Lan Na monk says "You have to prostate the sedge three to seven times for getting rid of the itch."

"Oh!.... I can't stay. I have to go back now."

Excerpt from "The collection of Lan Na Jokes", Social Research Institute, CMU. Tell by :Mr. Boonma Tawong (June 19, 1983)

Due to this anecdotal joke, Lan Na monk expresses their unsatisfied feeling towards Siamese monk by playing a trick with him. Lan Na monk use the thing that Thai monk is unfamiliar with. The joke portrays that Lan Na people have some unsatisfied feeling with Siamese who ruled over Lan Na region, whenever they have an opportunity to against the Siamese, they will not hesitate to fight back. Nevertheless, there are not many jokes like the above anecdotal joke in Lan Na Amusement Tales. Most of ethnic joke about Lan Na people represent that Lan Na people are dominant culture and clever or civilized than other minority ethnic races, In addition, Lan Na people try to take advantage or ridicule those minorities

Anecdotal Joke No.2
"I'm not an expertise."

Young Lan Na people and Young Karen are best friend. They love each other very much. After marriage, the both seperatedly live in each village. The young Karen's wife is more beautiful than the young Lan Na people's wife. The young Lan Na try to make a plan to have a sexual intercourse with the young Karen's wife.

One day the young Lan Na goes to visit the young Karen house. The young Karen sees the young LAN Na visits his house, he asks the young LAN Na

"Why do you come here?"

The young Lan Na answer:" My wife throws me away."

"What's a matter?"

"I'm not an expertise. So my wife doesn't let me having sex with her."

The young Karen feels very pity to him. Then he calls his wife and tells her to take off her cloth and lie down. After that tells his friend to take off his cloth also. When the both take off their cloth, he says to his best friend that "Going up!"

The young Lan Na pretends to be an innocent, he climbs the young Karen's house wall. The young Karen then insulted speak to the young Lan Na that

"You are so stupid. That's why your wife doesn't let you having sex with her." "Going up on my wife." He then teaches "...up and down...up and down....."

"You doing like this and then do the same thing with your wife."

Excerpt from the Appendix in the thesis “The Use of Humor in Lan Na Jests” by Asst. Prof. Hataiwan Chaikyakul: page 375 story no. 1.1/2,1

According to this anecdotal joke, we are able to presume that the young Lan Na tries to take advantage from the innocent and trustful habit of his Karen friend. The crucial point is both of them are best friend and the young Karen loves his Lan Na friend very much. He is able to do everything to help his friend even allow his wife having sexual intercourse with the young Lan Na. On the contrary, the young Lan Na seems to love his friend less than the Karen be. He allows his basic desire to overcome the priceless friendship relation between them. What’s a friend indeed? On the other hands, possibly that the young Lan Na think that his Karen friend is submissive than him. He has a right to take advantage from those people who are inferior whether they have a very good relationship.

The jokes which portray Lan Na people are dominant culture group in society and try to take advantage from other minority races in society exist in a great number.

Chinese

In Lan Na Amusement Tales, Chinese ethnic group is ridiculed with their absurd behaviors occurred from their unfamiliar to Lan Na culture and language. Most jokes about Chinese in Lan Na Amusement Tales usually mocking their unclear and ridiculous accent.

Anecdotal Joke No.3

A Chinese goes to hospital

There is a middle aged Chinese woman who is sick and goes to see a doctor at the hospital. The doctor asks her

“What’s wrong with you, Aunt?”

“I have a cough. (ai)”

“Don’t be shy (ai). Tell me, I promise to keep your illness a secret.”

“I have a cough (ai).”

“Oh.... Don’t be shy (ai).”

“No. Not shy (ai) but coughing (ai kak kak).”

Excerpt from the Appendix in the thesis “The Use of Humor in Lan Na Jests” by Asst. Prof. Hataiwan Chaikyakul: page 355, story no. 2. 7/17

Minorities usually are a target of parody in society. Almost of the parodies of the minorities always portray in joke. The reason is that people do not take Jokes serious. The dominant culture in society thinks that if they (dominant culture) make a parody of the minorities through joke, they will not receive serious reaction from the

minorities. Thus, we often hear/read of the joke like “light bulb joke” (the joke which makes a parody to the Poles). And if we are dominant culture in society, we always laugh or at least smile when we hear the ethnic joke. This example joke as well, is an example of the ethnic joke in Lan Na Jokes.

In Thai language there are numbers of homophony (the same sound) words. As mentioned in the joke, the word “cough” (ໂຄ, /ay/) and “shy” (ຄຳໂຄ, /a:y/) have a very close sound. The word “ຄຳໂຄ” /a:y/ which means “to shy” is a long diphthong word, while the word “ໂຄ” /ay/ (coughing) is a short diphthong word. But in the joke, the person who utters the word “ໂຄ” /ay/ (coughing) is a foreigner (Chinese). As a result, she can not pronounce the actual sound of this word which makes the doctor has a misunderstanding in middle age Chinese’s utterance.

Apart from the homophony pun, the other humor text of this joke is a parody. As mentioned above, the ethnic joke frequently accomplishes its function of humor when it is told, particularly, among the listeners who are dominant culture group in society. This phenomenon is able to explain by superiority theories of humor. We often laugh at people because they have some failing or detect or inferior than us. Obviously, the ethnic jokes are available for dominant culture group, but it rarely explores this kind of joke in the minorities. For example, it is hardly to find the jokes which satire or parody Thai people in minority racial groups who live in Thailand whether in Shan minority

In addition, there are two main Chinese ethnic race live in Lan Na society, Yunnan Chinese and Southern region Chinese. The first group have lived in Lan Na community for a long time. Yunnan Chinese is called “Chin Ho” by Lan Na people. This ethnic group as a relationship with Lan Na people by trading. The latter group, Southern region Chinese, first migrated to La Na community during King Rama V reign or around 130 years ago. This ethnic group has different dialect from the first one. Yunnan Chinese speaks Yunnanese, while Southern region Chinese speaks Chao Jou Hua or Cantonese or Fujian Hua. Most of Southern Chinese region immigrants in Thailand are Chao Jou people. However, Southern Chinese people still having the same occupation as a merchant similar to Yunnan Chinese. It is obvious that in Lan Na Amusement Tales they only talk about Southern Chinese ethnic race, not about Yunnan Chinese. This may be able to assume that the jokes which relate to Chinese are new jokes which have been told not before 100 years ago.

Yang or Karen

Karen or Yang in Lan Na language is another major minority race in Lan Na society. Yang usually lives in the mountain and their occupation is highland agriculture and finding forest product. In story no. 4,2/2.1 page 373 of the Appendix part in Asst. Prof. Hataiwan Chaayakul’s thesis mentioned that around March and April Karen people will come down from the mountain and bring along forest product such as honey, mushroom, and herbs to barter consumer products such as salt and chili.

In Lan Na Amusement Tales, most jokes portray that Karen and Lan Na people are best friend. However, in the jokes, Lan Na people often take advantage from Karen as the anecdotal joke 2. Moreover, Karen people also ridicule with their absurd behavior occurred from their innocent and improper behaviors.

Anecdotal Joke No.4.
Yang and the monk

A great number of Yang including men, women, youth, elder, and children come down from the mountain for pilgrim. They would like to make a merit with Kru Ba (the respectful Buddhist monk). The distance from the mountain and the temple is quite a long way and it takes many days for reaching the temple. So they have to stay overnight on the way. During the overnight stay, the youth and couples have their sexual intercourse normally until they reach the temple.

Karen Chief: “We come here to pay a respect and make a merit With your venerable”

The Venerable: “Good...good. You all do a good deed.”

Karen Chief: “Your venerable, we seem like not receiving the merit. The things those prepare for making making a merit with your venerable seem to not purity because the youth have a sexual –ntercourse until they exhaust during the pilgrim.”

Excerpt from the Appendix in the thesis “The Use of Humor in Lan Na Jests” by Asst. Prof. Hataiwan Chaayakul. page 370, story no. 4.2.2.1

The humor content of this joke is the improper behavior or Karen people. It is a general practice that during the pilgrim we should be purity. Having sexual intercourse will violate the purity. Nonetheless, Karen youths break this rule and makes Karen Chief feel uncomfortable to the venerable (Kru Ba). This joke wants to ridicule the absurd and improper behavior of Karen people.

Lan Na people always view that the minority races are absurd and uncivilized. Therefore, they often use this behavior’s aspect to ridicule those minorities. Furthermore, this may make Lan Na people feel superior than those minorities in Lan Na society.

Some noticeable views of Lan Na Amusement Tales about Yang people are the jokes usually show that Lan Na people and Karen people are friend, whereas the relationship of Lan Na people and other minorities are in other status. For example, the relationship between Lan Na people and Chinese base on trading, while the relationship between Lan Na people and Khambu is based on employer and employee.

Khambu (Khmer (Cambodian) dissident in Lan Na society)

Khambu is a Khmer dissident living in Lan Na region for a long time. Most Khambu’s occupation in elephant care taker because in the past Lan Na region has plenty of forest area. Consequently, they have a lot of elephants in Lan Na. It is generally known that Khmer or Cambodian are keen at looking after and control elephant, as well, the Khambu.

In Lan Na Amusement Tales, Khambu is portrayed as an employee of Lan Na people. Their responsibility is looking after an elephant and doing the house works. Around 130 years ago, the Westerner, especially the British, commenced their forestry industry in Siam. The multi-national company as Bombay-Burma Company

and the Dutch East Asiatic company received the right from Siamese government to do the forestry industry in Lan Na region. Subsequently, they employed Lan Na people to do the log industry for them. Hence, many of Lan Na people, specially the upper class people worked with this multi-national company. And those people employed the Khamu to work with them.

Nevertheless, Khamu is presented as a dull person in Lan Na Amusement Tales. They always do absurd behaviors and easy to cheat which makes Lan Na people feel amuse.

Anecdotal Joke No.5 **Khamu Cooks Rice**

There was a Khamu working with Thai people (Lan Na people). His duty was cooking rice. He did this kind of job everyday and felt bored with his routine job. So one day he told his employer that

“Boss, I can’t stand anymore. Every day I have to cook rice for all day.”

The boss said “It doesn’t matter. Today you needn’t to cook rice but your job today is filling up water.”

This Khamu then filled up the jar with water. Next, the boss told him “After filling up water, then add rice in.”

The Khamu followed his boss order; he put rice in the jar. After finished, he went to take a rest. While resting, he suddenly thought out. He rushed to his boss and said...

“Hey...today I also cooking rice again.”

Excerpt from the Appendix in the thesis “The Use of Humor in Lan Na Jests” by Asst. Prof. Hataiwan Chaikyakul: page 384, story no. 2. 1. 1

Explanation:

Lan Na people prefer to eat sticky rice. Before cooking sticky rice, we have to put rice into water and wait for a while. Then we should cook the rice.

The humor content of this joke is the absurd behavior of the Khamu. He is easy to cheat due to his innocent. He believes and trust his boss. He never thinks that his boss will play a trick with him. The author always find that the humor content in Lan Na Amusement Tales is nearly the same. Lan Na people usually taking advantage or cheating the minorities from their innocent and truthfulness. When Lan Na people are able to take advantage or cheat those minorities, they will feel amuse.

Other minority races

There are still other minorities in Lan Na society as mentioned in the introduction part such as Luo, hill tribe minorities, and including the Westerner and India. However, the jokes about those minority groups do not exist to many. Most humor content about these jokes is similar to the four main minorities in Lan Na

society those are ridicule their absurd behaviors or their ridiculous accent when those people speak Thai or Kham Muang (Lan Na language)

Anecdotal Joke No. 6

Farang (the Westerner) visits the Buddhist temple

There is a westerner visits Buddhist temple. At that temple, there is only an old man, who is 70-80 years old, acting as a door man. Eventually, the westerner forgets to wear wrist watch, so he asks the old door man —

“What time is it?” He wants to know what time it is. But the old man doesn’t understand what does the westerner ask? Then he answers —

“Ehh... exactly right, Thai temple is built with bricks. How about the English church? Is it build with cement?”

Excerpt from the Appendix in the thesis “The Use of Humor in Lan Na Jests” by Asst. Prof. Hataiwan Chaayakul. page 329, story no. ๖ 7/17

Explanation: “it” in English language has the same sound (homophone) as “อิฐ” (it) in Thai which means “brick”, moreover, an English word “time” is pronounced very close to the utterance “Thai”. Thus the door keeper thinks that the westerner asks him “Is Thai temple built with bricks?”

The humor content of this joke is like the humor content in Anecdotal Joke No. 3 that is ridicules the strange and ridiculous accent of the speaker who are not native Thai.

To sum up, Lan Na Amusement Tales protroy that they have a number of minority races in Lan Na society. Absolutely, Lan Na people are dominant culture in society and they try to take advantage or cheat other minority groups in society. When they can, they will feel amuse to those people. The humor content about mirority groups in Lan Na Amusement Tales is always ridicule those minorities absurd and improper behaviors and their strange and ridiculous accent. As Thomas Hobb stated” People laugh at the misfortunes or infirmities of others, or at their

Conclusion

Among 740 jokes that Hataiwan has gathered in the Appendix part in her thesis, there are more than 100 jokes which have their context about minority ethnic races in Lan Na or Northern Thailand. Those minority groups are including Thai Siam, Chinese, Indian, Westerner, Hill tribe minorities, Ngiao and Yong (Tai ethnic races in Shan State, Burma and Yunnan Province in South Western China). These jokes mock their absurd behavior such as the lack of understanding in language or custom of Lan Na society.

Raskin divides the ethnic joke into two categories: firstly, the “real “ethnic humor, humor that employs a specifically ethnic script for the script opposition which aim to ridicule special ethnic group. Secondly, the “false” ethnic humor, humor that builds around a script opposition that can be applied to any ethnic group (Attardo,

1994: 219). Most ethnic jokes in Lan Na are the first type because each joke has an aim to tease special ethnic group such as Chinese, Indian, or Hill tribe minorities.

In relation to Aristotle, people always laugh at a mistake or deformity of other people. Superiority Theories explains that the pleasure we take in humor derives from our feeling of superiority over those we laugh at. Due to this view, all humor is derisive (Monro, 1988, Superiority Theories section, para. 1). Thus people may feel amuse if they felt that they are superior to others.

Lan Na joke is a priceless heritage of Lan Na society. The study of Lan Na joke is not only studying the way of lives and social value of Lan Na people from the past to present, but also is the way to preserve this valuable heritage. In term of folklore, the study will investigate social value, norms and way of lives of Lan Na people through the jokes.

Humor is a mental mechanism that has been used to release suppression out of his/her mind. Without humor human will receive a server suffer from stress. Joke is a kind of humorous tools for eliminating human's suppression. Therefore joke plays a crucial role for helping human to manage with their suppression. However, besides from the mentioned function, joke also performs the function of social management. For instance, as a social control, conveying social norms, establishing common ground, social play, and etc (Attardo, 1994: 323-324). Accordingly, every society positions joke as its cultural symbol. We often hear of American joke, British joke, Japanese joke, and even Thai joke. Thai people may not amuse in western joke, and as well, Westerner may not amuse in Thai joke. The reason is the humorous texts in joke differ to its cultural context. For understanding the humorous text in the joke, the joke listener has to have cultural and language backgrounds of the joke. If the joke listener does not have cultural and language backgrounds of the joke, it is difficult for the joke teller to accomplish his goal.

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Lao Jokes as Supplementary Materials for Teaching Lao to Thai Learners¹

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Abstract

As a teacher of the Lao language to Thai learners, I found Lao jokes to be very useful materials which the students can enjoy right from the beginning. Although Lao and Thai are mutually intelligible enough for speakers of both languages to appreciate each other's jokes, some jokes in Lao are not easily understood at first glance. The jokes that I used in my Lao class as supplementary materials were taken from a variety of sources such as *Vannasin* magazine, short narratives made available by my Lao informants, as well as examples of humorous misuse of Lao words by my Thai students. Most of my gathered jokes involve non-Lao speakers' misunderstanding about the Lao language and culture. In addition, these jokes were usually about a misinterpretation of an interlocutor's real intentions due to his/her incorrect use of tones, words, or sentence structures. Therefore, jokes can be used for in-class discussion or as reading materials, in order that the differences between Lao and Thai tones, morpho-syntactical and semantic structures can be better illustrated and explained. Introducing Lao jokes to Thai learners not only creates amusing and entertaining sensation, but encourages an awareness of linguistic and cultural differences between Lao and Thai for advanced learners of other linguistic backgrounds as well.

1. Introduction

For Tai linguists as well as speakers of Lao and Thai, mutual intelligibility between the Lao and Thai languages is quite apparent, since both of them belong to the Southwestern branch of the Tai language family (Li 1977). Linguistically speaking, therefore, Lao and Thai are dialects of the same language, although from a political point of view, they could be treated as different languages spoken by people of different countries; that is, Thai including Thai-Isarn (i.e., northeastern Thai) spoken in Thailand, as opposed to Lao spoken in Laos PDR. Still, many (non-Isarn) Thai people are unable to speak, read, or write in Lao, unless they have social contact with Thai-Isarn people or Laotians at some point in their lives. This is because Thai people did not have access to the Lao media, such as radio stations or TV channels until only recently, when *Lao Star* and the Lao national TV channels started to be available through the cable TV network. The lack of accessibility and exposure to the Lao language and culture leads to the necessity for interested Thais, particularly non-Isarn Thai people, to learn Lao in the classroom as a second dialect.

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As a teacher of the Lao language to Thai learners, I found that focusing too much attention on some linguistic aspects in Lao which already exist or have very similar patterns as in Thai, such as greeting dialogues or most of the syntactic patterns, would result in boredom, indolence, and less motivation for the students. This is obviously because the students feel that there is no excitement in the lessons. Whenever it appears to the teachers that students already do well in practicing certain dialogues, the teachers should move on to the more challenging lessons even if it is only the beginning of the semester. One of the activities which, I found, has worked so well in class when new information was being introduced, was to provide them with joke texts or anecdotes that fit the lessons of the day. The jokes that I used in my Lao class as supplementary materials were taken from a variety of sources, such as *Vannasin* magazine, as illustrated in my recent work (Kamalanavin 2006), short narratives and anecdotes made available by my Lao informants, as well as examples of humorous misuse of Lao words by my Thai students. Most of my gathered jokes involve non-Lao speakers' misunderstanding about the Lao language and culture. In addition, these jokes were usually about misinterpretations of interlocutors' real intentions due to their incorrect use of tones, words, or sentence structures. Jokes can be used for in-class discussion or as listening and reading materials, so that the differences between Lao and Thai tones, morpho-syntactical and semantic structures can be better illustrated and explained.

Recently, there have been a number of discussions on the benefits from applying jokes to varieties of activities in the second/foreign-language learning classroom (Guindal 1985, Chiasson 2002, Sokolov 2009). For example, Chiasson (2009) suggests that jokes promote self-effacing atmosphere in the class, making students feel less intimidated to express their opinions in a foreign language. Sokolov (2009) states that jokes can make students happy. They also promote unity when students are willing to work in a team. Although these works mainly discuss the usage of jokes in the second/foreign language classroom rather than second-dialect classroom, I still believe that jokes are useful for second-dialect learning such as the Lao-language class taken by Thai learners.

In this paper, I will explain in Section two what kinds of jokes are appropriate for the Lao class, and why particular jokes are chosen to use in the class while some others should be excluded. Section three describes the use of jokes to expand linguistic knowledge (tones, morpho-syntax, and semantics) for learners. And since the joke samples in Section three are texts taken from *Vannasin* as well as my personal notes, teachers can make a rehearsal of instruction before class. Therefore they do not need to have any particular skills to tell jokes to the class. However, teachers need to have clear objectives of what they want to teach their students and select jokes accordingly, as suggested by Chiasson's (2002). In Section four, a discussion regarding the tales of Xiang Miang, a legendary Lao folktale, will be provided, in my attempt to show how they could be used as teaching materials. Section five is the conclusion.

2. Selection of jokes to be used in the classroom

I believe that jokes reflect human's unlimited creativity, deriving from our sense of humor. Jokes are therefore productive and can be made available in any culture. In selecting kinds of jokes to be used in a foreign language classroom, however, language teachers must not randomly use them without clear ideas of why

they should be used in class. In fact they must carefully prepare the jokes that fit well with their objectives. Before we can select the types of jokes to be used in class, we should first be aware of each kind of joke. Cohen (1999: 12) states that jokes are generally divided into two categories, namely, conditional and pure jokes. Conditional jokes require shared knowledge of the same language and culture, whereas pure jokes are about basic things or concepts that we all can understand as human beings. The division of jokes into two categories as conditional and pure can be seen in other works, for example Raskin's (1985: 135) "linguistic" versus "non-linguistic" scripts, Schmitz's (2002) "linguistic/word-based" and "culture-based" versus "universal (reality-based) humor". Because pure/non-linguistic/universal jokes can apparently be understood by speakers of any languages, they should be the ones that foreign-language teachers select as pedagogical tools in class. However, I think that conditional jokes are also useful for teaching a second dialect to speakers of other dialects, such as when teaching Lao to Thai students. Being two dialects of the same language family, second-dialect learners already acquire basic competence in the target dialect without too much effort. So, for example, any Thai person would understand what [kʰɔp cai lai lai dɔː] "thank you very much" means in Lao without difficulty. As such, I think that conditional jokes can be taught in a class of Thai learners, as long as the linguistic and cultural concepts are clearly explained to the students. The conditional jokes would make the class more enjoyable and fun, as it would be a good opportunity for them to learn aspects of the Lao language and culture that they certainly have no prior knowledge of. Also, I would like to emphasize that Lao jokes should be used as supplementary materials or as part of in-class activities, because overusing them might have negative results. For example, the students might spend too much time discussing some particular jokes which are irrelevant to the current topics on which the teachers are focusing.

On the other hand, the jokes that should not be used in class are those which may ruin the atmosphere of the class, which Sokolov (2009) called "caustic humor". The caustic jokes include disrespect of one's gender, age, and culture. From my observation, many jokes in Lao would make fun of a group of Mon-Khmer people called *Kha*. It is perhaps a good idea to discard such jokes. Although some funny anecdotes that I have (as will be shown in Section three) involve making fun of Thai people's incorrect pronunciation when they speak Lao; I don't think they would be caustic ones, because there is no sense of mockery or insult in the story (which will be further explained in Section three). In fact, they should be mentioned in the class since they reflect how Laotians view Thai people's speech.

Chiasson (2002) suggests that teachers should not try too hard to use jokes as teaching devices; they should do what fits their personality, and make jokes as minor activities. In this paper, how to tell jokes will not be discussed. Rather, I would like to demonstrate how jokes can enhance the linguistic (i.e. phonetic/phonological, syntactical, and semantic) knowledge to the students, as shown in Section Three.

3. Using Lao jokes to expand linguistic knowledge

I found that several joke punchlines carry the phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and semantic information which can show some linguistic differences between Lao and Thai, as illustrated below:

3.1 Tonal differences

In terms of phonetic information, several joke stories involve a Thai speaker's misunderstanding of the addressee's intention, due to his/her misinterpretation of Lao tones. These "phonetics" jokes can be part of in-class activities when one teaches some phonetic/phonological aspects in Lao to students. Here are some anecdotes that give Thai students an idea of the differences between Lao and Thai tones:

Story 1: "No wood" (Anecdote quoted from a Laotian informant)

Two friends, Thai and Lao, were trekking in the woods in Laos. When they reached a cliff, they wanted to climb down to continue trekking, but they wanted to be sure that there were no dangerous obstacles down there. So they asked a Lao villager down below if there was any (sharp) stool. The Lao villager yelled out, "[maj (H-F)² mii (M)]". The Lao trekker decided not to jump. On the other hand, the Thai trekker did, and ended up being stabbed by a big sharp stool.

(Lao) maj (H-F) mii (M)
 Wood have
 "There's wood."
 (Thai) maj (H-F) mii (M)
 not have
 "There's no (wood)."

In Vientiane Lao, the word [maj] with a high-fall (H-F) tone means "tree". Therefore, when the Lao villager yelled out [maj (H-F) mii (M)], he was emphasizing the fact that there was indeed a (sharp) stool, implicitly suggesting that the two trekkers should not jump down. However, the word [maj] with this tone means "no, not" in Thai. The Thai trekker thought that the villager was speaking Thai, which would have meant that there was no (sharp) stool. With such misinterpretation, the Thai trekker decided to jump, but not the Lao trekker, who interpreted the same sentence with the opposite meaning.

As a Thai person, I do not feel that this joke sounds offensive, since it does not carry any messages with an insulting tone, indirectly suggesting the other person's lower education, lower income, underdevelopment, ethnic minorities, and so on. Therefore, I think that it is a good choice to be used as an introduction of tones to the class. The tonal system of the Vientiane Lao dialect is relatively different from that of Central Thai, thus not an easy subject to teach. Telling this joke before class intermission, for example, always brings a smile to learners and gives a more relaxing atmosphere to the class.

² An abbreviation of tones; M refers to the mid tone, L the low tone, H the high tone, H-F the high-fall tone, M-F the mid-fall tone, L-R the rise tone, and H-F-R the high-fall-rise tone. Tones will only be marked in this section, while the rest of the paper will omit them since they are relatively irrelevant.

Story 2: “Who’s calling?” (Anecdote quoted from my acquaintance)

A southern-Lao person (A) called a Luang Phrabang resident (B) on the phone.

A: “Hello!”

B: [p^huda.j pa:k(M-F) ma:H-F-R]

(Luang Phrabang Lao)	p ^h uda.j	pa:k (M-F)	ma: (H-F-R)
	Who	speak	come
	“who’s calling?”		
(Thai and many other Lao dialects)	p ^h uda.j	pa:k(M-F)	ma: (H-F-R)
	Who	mouth	dog
	“who has a dog mouth?” (slang; “who speaks harshly?”)		

In this anecdote, speaker B, who is from Luang Phrabang, was answering the phone in a very ordinary way. But since the word [maa] with the high-fall-rise tone (or the tones alike) means “dog” in several Lao dialects including Thai, the interpretation that Thai speakers would have is “who has a dog mouth?” which colloquially means a person with abusive talk. In this anecdote Lao teachers could explain to learners that speaking with a different (not necessarily wrong) tone could result in a different interpretation for various Lao and Thai speakers.

3.2 Morpho-syntactic differences

Jokes that show morpho-syntactic differences between Lao and Thai are relative rare, as Lao and Thai syntax do not differ much. One of the morphological differences between Thai and Lao can be seen from the usage of polite final particles. In Thai, the polite final particles [k^hrǎp] (for male) and [k^hǎ] (for female) are required at the end of each sentence when speakers would like to express politeness to their addressees. For example, [mi: lû:k sǎ:m k^hon k^hrǎp/k^hǎ] “(I) have three children” in Thai, with the polite final particle ([k^hrǎp] or [k^hǎ]) would certainly be more polite than [mi: lû:k sǎ:m k^hon] which has no polite particle. In Lao, there are no such final particles for politeness. However, there are three words meaning “yes”, which can express different degrees of politeness in Lao: [ʔɿ:] for the less formal situation, polite [câw], and very polite [dõ:j]. Unlike the polite “yes” forms (female) [k^hǎ] and (male) [k^hrǎp] in Thai, the words [ʔɿ:], [câw], and [dõ:j] in Lao can only refer to the “yes” meaning, not a final particle. So, for example, when someone asks to you, [saba:j di: bo:ʔ] “Are you doing alright?” You should say, [caw, saba:j di:] or [dõ:j, saba:j di:] “Yes, I’m fine.” On the other hand, the phrase like *[saba:j di: caw] is ungrammatical since [caw] and [dõ:j] cannot be attached to any phrases or sentences, as explained earlier.

Having explained the usage of three “yes” forms in Lao, the teachers can now begin to tell the following joke (taken from *Vannasin* magazine) involving the Lao “yes” forms to their students:

Story 3: “Dad taught his child, and vice versa”

A three-year-old child was in kindergarten. After school, her dad always told her many stories. He asked questions to the girl to see if she could remember anything he had taught:

“Dao”, called her dad (“Dao” is the child’s name).

“[do : j]”, answered the girl. ([do : j] is a very polite particle meaning “yes”.)

“Dad”, called the girl to her father.

“[câw]”, replied her dad. The girl started

to cry. (mild particle meaning “yes”)

“What’s wrong?”, her dad asked.

“(I cried) because you don’t “do : j” me!”

Sor Bik 1998: 22

ພໍ່ສອນລາ ລາສອນພໍ່

ລາສາວໄວ ລ້ ຂວບ ພວມຮຽນຢູ່ອະນຸບານ

ເລີກໂຮງຮຽນຕອນແລງ ມາຮອດເຮືອນບານໃດ

ພໍ່ກໍມາສອນລາສາວ ແລະຟັງຖາມນັ້ນຖານີ້ວ່າ

ລາສາວຈະຮູ້ໄດ້ບໍ່?

“ຕາວເຮືອ!” ພໍ່ເອີ້ນລາສາວ

“ໂດຍ!” ລາສາວຕອບພໍ່

“ພໍ່ເຮືອ!” ລາສາວເອີ້ນພໍ່ອີນ

“ເຈົ້າ!” ພໍ່ຕອບລາສາວອີນມາ

ລາສາວໄຫ້ກາກອັນ

“ລາດົນຫຍັງ?” ພໍ່ຖາມຂຶ້ນດ້ວຍຄວາມຕົກອົກຕົກໃຈ

“ຍອນພໍ່ບໍ່ “ໂດຍ” ລາ”.

(ສີປິກ. ຕຳອາຍ. ກໍລະກົດ ໑໙໙໘ ໜ້າ ໔໒)

In Story Three, Dao correctly used the yes-form [do : j] to her father, since this form is usually uttered by speakers who are socially less powerful. That Dao cried although her father correctly chose the less polite form [câw] is, therefore, the unexpected part of the story.

In terms of syntactic structures, there are only a few jokes which can demonstrate certain syntactic differences between Lao and Thai. The following is a conversation between a Laotian friend of mine and myself. I made a grammatical mistake that had led to the meaning that was different from what I originally intended to say:

Story 4: “Eating one another”

Myself: ma kin kan

Come eat rice

“Let’s eat!”

My friend: p^ha.j si kin caw, k^ho.j si kin nam caw

Who will eat you, I will eat with you

(Literally, “Who will eat you? I will eat with you!!”)

I don’t want to eat YOU; I just want to eat with you!!

In Thai, the sentence [ma kin kan] “let’s come and eat (together).” is perfectly acceptable, whereas in Lao this same sentence possibly means “let’s come and eat one another”, which sounds quite hilarious to many people. This short story can be told when the prepositions such as [nam] “with” is introduced to the class.

3.3 Semantic differences

Jokes that show differences in word meaning between Lao and Thai are the greatest in number, compared to jokes showing other linguistic aspects. There are a lot of Thai-Lao cognates that are different in tones and meanings; for example, [sù̌a] (M-F) “bed (Lao)”- [sù̌a] (L) “mat (Thai)”. This kind of words usually causes humor when they are uttered in the wrong time and place. The following example is well-known by many Thais, even by those who have no interest in the Lao language and culture, as the story tends to occur in real life when Thai people order some drink in Laos:

Story 5: “Five glasses of pepsi”

A Thai person ordered five glasses of pepsi. S(h)e said in Thai,

[kʰ ǿ : kʰ Ǿ : k hâ : kê : w]

Give coke five bottle

“I’d like to have five bottle of pepsi.”

The Lao waiter/waitress went back to the kitchen and brought back five bottles (instead of five glasses) of pepsi.

In Thai, the word [kê : w] means “glass” while the same word refers to “bottle” in Laos. Therefore, [hâ : kê : w] “five glasses” in Thai is semantically equivalent to “five bottles” in Lao.

The following example is from *Vannasin* Magazine:

Story 6: “Confusing language”

At a textile manufacturer, Khamdee, a salesperson talked to his manager:

refrigerator is dead. It was carried by a Tuk-Tuk to get fixed.

Khamdee: Mr. Manager, [tʰu :] is already dead.

Manager: When did it happen?

Khamdee: Only recently. The body was already taken by Tuk-Tuk.

Manager:

Oh, you shocked me.

Manager:

Have his relatives known this news?

Next time if you want to say “the fridge is dead” you should use the more appropriate word:

Kamdee: What relatives? The

“broken”!!

Adapted from Pa nin noi 1998: 23

ຜາສາ ຜາສົນ

ໂຮງງານຕັດຫຍິບແຫ່ງໜຶ່ງເປັນເກົາສອງຊັ້ນ,

ຊັ້ນເທິງເປັນເຍອນເຜສິດ ສ່ວນຊັ້ນລຸ່ມເປັນຫ້ອງ

ວາງສະແດງ ແລະຈຳໜ່າຍສິນຄ້າ ຢູ່ຊັ້ນລຸ່ມເຈົ້າ

ຂອງກິດຈະການໄດ້ຈາງຄືນຍາມ ພໍ່ໜຶ່ງທີ່ມີອາຍຸແກ່

ເພື່ອເຝົ້າຍາມຕິດຕາມການຂ້າຂອງການສາມ

ແລະສົນພາຍນອກທີ່ຂ້າມາພົວພັນວຽກ.

ນີ້ໜຶ່ງ ຄຳຕີ ພະນັກງານຝ່າຍຂາຍໄດ້ອັນໄຂ່ຊັ້ນ
ເທິງເພື່ອລາຍງານຜູ້ຈັດການ.

“ຜູ້ຈັດການເອີຍ ຕຳລະນາຫນ້າຕາຍແລ້ວດດ!”

“ຕາຍດົນແລ້ວຫລະ?”

“ຫາກຕາຍ ເຂົາອັນລົດເກ ໆ ໄປໄປແລ້ວ!”

“ຊາງວາແທ້ໄທເຮືອນລາວຮູ້ແລ້ວບໍ່?”

“ຊິນໄທເຮືອນໄທຫຍັງ

ຕຸ້ນ້າເຢັນມັນຕາຍເຂົາໃສ່ລົດໄປແປງຊື່ ໆ!”

“ເອ ເຈົ້າ ໂລດເຂົ້າໃຫ້ຂ້ອຍເກົາໃຈແທ້ນີ້

ເພື່ອຫາຄືນແລ້ວນ “ຕຸ້ນ້າເຢັນ” ໃຫ້ເຈົ້າໂບກວ່າ ມັນ

“ຜູ” ຊັ້ນດີ ໃຊ້ຜາສາໃຫ້ເກົາແດ່.”

(ປານີນບອຍ. ຕໍ່ອາຍຸ. ມີນາ ໑໙໙໘ ໜ້າ ໒໓)

In the story above, the word [tʰuː] is semantically ambiguous; it could refer to “an old man” as well as “refrigerator” (abbreviation of [tʰuː jɛn]). Making an unclear statement could lead to misunderstanding of the whole situation. In a Lao class, students could learn new words with semantic ambiguity as in the examples above and many others which has different meanings in Thai, such as [sua.j](L-R) “late (Lao)”-“beautiful (Thai)”, [sɔp](H) “lips (Lao)”-[sɔp](L) “dead body (Thai)”, [hɯa](L-R) “laugh (Lao)”-“head (Thai)”, [lɔɯɯ](H)tʰa.w(L)] “socks (Southern Lao)”- [rɔːŋ](M)tʰaː.w(H)] “shoes (Thai)”, and so on.

3.4 Learning communicative skills through dialogues

Lao joke texts from *Vannasin* Magazine are useful examples for conversation between people with various degrees of power, status, and intimacy: for example, between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, husbands and wives, teachers and students, or monks and ordinary people. The first example is a conversation between a father and a son:

Story 7: “Earth cavity”

Son: pʰɔːɽɽːj pen naɯ vat.tʰuː

cmɯ tok caːk boːn suːŋ lɔŋ

boːn tam hu

Dad: why do things fall from top to
bottom?

Father:

pʰɔːɽ heːŋ duɯ duːt ti ɿuːk

Because of the earth cavity, son.

Son: kʰansan muːni haw het

keːw law kʰɔːŋ ɽipʰɔː

tok teːk pen pʰɔːɽ heːŋ

duɯ duːt kʰɔːŋ loːk men

bo

So, last night when I dropped your
Liquor, it's because of the earth
cavity, right?

Khaenkhram 1999:35

ສະຮຽງຄຶງດູດ

ລູກຊາຍ: ຝ່ເຮືອຍ... ເປັນຫຍັງວັດຖຸຈຶ່ງຕົກຈາກບ່ອນ

ສ່ຽງລົງບ່ອນຕ່ຳຫີ້?

ພໍ່: ເພາະສະຮຽງຄຶງດູດຂອງໂລກຕີລາ

ລູກຊາຍ: ອັນຊັ້ນ... ນີ້ນີ້ເຮົາເຮັດເລກວັດລ້າຂອງອີ່

ພໍ່ຕົກເລກກຳເປັນເພາະສະຮຽງຄຶງດູດຂອງ

ໂລກເພນຍ໌?

ພໍ່: ...!!

(ເລກນຳ. ຕໍ່ອາຍ. ຫັນວາ ໑໙໙໙ ຫນ້າ ໓໔)

We can see two forms that the son used for addressing his father: [p^hɔːʔɣːj] and [ʔi p^hɔː]. The former is usually used when one wants to call one's father's attention. The suffix [-ʔɣːj] can be attached to pronouns or someone's name only. Its function is to soften the tone of voice, which is perfectly acceptable in Lao, but is rarely used by Thai when they call their parents. The forms [ʔi p^hɔː] (also [ʔi meː]) are very common when one calls one's parents in Lao. Now let's take a look at a dialogue between spouses:

Story 8: “Reason”

The husband told his wife:

Husband: k^hɔːj ca ca:k caw paːj

t^haːŋ daːj bo daːj ʔi:k

leːw laʔ

I can't leave without you.

Wife: niː caw hak k^hɔːj laːj

k^hanaːt niː p^huːn va

It's because you love me so
much, isn't it?

Husband: boː do:k te pen p^hɔːʔ

caw p^huam niap tiːn

k^hɔːj taŋ ha:k neŋ con

boː daːj diːdiː

Not really. I said so because
you're stepping on my foot. I
can't move!

Adapted from Khaenkhram 1999: 35

ສາເຫດ

ຜົ້ວເຮືອຍບາກັບເມຍ...

“ຂອຍຈະຈາກເຈົ້າໄປທາງໃດບໍ່ເຂົ້າເລວລະ!”

“ນີ້ເຈົ້າຫລົງຮັກຂອຍຫລາຍຂໝາດນີ້ໄປຫລະ?”

ຝ່າຍເມຍສີ່

“ບໍ່ເອກ,

ເຮົາເປັນເພາະເຈົ້າເລນປ່ຽນຕີນຂອຍຕ່າງຫາກ

ເໝືອງຈົນບໍ່ໄດ້ດີ ໆ!”

(ເລກນຳ. ຕໍ່ອາຍ. ຫັນວາ ໑໙໙໙ ຫນ້າ ໓໔)

From the story above, the husband and his wife used the standard pronouns “I” [k^hɔːj] and “you” [caw] to refer to themselves when talking to each other. This dialogue is also a good example for the introduction of the usage of pronouns.

Compton (1988, 2002) made a distinction between the standard pronouns ([k^hɔ:j] “I” and [caw] “you”) and the kinship terms (such as [ʔa:j] “elder brother” or [ʔwa:j] “siblings”). She stated that in intimate relationship such as in courtship the kin terms (rather than the standard pronouns) are often used. However, we see that the standard pronouns [k^hɔ:j] “I” and [caw] “you” are perfectly acceptable in a husband-wife conversation as shown in the dialogue above. From my personal observations, the kin terms [ʔa:j] “elder brother” and [ʔwa:j] “sibling” are widely used between husband and wife as well as the whole set of standard pronouns, such as [k^hɔ:j] “I”, [caw] “you”, and so on. Some families address themselves as [p^hɔ:] “father” and [me:] “mother” when they talk to each other, according to their family roles. Lao language learners should be told that the selections of pronominal systems depend on the major role of individuals in the family; therefore various terms of address could be correctly selected. Now let’s take a look at a conversation between teacher and student as in the following joke:

ຢູ່ໂຮງຮຽນມັກທະຍົມແຫ່ງໜຶ່ງ ເຊື້ອຍຄູ່ໂຖານນອງນັກຮຽນກຽວກັບຄວາມຮອບເງິນວ່າ:

“ກ່ອນຈະຮອດໂຮກສະອາດ ຮອດໂຮກໃດກ່ອນໝູ່ ທ່າວທີ?”

“ຮຽນເຊື້ອຍຄູ່ນອງຂໍຕອບ ອ່າ, ອ່າ...”

“ຕອບບໍ່ໄດ້ແນ່ນອນ ... ເຊົ້ານຶ່ງລົງ ມີນ້ອງໃດຕອບໄດ້ຊິນອີ່ມ?”

“ເຊົ້າທ່າວສຳ ຕອບໃຫ້ໝູ່ຝັ່ງເລີ່ມດູ”

“ຮຽນເຊື້ອຍຄູ່ນອງຂໍຕອບ ກ່ອນຈະຮອດໂຮກສະອາດຕ້ອງຮອດໂຮກເບື້ອນກ່ອນ”

“ຍ້ອນຫຍັງລະ?” ເຊື້ອຍຄູ່ຖາມຂຶ້ນ

“ຍ້ອນວ່າຖືງຢ່າງຄອບແລບປິດມາສ້າງຕາມຮົວ ແລະເດີນບ້ານເຮືອນປະຊາຊົນ ແລະ ແສນທາງ

ບໍ່ເປັນຕາເບິ່ງຈັກດີ”

“໑໐ ສ້າງຫລາຍ”

(ສ.ກາວໄກ. ເຖື່ອຍ. ປິດສະມາ ໒໐໐໒ ໜ້າ ໑໑)

The punchline of this joke is the usage of the town name; [kʰo:k saʔa:t]. As both Lao and Thai people already know, [saʔa:t] means “clean”. Therefore, when Thao-Kham answered [kʰo:k pwan] ([pwan] means “dirty”) to his teacher, he was witty in inventing a non-existing name of the town (= [kʰo:k pwan]) which has an opposite meaning.

This dialogue provides us with the usage of appropriate pronouns when students address their teachers. Laos remains an agriculture-based society, in which people are socially connected as pseudo-relatives. Unlike in Thai, it is very common for teachers to consider themselves as “elder brother/sister” to the students, whereas the students would think of themselves as being “younger brother/sister” in relation to the teachers. The use of self-reference of the student in this dialogue as [nɔ:ŋ] “younger brother” and the reference to his teacher as [ʔwa:j kʰu:], a combination of [ʔwa:j] “elder sister” and [kʰu:] “teacher”, reflect such social network. In addition, we can see the example of using a nominal prefix [tʰaw-], as in Thao-Thee and Thao-Kham (i.e. names of the students). This prefix is used to address a male speaker.

The conversation between monks and commoners is also interesting, as monks have a special term to address commoners, and vice versa. Observe the joke below:

Story 10: “Prevention”

sa:j va:j ka:ŋ kʰon nɔŋ le:n hɔt hat kʰaw vat pai son ju: kuti nam
kʰu:ba:

A man rushed to the temple to hide himself in the monk’s residence.

Monk: pʰɔ: ʔɔ:k pen ɲaŋ kʰu: faw faŋ ʔaw tʰɛ:

why do you rush yourself?

Commoner: mia kʰanɔj pʰuam ho:ŋ pʰe:ŋ pʰe:ŋ le:w pʰe:ŋ

law bo:k haj saw ka bo saw

My wife was singing ..one song after another. I told her to stop but she wouldn't.

Monk: aw ka di: le:w de bo: campen toɯ sw: tʰe:p ma: faɯ

Oh, that's good. You don't have to buy a tape recorder.

Commoner: di: ne:w daɯ kʰano:ɯ kʰon ba:n kaɯ huan kʰiaɯ
pʰajpʰaj ka tu: va: kʰano:ɯ kʰa: ti: con het haɯ mia
ho:ɯ haɯ. . sanan kʰano:ɯ cuɯ pop ni: ko:n pʰwəpɯkan
bo: haɯ mi ka:n soɯsaj
Why should it be good? Everybody in the neighborhood thought that I hit her and made her cry. So that's why I ran away quickly to prevent myself from being suspected!!

ປ້ອງກັນຕົວ

ຊາຍໄກກາງຄົນໜຶ່ງແລ່ນຮີດຮາດເຂົ້າວັດໄປຂໍຊົນປ່າດື່ມນໍ້າລູປາ

“ພໍ່ອອກເປັນຫຍັງຄືພໍ່ໄວ້ຝັງເອົາແທ້” ຄູ່ບາອອກປາກຖາມ

“ເພຍຂ້ານອຍເພວນຮອງເພງ... ເພງແລ້ວ ເພງເລົ່າບອກໃຫ້ເຊົ້າກໍບໍ່ເຊົ້າ.” ຊາຍໄກກາງຕອບ

“ອາວກໍດີແລ້ວເດ, ບໍ່ຈຳເປັນຊື້ເທັບນາຝັງ” ຄູ່ບາເວົ້າເລີນ

“ດີແນວດີຂ້ານອຍ... ຄົນບ້ານມີເຮືອນຄຽງໃຜ ໆ ກໍຖວາຂ້ານອຍຂ້າໃຈໃນເຮືດໃຫ້ເພຍຮອງໄຫ້..

ສະນັ້ນຂ້ານອຍຈຶ່ງປັບໜົມກອນເພ່ອຍປ້ອງກັນບໍ່ໃຫ້ມີການສົງໄສ.”

(ແຂ້ວແທ້ໆ. ຕຳອາຍ. ຕຸລາ ໒໐໐໑ ໜ້າ ໑໐)

This joke introduces additional pronominal terms widely used between monks and commoners. In the dialogue above, the monk used the term [pʰɔ: ʔɔ:k] to address his conversational male partner ([me: ʔɔ:k] for female), whereas the addressee called himself [kʰano:ɯ] instead of the typical first-person pronoun [kʰɔɯ]. When this joke is introduced in class, Lao language learners can also be taught the other relevant groups of words used for monks and their conversational partners, such as the pronoun [ʔa:ttama:] “I” (monks refer to themselves when speaking to non-monks), [kʰano:ɯ] “I” (monks refer to themselves when speaking to other monks), the kin terms [ʔacca:n] “(literally) teacher” (when non-monks address to monks), or the lexical items used specially for and between monks themselves such as [san] “eat”, [camvat] “sleep” etc, although most of them are similar in Thai.

3.5 Cultural differences

Cultural-based jokes are not easily understood by outsiders. Even if students could almost understand the whole story, they wouldn't feel that such jokes were funny unless some cultural concepts relevant to the story were explained to them. In the following joke, for example, one needs to know the meaning of [k^ha1am] before understanding the whole story:

Story 11: [hap pakan] “Guarantee”	
laŋ ca:k mo:p k ^h at ^h a: ʔa:k ^h om	ຮັບປະກັນ
p ^h wa pa:p p ^h i: ha:j siaŋ di:	ຫຼັງຈາກນອບສາຖາອາຄົມເພື່ອປາບພິທີຊ່ອງດິເລລວ,
le:w k ^h uba:p ^h o:ŋa:j ka ɲam	ສູບາພໍ່ທຶຍກໍຢາຮ້ອ້ສະລໍາອືນໃຫມວ່າ
k ^h o: k ^h a1am k ^h w:n va	“ເດືອນຕ້ອງນີສະຕິ, ຢ່າລອດຜຽກສິ້ນເດືອນຕາ”
After giving magical words to Xiang Di for him to fight against ghosts, the monk insisted:	“ເລື່ອງນີ້ຮັບປະກັນສູ່, ເນື
Monk:	ແລະລາກສາວຂານອຍລວນງ່າະໂປງ, ສະຕິເດ,
detk ^h a:t toŋ mi:	ໂສ້ງກັນຫນຶ່ງກອນ”
satiʔ ja: lo:t	(ແຂ້ວແຫງ. ຕໍ່ອາຍຸ. ພະຈິກ ໒໐໐໑ ໜ້າ ໓໑)
p ^h iaksin det k ^h a:t	
You need to be mindful.	
Don't ever pass under the	
[Lao-traditional] skirts.	
Xiang Di:	
laŋ ni happakan	
k ^h up ^h o: mia le	
laksawk ^h ano:j luan	
nuy kapo:ŋsakɾt	
nuy soŋ kan mɾt	
This is guaranteed, my	
teacher-father. My wife	
and daughter usually wear	
(western) skirts and	
trousers.	

Kheoheng 2001b:30

The words *kho khalam* and *xiang* in this story are based on Buddhist beliefs. *Kho khalam* refers to any act that might bring bad luck to the actor. In this particular situation it is bad luck for a man to pass under a clothes line that hangs women's *phasin*, a traditional Lao long skirt. *Xiang* is a kinship term for a man who has recently left monkhood. The story also implies the traditional belief in shamanism. The monk was giving the man *khatha Akhom*, a magical verse to fight with ghosts. The man's statement surprises the monk (and so the joke readers) by saying that nothing bad would happen to him since his wife and daughter no longer wear the traditional Lao *phasin*, but western-style skirts. Clearly he was saying that if he happens to pass under a clothes-line, he would go under different kinds of skirts, not *phasin*, which would bring him bad luck.

By using this joke as a supplementary text, students would be able to learn different beliefs in Lao and can discuss them. The students might have different views about this type of [k^h a l a m] in the story, depending on which region they come from.

4. Tales of Xiang Miang: a practical folktale for various in-class activities

Tales of Xiang Miang is one of the most popular ancient Lao folktales. In the story, Xiang Miang is a stepbrother of a king. Because of his wit, the king envied him. In order to get rid of Xiang Miang, the king did every way to defame him. However, Xiang Miang was able to overcome all the problems and obstacles created by the king. Reading Tales of Xiang Miang is always enjoyable for everyone, as every chapter ended with a twistingly funny turn. This Lao folktale is in line with Thai's famous tale of *Sri Thanonchai*. Students can discuss various aspects of Xiang Miang: for example, they can compare and contrast the characters between Xiang Miang and Sri Thanonchai. They also can talk about the good and bad things they like about Xiang Miang. I found that the activity which students like most was to take turn role-playing each chapter of the story.

5. Conclusion

The jokes that were shown in this paper are examples of materials that can be used as teaching tools specifically for Thai learners of Lao. The Lao-language learners of any other nationalities can also have benefit from using joke texts as supplementary materials, on condition that their reading and writing skills are adequately proficient in Lao to appreciate culture-based jokes without difficulty. Unless Lao instructors are able to find humorous anecdotes or joke pieces for themselves, I would suggest that they use *Tales of Xiang Miang* as well as jokes in *Vannasin*. As far as I know, *Vannasin* magazine is the only source that includes one or two jokes in each volume, although recently they are rarely available. Introducing Lao jokes to the class not only creates amusing and entertaining sensation, but encourages an awareness of linguistic and cultural differences between Lao and Thai for advanced learners.

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What's So Funny About Sri Thanonchai?¹

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Abstract

The trickster tales of Sri Thanonchai, or Xiang Miang, as he is called in Laos, are part of a widely shared cultural package—about a single and singular hero with different names and traits as he moves across the Mekong. This prototypical hero, in fact, crosses all national boundaries in Southeast Asia. Here the focus is on the Thai and Lao versions only. He presents a challenge to a Westerner on first encounter. What is humorous about a tale that at times turns on feces and farts? The attempt to translate the humor in the tales into English—in text or art—depends ultimately on the intentions of the translator or artist and the receptivity of the audience. Is a sanitized version a betrayal, or just another rendering refashioned for the enjoyment of a new generation with little knowledge of older versions the tales?

Many students of Southeast Asian literature have commented on its fairly homogeneous quality. The underlying cultural assumptions on which they are based vary slightly from place to place, but they serve as a common background throughout the area. The tales of the trickster Thanonchai is a prime example of this. “Sri Thanonchai,” or “(Bak) Xiang Miang/Thanonchai Pandit”—his Lao counterpart—is the main character in a series of trickster tales that have been popular for generations in Thailand and Laos. Close variations of the tales are also found in Cambodia and Burma and elsewhere in Southeast Asia and Asia itself.² In Cambodia, he is “Tmeagne

¹ Prepared for Chulalongkorn University’s International Conference on Humor in ASEAN, August 4-5, 2010. We would like to acknowledge our deepest appreciation to Ajan Wibha Kongananda of Silapakorn University who gifted me the comic book slides and set of mural slides from Wat Pathumwanaram when she resided as Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at NIU in 1987, and a copy of the book published by Muang Boran on the temple. It turns out that Ajan Kanjanarat Vechasat, also of Silapakorn University, took the original set of slides as part of her study of the temple published in 1982. In February, 2010, she received permission for us to accompany her and a small group to enter the royal temple to see the murals close up and to take some photos and to video tape her as she explained the stories behind the paintings. In the end, she was the initial impetus for this study on the humor of Thanonchai that came through most clearly in the cultural heritage left by Rama IV. Any errors in fact or interpretation are solely those of the authors, who ask the indulgence of Ajan Kanjanarat.

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² Manduan Tipaya (1991:9) states that there are at least seventeen versions in oral, verse and prose forms. The Thai National Library holds over thirty editions, including a verse rendition dating from the reign of King Chulalongkorn. It is believed by many to date from the Ayudhya period (1350-1767), which suggests that they were borrowed from Cambodia, along with the *Ramakian* and other works of Khmer literature. In this paper, we rely largely on Manduan’s collection of over sixty tales.

Tiei,” in Malaysia, “Abu Nawas.” In northern Thailand, one finds a series of tales entitled “Suk, The Trickster Who Fooled a Monk,” which repeats many of the themes found in the Thanonchai tales. The tales in all their variants—in prose, verse³, temple murals, and T.V. cartoons—are somewhat reminiscent of Aesop’s Fables, which have also made their way around the world, including Southeast Asia. In the latter, the trickster often takes the form of a cunning fox or another animal or human (male) whose cleverness leads to some minor triumph.

The tales of Thanonchai are unique in several ways: each one usually, but not always, features him as the male protagonist, and the content runs the gamut from both hearty and ribald humor to the cruel and sadistic. The targets of Thanonchai’s tricks are usually the relatively rich and powerful: his parents, monks, patron, even his king. The story of Sri Thanonchai reveals a conflict perspective of social relationship among actors who have power differentials. Despite the violently confrontational relationship between Sri Thanonchai and his parents, brother, monks or master, the relationship between Sri Thanonchai and the king appears to be non-violent. It demonstrates the powerful endurance of the monarchy (Khanjanarat Vechasat [กัญจนารัตน์ เวชชาสัท] 2525 B.E.: 126-142).

Tales that feature the king and Thanonchai derive a good deal of their humor from their benign “tit-for-tat” aspect. Two poles of a social axis can be seen playfully tilting back and forth. Because the tales have many tellers covering a wide geographic and historical span with multiple audiences of commoners and royals, Thanonchai/Xiang Miang is far from a static character. Depending on time and circumstance, he can appear as a consummate trickster, a playful jokester, or an indolent court jester.

More often than not, those persons taken in by him are the gullible or intolerably naive and, as such, provide the perfect foil for Sri Thanonchai’s antics. The tales also have a Thai-centric nationalist thrust. His adversaries include the Mon, Burmese, Chinese, Indians and Westerners. In more than one instant, Sri Thanonchai can be seen as Everyman “speaking back to power” in ways that are indirect, a kind of passive aggressiveness where he uses the creative possibilities of language, chiefly word play wit, and outright deceit as his weapon of choice. He emerges as a folk hero; he is on the side of the “little people.” He is also the comic champion of indolence, employing a ruse to avoid physical labor when it is to his advantage and monetary gain. He is in the end, a social climber who aspires to be rich and powerful like those he loves to pester. To his credit, he is not content to accept his condition in life and merely accept the fate that he has been handed, by his lowly birth as the son of peasant farmers. His mother also has ambitions for him, and seeks to have his fortune told, much in keeping with the cultural beliefs among many Southeast Asians. Moreover, if there is an underlying, Buddhist message to be found, it is that greed ultimately leads to suffering. However, lest we get lost in explanations of the moral or political purpose of the tales, suffice it to say that, like all literature (oral or folk included), these tales in their own way provide a detailed representation of the inner experience of being alive in a given time and place. The mythical time and place in the Thai version of the tales can be situated as early as the Ayudhya period or as recently as the Fourth Reign (King Mongkut, b.1804-d.1868).

³ Palm leaf copies can be found in the Lao National Library. The date of the first Xiang Miang stories is unknown. Some sources claim that they pre-date the 16th century.

The individual tales, while funny in their details, do not convey the conclusion that life is just one big laugh. We need to keep in mind that the tales also vividly portray the challenges of the everyday life of a rural peasantry populated with a king's white elephant, chickens, oxen, a cat, and an occasional vulture; and colored with rituals: birth, initiation as a novice, life as monk, employment by a patron, marriage, and finally old age and death. Altogether, they articulate the biography of a culture hero chafing under the restrictions of a patron-client relationship while at the same time exploiting the possibilities for personal advancement that are built into the system. In her introduction to *Tales of Sri Thanonchai, Thailand's Artful Trickster*, Maenduan Tipaya (1991:9) sums up the features of Thanonchai as follows.

Sri Thanonchai's enduring popularity stems largely from three factors. First, in Thai, entertaining incidents frequently provoke genuine mirth. Second, common folk derived considerable vicarious pleasure from the ways the impudent hero irreverently challenged and bested officialdom, rich fools and foreigners with native intelligence, bluff and deceptions. Third, a keen Thai appreciation of the ridiculous and absurd was, is, and probably always will be satisfied.

In numerous ways, the tales mirror traditional Thai society, and many of those features persist up to the present. In order to fully appreciate the Thai version of the tales, it helps to frame them in the value system of an absolute monarchy, particularly when Ayuthaya [Auydhyā] was in the ascendancy. Maenduan (1991:11) has this to say.

Slavish obedience had particular significance in Ayudhya's feudal society where heavy-handed authority, official or social, could comprise the major bane of any peasant's life. Failure to obey commands guaranteed, at least, subsequent rebuke, perhaps even physical abuse. On a personal level, little could be more immediately gratifying than literally obeying commands to the visible detriment of authorities issuing them. Similarly, opportunism and blind greed contributed to many a person's downfall, particularly when terms of agreement were not clearly specified. (p. 11)

Indeed, Sri Thanonchai endures more than one beating as a child and as a novice chiefly because he defies authority in acts with the implicative of something like, "Well, I did exactly what you told me to do!" The act of "literally obeying commands to the visible detriment of authorities issuing them" is illustrated with simple, direct, situational humor. Two episodes involving domesticated animals come to mind. One is where he is chastised by the king for habitually arriving late at court. The king commands him to "come before the cock," an expression simply meaning very early in the morning, which Thanonchai fully understands, but he reduces it to its literal meaning in order to blunt the king's order with a comical act.

Sri Thanonchai habitually overslept. Often he attended court late. He was beginning to set a bad example for younger courtiers. One afternoon, King Jessada tired of his tardiness, ordered that the following day he was to 'come before the cock,' meaning very early in the morning.

The following morning, despite the King's admonition, the trickster overslept as usual. At court, the King became angry and resolved to issue the severest reprimand when the reprobate actually appeared.

Sri Thanonchai finally appeared in court during the early afternoon, leading by a string, to the amusement of everyone but the King, a fat and complacent rooster.” (Maenduan Tipaya 1991: 41).

Not only does he arrive even later the next day, but he shows up at court with a docile cock in tow, string tied around its neck. He had literally obeyed the king's order and could not be faulted. He is greeted by the king and court with laughter.

In a similar incident, Thanonchai was at a stage in his life where had succeeded in climbing up the social pyramid. He had rank, owned a house, some land, money and servants. Now he wanted a large plot of land. He approached the king with the request for more land that he would need if he were to marry and have children. His request was cleverly couched in the phrase, “just enough land for a cat to crawl and die in.”

One day, Sri Thanonchai petitioned the King for land. The King opined he enjoyed sufficiency. Sri Thanonchai persevered, claiming he needed more, particularly were he to marry and raise a family. He explained his requirements were actually very modest. He wanted merely enough land ‘for a cat to be able to crawl and die in.’

Amused, and expecting to award a paltry amount, the King acquiesced to his request.

Thereupon, Sri Thanonchai leashed a cat and proceeded to beat the wretched animal around Ayudhya. He claimed as his own land wherever the tormented cat crawled before the abused animal miaowed its last and finally expired.” (Maenduan Tipaya 1991: 41).

The king agreed, naively assuming that Thanonchai would stake out a claim for a very small parcel of land. This time, Thanonchai tied the string around his cat's neck, and took off running and hitting the animal with a stick until he completed outlining a huge plot, and the cat died on that spot, an act of animal cruelty. It is a funny story because it never happened, except in the storyteller's imagination and play on words. The humor here is cartoon-like, but funny only up to the point where the cat actually dies. Then the listener needs to ponder as to whether Thanonchai is a true comic or a born sadist. We let him off the hook here, knowing that he will go on to engage in other absurd acts. He is a beloved buffoon.

The representation of humor in Sri Thanonchai relies mainly on language use. Simple commands or innocent comments can be interpreted either straightforwardly or intentionally twisted to turn the meaning inside out. Thanonchai chooses the latter. In one of the most memorable episodes that perfectly illustrates the “patron-client” relationship between him and his superior, Sri Thanonchai had dropped most of the betel nuts from his master's betel nut box that he was carrying as he followed his master to court one day. The master sternly orders him to collect

everything that falls on the ground next time. The following morning, Sri Thanonchai collects everything on the path to the court, including garbage and animal feces and gives them to his exasperated boss. Stories such as ‘arriving before chicken’ (มาถึงก่อนไก่) mentioned earlier, ‘Tong Lang Tree/Golden House (เรือนทองแดง),’ and ‘the cause of fire’ (ต้นไฟ) are good examples of the latter category (see also Kanjanarat Wecharat [ปัญญาธิ์ตน วิเศษศาสตร์] 2525 B.E.: 150-156).

The most extreme depiction of Thanonchai's character appears in one of the earliest episodes in his life. Provoked to act in defiance, as he often is, he commits fratricide; he disembowels his younger brother who is left in his care. In this instance, sibling rivalry is also involved (see also ปัญญาธิ์ตน วิเศษศาสตร์ 2525 B.E.: 127-130). The younger brother is spoiled by a grandmother whose love is measured in the many snacks that she gives the infant. Thanonchai's jealousy is compounded by his unalloyed annoyance of having to babysit while, at the same time, occasions to play with age-mates beckon. As the story goes, his parents come home from the fields only to find that Thanonchai, whom we can imagine is no older than five or six, is not at all interested in keeping his brother clean. It has been a long-standing custom in Thai families for a disinterested youngster to take care of a toddler, especially when the parents are otherwise occupied. As young Thanonchai's parents leave the next morning to work in the rice fields, his mother issues a very stern order for him to bathe the baby brother from head to toe—“inside and out”—and, while he is at it, to leave the house spotless. Thanonchai's resistance—and subsequent defense of his action—arises from his literal adherence to the parents words, which, of course, they meant only in a figurative sense.

The original Thai phrase about cleaning his baby brother appears in the caption to the comic book frame below.

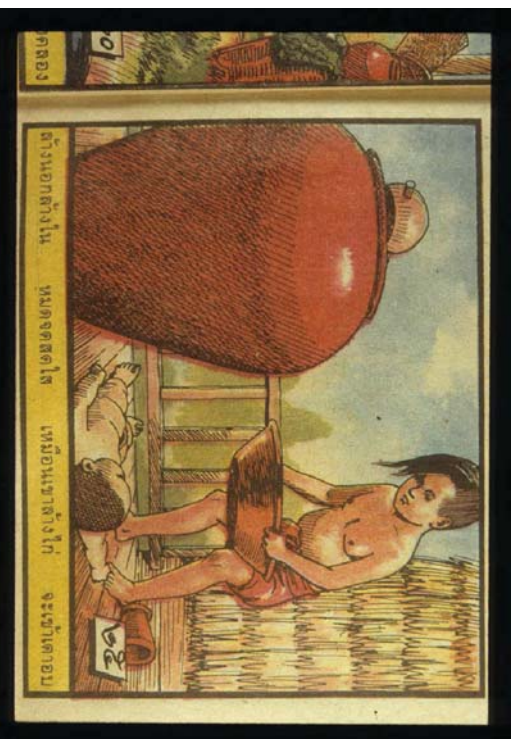


Fig. 1. Sri Thanonchai in the act of cleaning his brother “inside out”

lang nok, lang nai; mot cot sot sai
wash chest, wash inside; all point(s) fresh clear
meuan khaw lang kai; ja khaw taw op
like he wash chicken; will enter oven roast

“He washed the chest and the insides; everything was spotless – like he was cleaning a chicken to put in the oven to roast.”

This particular episode, while it has a comic aspect, is reminiscent of the Old Testament story of Cain and Abel, is karmic in its consequences. When Thanonchai's parents come home and find their baby is dead, and listen to Thanonchai's defense of his act of killing his baby brother, they throw him out of the house and let the neighbors know that he is an outcast. This part of the biography is not funny at all; it is horrific, and it colors our perception of who Thanonchai really is—his *sandan* in Thai terms. His act of ultimate defiance with a knife propels the story forward and prepares us for possibilities for his own suffering and death later on in life. Now that he has been exiled as a little boy, he really has to depend on his wit and powers of deception. His saga moves on as he finds a new home in a distant temple by convincing the unknowing but compassionate Abbot that he is a homeless orphan. He can only go up the social ladder, from novice to monk, and from there to servant of a lord, and finally to a titled member of the court. (We should note here that this episode does not appear in all collections of the tales, but seems to satisfy the rough-and-tumble action of a comic book.)

Another clearly amusing instance of his using words to win a bet comes from the Lao tale of “How Xiang Miang (Sri Thanonchai) Got his Name.”⁴ The story is that a couple of tea merchants, most likely from Northern Thailand, want to cross over to the other side of a river to sell their tea (*miang*). They approach Novice Thanonchai, who always has an all-knowing look about him, for his advice. “Can we cross (over) this river?” To understand the verbal trick that Thanonchai is about to play on the naïve tea merchants, we need to know that there are two definitions of the Lao/Thai word *khaam*: 1) to cross over, 2) to step over. He not only tells that they cannot *khaam*, he bets them that they cannot. If they cannot, they will have to pay him in tea; if they win the bet, he will need to pay them in silver.

The merchants cross the river and return. They cannot wait to collect the money they have won. However, Thanonchai tells them that, strictly speaking, they did not “lift up their leg to cross over,” they only waded through the river to get to the other side. Hence, they owe him all of their tea. To settle the disagreement, the two parties approach the king for arbitration. The king is convinced by Thanonchai's strict interpretation of the word *khaam* and yields to him; but the monarch goes on to decide that the trickster can have only “two baskets and five monk's alms bowls” full of tea, not all of it. Thanonchai returns with two enormous baskets and the five bowls, enough to take away all of the tea. When the king learns of this new trick, he invokes a rule for the proper conduct of the *sangha* and tells Thanonchai that he has violated the dictum that forbids monks from wagering bets. The king orders him to disrobe. Karma is at work and greed was the act that triggered it. So that is how he got the Lao name “Xiang Miang.”⁵

In this and other tales, the king is called in to settle disputes. We have seen

⁴ “Xiang” is a Lao title that means ‘young monk’ (Marcus: 314) or ‘former novice’ (Epstein: 25). “Miang” is ‘tea’, or ‘fermented tea leaves’ popular among the Burmese and Lanna Thai.

⁵ See the video clip on <http://vimeo.com/groups/lao/videos/3773244>

how this in fact has worked in Thai history. King Bhumibol used his charismatic authority to bring squabbling political parties together and to work out a solution. Thanonchai's king is kind up to a point, but at times, he would like to reduce or nullify the trickster's mischief-making. In one of the more inventive tales, the king employs the folk belief that if anyone eats the flesh of the vulture, their mental capacity will be reduced. So the king has his cook prepare a vulture curry and invites Thanonchai to eat it. The all-knowing trickster has been tricked, but the game with the king is not over. Thanonchai eats the vulture curry, waits for it to pass through his stool, collects it, dries, it and makes it into the shape of a pencil. He presents his hand-crafted pencil to the king to write with, but it does not leave a trace. Thanonchai then tells the king that he needs to wet the tip of the pencil with his tongue. The king innocently obliges, and upon tasting the pencil, realizes that he has failed in his attempt to dim the trickster's wit in the slightest.

The use of a live vulture appears in a cock-fighting episode where Thanonchai disguises a vulture, which he conditions by feeding it live chickens, as a fighting cock. When released into the betting circle, his "cock" instantly kills the opposing cock, and Thanonchai wins the contest—through deceit.

Several of the tales center their humor on a display of feces, as told in the episode involving Thanonchai's vulture-impregnated stool. Other tales go on to employ flatulence and the act of urinating to provoke laughter. In one, Thanonchai farts into an empty tureen, which he seals and invites the king to partake of in private. We know what happens when the king opens the bowl in his closed chambers and are expected to chuckle over his irritation. In another episode, the king retaliates by sending his courtesans with the order to defecate and urinate all over Thanonchai's house. When Thanonchai discovers that the women also farted, he beats them. In the presence of the king, they complain to him about Thanonchai's physical cruelty. Thanonchai's retort is that, strictly speaking, they went beyond his orders by farting. The king is forced to agree with Thanonchai's legalistic defense of his action and lets him off the hook.

These three named bodily functions seem not as humorous in a "polite" setting among Western audiences, whereas small children everywhere certainly find talk of "pee and poop" hilariously funny. The children in the American T.V. cartoons such as "South Park" clearly reflect childish pleasure in talking about bodily functions. Speaking as a Western adult, I don't readily find humor in them. I need to desensitize myself by tacitly entering the world of a child in order to find them funny. The explanation for unabashed talk of feces, urine, and flatulence in Southeast Asian culture is a bit different and even has religious implications. In her study of the Lao tales of *Seo Savat*, Constance Wilson points to several literary references to bodily excretions that "might possibly account for or at least lead to the appearance of certain motifs in Lao literature that one would not otherwise expect." (Wilson 2009: 121) She mentions that these elements have curative properties, and were used, to cite one example, in the magical medicine needed to heal the wound of *Lam* (Rama). Some Buddhist meditative practices call for focusing one's thoughts on the 'thirty-two parts of the body' (sweat, snot, entrails, etc.) as a means of controlling lust. In the tale of the "Three Happinesses," found in *Seo Savat*, there are several references to bodily functions. Wilson (2009) reports as follows.

Here, three brothers attempt to advance themselves through the study of magic. The eldest learns how to

produce feces in exceptionally large amounts. The middle brother discovers how to produce such a large amount of urine that it creates major floods. And the youngest brother finds out how to make flatulence sound melodious; indeed his flatulence becomes a source of beautiful music. The king hearing about this beautiful music requests that this particular brother visit him. Displaying his talent, the brother produces music that sounds as if it was coming from “several instruments together: beats of the drums of various sizes accompanied by the clinking of symbols, of sticks, of castanets, the soothing and plaintive sound of the *khaen*, the flute, and the clarinet.” (p. 122).

The tale goes on with the king employing the three brothers to defeat his enemies with their special talents. In victory, he rewards each with marriage to his daughters. Wilson mentions similar tales where the three bodily functions have a storytelling purpose. One with a religious motif deals with three novices who take care of an invalid monk: one in charge of his medicine, another his feces, still another his urine. The three achieve kingly status in their next life as Indra, Brahma, and *chakravartin* or ruler of the world.

Mention of bodily functions is not at all taboo in Southeast Asian culture. So it is not surprising to come across references in the verbal or pictorial arts. Even in modern times, this is true. I recall scenes from the movie, “The Scent of Green Papaya,” where the spoiled little boy in the household is shown peeing on the floor as a prank in one scene and in another raising a leg to release an audible fart, all to evoke laughter. In other Asian films, the buffoon is almost required to fart. As far back as the Indonesian *wayang*, Semar the clown farts copiously as a kind of gas warfare--all to the delight of the audience.

Of the three bodily functions, the act of urinating would seem to be the easiest to perform as an act of humor or humiliation, a function that can be done almost instantly on demand. The final test of wits between the king and Thanonchai takes place when the latter lay dying. He asks his wife, Srinuan, to request the king to come to his bedside to receive final words of wisdom from the trickster. Out of compassion, the king kindly comes to the bedside vigil. Thanonchai beckons for the king to bend down so that he can whisper into his royal ear. This requires absolute humiliation on the part of the king, that is, bowing down to his subject, but he accedes willingly. What is the trickster's dying advice? “A grilled fish should often be turned over, and bamboo shoots are best eaten when tender.” Infuriated, the king cannot let this final trick pass. Because he cannot order the execution of a dying man, he tells Thanonchai that he will have the court ladies piss on his ashes in one final act of retaliation. But, Thanonchai will have the final laugh even after death. He has his wife prepare *lantarn* wood for his cremation, knowing that it releases a toxin that causes itching when water is poured on its embers. At the conclusion of the cremation, the ladies, following the order of the king, arrive and urinate on the ashes only to have their private parts irritated by the rising ashes and fumes. Thanonchai, king of tricksters, is not defeated even in death. He has the last laugh.

Each community and epoch has taken their turn in adapting the Sri

Thanonchai tales to their own designs. The stories appear in comic book form, as well as a full-length novel, soap operas, and movies. More recently, the story has been made into an infantile, Disney-like cartoon for Thai T.V. viewing, and teachers stage little classroom plays based on them.

Oral in their origins, the tales are told in village settings and passed down from generation to generation and place to place. Even today, parents and preaching monks serve as a conduit of these humorous but value-laden vignettes. Local story-tellers take delight in recounting these reworked stories and illustrate their oral origins that others subsequently put to print as poetry or prose. Monks use Thanonchai tales to illustrate homilies and entertain their lay listeners. It is the special attraction of the figure of Thanonchai/Xiang Miang and their artistry as storytellers and artists that has fashioned Thanonchai into the enduring and entertaining character that he has become.

The most elegant transposition of the tales appear in the form of dazzling murals that adorn the interior of Wat Pathumwanaram, constructed during the reign of Rama IV to present to his queen, Her Majesty Queen Debsirindra. It was completed in 1857, but the queen died before it could be consecrated in her honor. Ten years later, it was dedicated in a huge celebration presided over by the king himself.

Wat Pathumwanaram is a royal temple of the third rank of *rachaworawihan*. It is located on a patch of land facing Rama I Road. In back, the land is adjacent to Saen Saeb or Bangkokapi Canal. Originally the area was covered with rice paddies and lotus ponds full of many varieties.⁶ According to Pranee Klamson and Chutima Chunhaca (1996: 145), “There were few households in the area, mostly Lan Chang [ethnic Lao] people, who were taken as captive population during the quelling of a rebellion led by Prince Anuwong of Vientiane, in B.E. 2368 (1825).” They originally resided in Vientiane but were resettled in the Pathumwan area by Rama III as a means of redistributing populations for defense and development purposes. Most of the monks residing at this temple are from Isan; they still form the majority. Rama IV, who originally established the temple as a retreat for the Dhammayitika sect, invited a Laotian monk from Champasak, Laos to be the very first abbot. Understandably a Lao community would prefer to have one of their own people preside over their religious affairs. It also made it easier to manage affairs and maintain the temple to have Lao *sanga* in charge. The principle image in the *wihan* is the cast image of Phra Serm, who is the counterpart of Phra Sai, the main image in the *ubosot*. A third image, Phra Saen, is situated in front and just below the Phra Serm figure. All three images were “significant Buddha images of the land of Lan Chang [Laos], and were brought to Thailand from Vientiane.” (Pranee and Chutima 1996: 150). In the final analysis, it would appear that the temple was in every respect a Lao cultural artifact, and somewhat incongruously, situated in the royal Thai capital. The inclusion of glorious murals of a very Lao tale can only add to that conclusion. Further investigation would be needed to support the notion that the Lao Abbot and his Lao devotees played a role in selecting the episodes that were to be depicted on the walls. Another question to be answered is why would King Mongkut permit or encourage the depiction of an exulted king who is bested by one of his lowly subjects—all as a gift to be seen by his queen, court, clergy, and subjects? I think it is a complement to Mongkut and evidence of his all-embracing intellect and wide interests to have sponsored the

⁶ Paintings of the different varieties of lotuses inside the chapel serve as a kind of biological record of the varieties that once grew in the environs.

project. A less secure monarch would not have allowed such a public display of humor at his expense, but Mongkut, as king, seems to have encouraged and enjoyed entertaining events, such as those that took place when the temple was finally consecrated. He clearly was not the naïve king shown in these murals as an object of chicanery.

We have earlier seen how Thanonchai's king was duped into inadvertently bowing low to trickster as he lay on his deathbed. In an even more public display of willing humiliation, we see in one of the murals the scene (Fig. 2) where the king allows himself to be tricked into descending into a chilly pond where he is at a lower, innately inferior position relative to Thanonchai and everyone else.



Fig. 2. The king is tricked into getting into the pond. (Mural from Wat Pathuwanaram)

The story is that the king challenges Thanonchai to see if he can trick him into getting into the pond. Thanonchai tells the king that he cannot trick him into the pond, but he can trick him out of it. Whereupon the king lowers himself in the pond and says to Thanonchai, “Now trick me out of it!” Thanonchai just laughs at the king and says, “Why should I? I already tricked you into getting in it!”

The temple murals paint Thanonchai in a very playful mode. In one scene he is seen selling a magical cow to a wealthy man after showing him that the animal's droppings contain silver coins—which he previously fed to it. He loves to engage in contests because it is a test of his wit and cunning. In a competition to guess the number of seeds in a watermelon, he overhears (Fig. 3) the answer by surreptitiously listening through an open window—of a foreign vessel no less.



Fig. 3. Sri Thanonchai hears the answer through an open window. (Wat Pathuwanaram)

The most playful scene (Fig. 4), which exhibits the talents of the mural painters to their fullest, depicts a diving contest arranged by the king. The king asks for each of the divers to find an egg at the bottom of the pond. With the exception of Thanonchai, all of the divers are lovely women of the court who have secretly been given an egg in advance. When they all come up from the water holding eggs above their heads, empty-handed Thanonchai, who will not allow himself to lose the contest, delightfully protests, “Well, how can I produce an egg, I am a cock!”



Fig. 4. The egg-diving contest. The swarthy-skinned Sri Thanonchai is seen at the right.

The Sri Thanonchai murals of Wat Pathumwanaram are a work of genius. Their watery scenes capture the natural setting of the temple surrounded originally by canals and lotus ponds. The images are not only beautifully executed in exquisite detail in one the earliest attempts at perspective influenced by the arrival of Westerners and imported goods, they also have been carefully chosen so as to tell the story of a low-born but ambitious Thai male of the period who succeeds in ascending the social ladder to become a member of the court. There are easily a hundred or more Thanonchai tales that might have been available at the time as themes for the murals, but the monk-artist and his assistants assiduously selected those that, humor aside, highlight the life cycle of a clever male peasant of a century or more ago. Upon close inspection, the murals are packed with details about customary behaviors, such as fortune telling, selling a child as a debt slave/servant, appropriate dress and postures, the role of betel in social exchanges, the royal court and courtesans, the advent of foreigners and their military paraphernalia, the act of serving as a novice, then as a teaching monk, contests of all kinds, and expressions of indolence and deception, architectural forms, and many more scenes and cultural details too numerous to enumerate here. They are a witness to the history of the time.

The American historian David Wyatt has written an instructive book entitled *Reading Thai Murals* that is worth considering when examining the Sri Thanonchai murals. We quote his summary statement here because it is too penetrating a lesson to pass up in this paper.

The murals on the walls of Thai temples are often pleasant to look at. At their best, they offer color and line and artistry. We cannot forget, however, that they are documents. They were created in particular times, usually by individuals. They bear the stamp of that time, and they usually bear the impress of that artist's skill and personality and the commitments he (or she) had to some particular set of causes and ideas.

Similarly, temple murals were shaped by the intentions and commitments of those who gave the money that maintained the artist(s), and the particular intentions they may have had to educate or inform those they assumed would for the next several generations be gazing upon those walls. They might have been expressing a common commitment of a whole community, or they might have been expressing a personal view of the direction in which they hoped to lead that community (p. 78).

Some summary thoughts of our own are in order. The Thai traditionally perceive all humans living in a hierarchical social structure based on merit (*bun*) or virtue (*kwamdi*) which can be accumulated from a past existence (Hanks 1972: 95-103). Based on one's own merit from their past life, people are born unequally. Thai social hierarchy is, however, not static. Since social life is a process, people can conceivably earn higher status or fall into a lower one according to the way in which they are able to accumulate merit or virtue. Thus, virtuous conduct is so important for both ordinary persons who want to become highly-respected officials and the king who wants to maintain his superior status. Virtuous conduct has become a source of power in an ideal Thai society. The story of Sri Thanonchai indeed represents the existence of the hierarchical social structure of traditional Thai society. That social status can change can be seen from the story. Sri Thanonchai can move up in social rank from time to time. What is so striking, however, is that Sri Thanonchai employs his cleverness as a tool to change his social position rather than sticking steadfastly to virtuous conduct and moral principles. Tricks of all sorts, especially in the use of language appear to be Sri Thanonchai's special source of power. The life of a monk, which he has tried, is too demanding of virtue for him and too restrictive considering his rascally temperament. The episodes in the story represent the drive for social status in Thailand and the venality involved even today. A social structure based on merit and virtue also leads to a patron-client system. In order to maintain their source of power and superior status, the one who has greater resources must give to the other who has fewer. On the other hand, peasants, for instance, must find ways to end their suffering and seek protection through a patron-client network. Ties and affiliations of all kinds cement social security (Hanks 1972: 99). This is also represented in Sri Thanonchai, as seen when his mother gives Sri Thanonchai to an old female vendor and when she later sells him to a master (*nai*). The nurturing mother and obliging son are seen most clearly in the Wat Pathumwanaram murals. No picture of Thanonchai's fratricide appears in the temple series. There Thanonchai is enshrined in a mostly charitable fashion. He comes across as clever but lazy—two traits that reinforce each other—yet an overall likable, even heroic chap. He and his king reside on those chapel walls as playful partners, the king more kind than cruel, Thanonchai ultimately funny and affectionate, especially towards his mother and wife. He loves his king, and we love the wily Sri Thanonchai.

The general cultural traits of Thai people and society as seen in the tales of Thanonchai include the following: 1) a hearty sense of humor; 2) singular love between mother and son, husband and wife; 3) belief in astrology and magic side-by-side with Buddhism to remove some of the uncertainty in life; 4) the temple as a fundamental center of learning; 5) the firm belief in the cause-and-effect influence of *karma*; 6) the role that ordinary servants play in urban society, and likewise the desirability of civil service as a respected profession (Kanjanaarat:109-114).

In the abstract to this paper, we raised the question of the translatability of the Tales of Sri Thanonchai into English. The work of Maenduan Tipaya certainly is very well done, as are some of the translations of Epstein. Still the translations cannot

begin to capture the word play of an oral rendition, which is more than half the fun in telling the tales, especially when embellished by the cadences and voice quality of a live storyteller. (See the References Internet link to the Lao storyteller.) Some of the simpler, situational humor, especially in the tales that involve animals and do not rely heavily on word play, can be carried over the face of the earth with the amusement kept intact. One episode that illustrates this is the tale of the king showing off his rare white elephant to Thanonchai in expectation that the latter's words of admiration would echo what everyone else told the king. Thanonchai replied, "In my view, your elephant has one flaw." "What is it?" asked the king. "Well, your elephant has big legs, big ears, big tusks, big toes, big everything. Except for his eyes; they are too small." The king was rendered speechless by the put-down. Come to think of it, elephants do have disproportionately small eyes! Now, isn't that funny?

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The Power of Humour in Redressing Social Imbalances: The Case of an I-san Comedy Film ^{*}

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Abstract

The content and ideology of films can provide insights into cultural and social issues. In this paper, the popular Thai comedy film, Yam Ya-So-Thon, is analyzed from a humour perspective to gain insights into power and control issues in Thai society. The film is produced and directed by people from I-san (the North-East of Thailand), an area which is traditionally viewed as inferior and backward by mainstream Thai society.

The humour in the film was analyzed using critical and semiotic approaches to identify the prevalent theories of humour. Most of the humour manifested the superiority and psychic release theories, with the incongruity theory being rarely evident.

The use of the superiority theory confirmed mainstream ideologies in Thailand which regard I-san as inferior to Thai people. Conversely, the psychic release theory was used both in highlighting sexuality issues and in ways which implicitly criticized certain aspects of Thai society such as monkhood.

The film can be viewed as an attempt by I-san people to redress power imbalance in Thai society, showing the potential for humour to aid the achievement of social goals.

Key words: humour, comedy film, I-san, power imbalance

Introduction

Humour is endemic to all society and culture (Simpson and Mayr 2010: 25) because humour is a form of interaction in human social life. As a social interaction, humour occurs whenever people laugh or smile. Therefore, humour can have an affect on people's thought and action. People affected by humour are storytellers, listeners and targets of humour. This effect occurs not only at an individual level, but also at a social level such as within or against a social group or a social institution.

These effects of humour in a social perspective are an interesting topic. Numerous research support that humour functions in social groups and society. Gary Fine and Michaela Soucey (2005) suggest that a joking culture serves to smooth group interaction, helps share affiliation, separates the group from outsiders, and secures the

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compliance group. Marjolein Hart (2007) studied humour in a social protest context, and urged that humour functions in the development of the collective identity of a social movement. Political protesters also use humour as a powerful communication tool to attack incumbents as a “weapon of the weak”.

In the above cases, positive humour functions to support a smooth social relationship, and facilitates the feeling of in-group belonging and further contributes to its development. In contrast, negative humour functions as a social relations abolishment tactic. However, there is no focus on humour functions acting in concert with positive and negative humour; instead, the emphasis appears to be on mutually-exclusive analysis. The author writes this paper to illustrate the function of humour in redressing social imbalance, through the relationships of the derived theory of humour, the superiority theory and the psychic release theory, applied with the incongruity theory. Moreover, the author relates humour to power, or, something that makes people laugh or smile (Ross 1998: 1) with the social resource of having control or influence over other people (Steele and Price 2008: 94). To demonstrate the social imbalance and redressing imbalance states that are related to the social power issue, three research questions were raised: ‘Who are the targets and the people laughing in the Yam Ya-so-thon film?’ ‘What are the functions of humour in the Yam Ya-so-thon film?’ and ‘How does humour redress social imbalance?’

Theory of Humour

The writer draws from the related fields of linguistics and psychology to analyze humour in this comedy film. Three sub-theories discussed are the incongruity theory, the superiority theory, and the psychic release theory. In the case of the Yam Ya-so-thon film, the writer used the superiority theory and the psychic release theory as main theories, and linked the psychic release theory to the incongruity theory. Consequently, the superiority theory and psychic release theory provided insights into the two states of exercise of power—balance and imbalance.

Superiority theory

Sometimes, the superiority theory is known as the degradation theory (Billig 2005: 38) because the superiority theory is the theory of mockery which assumes that people always laugh about a perceived inferior group, who is thought to be somehow lesser or lower than them. According to Thomas Hobbs, the first superiority theorist presenting his view on laughter as a part of a systematic account of human motive, “The passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others” (cited in Jaroenkiatboworn 2005). Likewise, Du Pré (quoted in Billig 2005: 39) and Ferguson and Ford (2008: 288) agree that humour is the outcome of a triumphant feeling about the infirmities or denigration of a person.

People feel good about themselves by way of comparison. This triumphant feeling is the result from the enhancement of self-esteem derived from downward social comparison to the deformed things in others, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. The targets of infirmity or denigration humour may be illiterate/absurd people (Morreall 1983, Hobbes 1996 cited in Ferguson and Ford

2008: 288), stupidity, clumsiness, moral and cultural defeat (Grunner 1997 cited in Ferguson and Ford 2008: 288), people perceived to have a lack of ability, people afflicted with misfortune, lower class people, and minorities.

In other words, people use humour to degrade the target who is perceived to be inferior. As Bain suggested, “Not in the physical effects alone, but in everything where a man can achieve a stroke of superiority, in surpassing or discomforting a rival is the disposition to laughter apparent” (cited in Jaroenkiatboworn 2005: 14). Therefore, humour can be used as a tool of repression and ridicule by the powerful (Simpson and Mayr 2010: 25-26) to stabilise and maintain the status quo—inequality and a hierarchical social structure.

Psychic release theory

The psychic release theory developed from and has its roots in psychology. Psychic release theorists explain the triggering of laughter as the sense of release from the treatment of being overcome (Ross 2003: 63). In this sense, humour is the result of repression in human life. When people are faced with repression, they release that repression through humour. (Jaroenkiatboworn 2005: 16). According to Freud, repression is the means by which unruly human nature is socially disciplined. The morality system of the Jewish and Catholic religions is the apparent standard of discipline. He urges that people who repress their desires and feelings to follow rigid standards and the serious rule of both religions tend to be emotionally abnormal (1908 cited in Yos Santasombat 2542: 48). The unconscious rebels against this discipline in dreams, in slips of the tongue, and through jokes. So, joking and humour can relieve the tensions between the world of ideas and daily life because they allows us to escape from the cognitive constraints impinged on us from a regimented social force (Billig 2005, Alexander 1996: 76).

Therefore, most humour involves breaking taboos—restriction that results from convention or tradition—and rule violation. The most common areas of humour in the psychic release theory are sex, filth, death, religion, government, family and marriage (Ross 2003: 65, 68, 70; Jaroenkiatboworn 2005: 16; Berger 1996:15).

In general, taboo or rule was established by the powerful in society, and functions to enforce their power or stabilize hierarchy. Breaking the rule/taboo means to resist or fight repression power. So, humour in the area of taboo or rule violation (such as sex humour, religious humour) can destroy hierarchical distance. Humour is the tool of the powerful to repress the powerless, however, humour is also used by the powerless to counter or resist the powerful. (Berger 1996: 15; Simpson and Mayr 2010: 25-26)

Incongruity theory

Incongruity, meaning not suitable in a particular situation, theory assumes that humour is created out of a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in a joke. Therefore, this theory focuses on the element of surprise (Ross 2003: 7), making people laugh through an unexpected result and not by an anticipated suitable action in a particular situation. According to Kant (1790), “Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (cited in Jaroenkiatboworn 2005: 18).

Incongruity humour induces laughter by dealing with an ambiguity which deliberately misleads people. First, the deliberate humour is carefully planned to induce people to make an outline of a plan which should always be in line with tradition, or schema, and then, the plan involves promptly breaking that schema exact in wording and timing (Ross 2003: 7-8).

In general, incongruity theory focuses on the structure/component of humour that is based on language use or incidents that contain an element of surprise. Incongruity humour does not seem to be involved with different social status like the superiority and psychic release theories do. Instead, the incongruity theory states that using incongruity in a story is a technique that allows the powerless to laugh at the powerful. So, we can apply the incongruity theory to study humour and power.

Research Method

Film as the subject of study

The writer studied humour through comedy films because film is an easily-accessed storage of humour. Many forms of humour can instantly be recollected for revision. Moreover, film is a mass medium that has a widespread impact, so it can be an effective tool to influence people in a society.

Yam Ya-so-thon was a popular comedy film that grossed about 100,000,000 Baht and spawned a successful sequel. Yam Ya-so-thon was released in 2005, and then Yam Ya-so-thon 2 debuted in 2009. Yam-Ya-so-thon is one of the few I-san films that were showed in leading movie theatres, include in Bangkok. Being an I-san film, Phetthai Wongkamlaio (Muum), producer and director, presented I-sanness in every part of this film. Since the name Yam is an I-san word and Yasothorn is a province in I-san, most of the actors attempted to present authentic I-san characters via speaking in the Thai I-san dialect, and dressing I-san-style. The film components also presented I-sanness by setting the film in a peasant community in I-san, using a Thai I-san soundtrack (with central Thai subtitles), and using colourful scenic backgrounds that reflected the image and taste of I-san.

Yam Ya-so-thon is a love story about two couples. The first couple are a farmer named “Yam” and an ugly female maid named “Juey” who becomes prettier after reconstructive surgery. The second couple are a poor handsome farmer named “Tong” and a millionaire’s niece named “Souy”. When Juey follows and takes care of Souy when she comes to meet Tong, Juey falls in love with Yam, Tong’s uncle. Contrary to Thailand tradition where women do not initiate flirting, she tries to flirt with Yam. Yam is very annoyed with Juey, but he finds that he actually loves Juey, after Juey leaves for Bangkok. Thong and Souy are prevented by Souy’s aunt to have a relationship. She sends Souy and Juey to Bangkok, and calls Souy back to Ya-so-thon to marry a millionaire, Yod-chay. Juey and Yam’s father obstruct this ceremony and help Souy marry Thong. Juey and Yam also get married.

In the sequel, Yam Ya-so-thon 2, Yam and Juey are still the leading characters. Thong and Souy are replaced by another couple, Thanu and Wair. Yam becomes the village headman. Yam tries to protect his beautiful daughter (Wair) from the new deputy (Thanu) who flirts with her, but Juey and Kam-phan (Yam and Juey’s son) want them to be successful in love. After Wair accepts Thanu, he is transferred to

a new position in his hometown, Bangkok. But, after Yam tells him about Weir's pregnancy, Thanu returns to Ya-so-thon to live with Wair, and helps Yam fight a local robber.

Procedure

To study the power issue in humour via film analysis, films were selected based on popularity because the writer believed that high ticket sales meant that many Thai people accepted a movie, and it may have an important function in Thai society. Therefore, the comedy films that were financially successful in 2009 were candidates for research. From those popular films, the writer wanted to choose a film that reflected the various dimensions of power in humour. Yam-Ya-so-thon was a popular Thai comedy film that matched the criteria. This comedy film was produced by I-san people, generally considered to be an inferior group of Thai people. So, this film appeared to be a suitable subject that could provide insights into the issues of power between lower- and higher-ranked people from an inferior status perspective.

Along with the film selection process, the writer reviewed relevant literature and found that theories of humour, especially the superiority and psychic release theories, were proper for this study. The funny scenes in this movie contained a plethora of examples of these theories involved with power issues; this led to the selection of this film. Then, the writer watched Yam Ya-so-thon and Yam Ya-so-thon 2 several times to catalogue scenes that presented humour among differently-ranked people. Selected scenes were grouped based on the forms of humour. Each form of humour was analyzed to identify the functions of the humour. Finally, such forms and functions of humour were interpreted based on a perspective of theories of humour.

Data analysis

The process of analysing started with finding the scenes that contained a sense of humour. The writer considered each such scene as a humour interaction, so each scene was analysed in terms of the social status of Yam Ya-so-thon characters. Humorous scenes of different social status characters were addressed and grouped. Then, the writer illustrated the different forms of humour in different groups. Finally, the writer explained how each form of humour related to power in society.

Laughter and Humour Targets in Yam Ya-so-thon

Yam Ya-so-thon humour was analysed based on social status. The funny scenes presented interactions between people of different social status: higher position and lower position. The humour scenes were likely to contain two kinds of interaction – higher-ranked people laughing at lower-ranked people, and vice versa. The writer used relativism to define who was lower or higher. For example, the writer judged that I-san people enjoyed a higher position when they were compared to unusual persons—deformed persons, homosexuals, mentally ill—while these same I-san people occupied a lower status when compared with mainstream Thai people.

Higher-ranked laughs at the lower-ranked

Using relativism to consider humour in the form of higher-ranked people laughing at the lower-ranked, the writer found two pairs of humour interaction: Bangkokians/Thais laughing about I-san characters, and I-san/Thai people laughing about unusual characters.

This film showed over all of Thailand, both in the mainstream ideology context and in the perspective of the filmmakers, that I-san are backward. Allowing Thais and Bangkokians to laugh about the backward I-san figures is an important aspect of gaining a big laugh. Backward I-san figures that were ridiculed are:

1. Peasants. Clumsy people from peasant society lost in the big city are a classic comedy story in many films as well as in Yam Ya-so-thon. Humour occurs when viewers laugh at the clumsiness of I-san people: Yam and Thong don't understand why Bangkokians call a traffic signal Fai-Dang (red light) even when the red signal turns green, and Yam and Thong can't communicate with a western tourist in Bangkok.



Figure 1. Yam and Thong use body gesture to communicate instead of speaking English.

2. I-san physical features. The uniqueness of I-san facial and physical features—a flat nose and a dark skin tone—is a popular target to create laughter as an important part of Yam Ya-so-thon's funny scenes. For example, Juey told Yam, “Don't be angry, otherwise your bridge of nose will be flatter”, Thanu said to Yam, “Be careful, if the dog bites your nose, you will breathe by gum (mouth) instead”, and Joey made fun of her own dark skin.

As the I-san owned the production rights to the film, the film maker did not allow other people only to laugh about I-san people. By comparison, the lower-ranked people that I-san people persuaded all Thais to laugh at were unusual. These unusual people that were the targets of Yam Ya-so-thon humour can be categorized into four groups:

1. Deformed body group. In Yam Ya-so-thon, there were always comical situations that prompted laughter about physically-challenged people—cross-eyed, lame, and abnormal—occupying a lower position. Many conversations and scripts in the film reaffirmed those unusual things as funny things.



Figure 2.

Cross-eyed seller: “How many bags of coffee do you want?”

Yam: “What is she looking at?”



Figure 3. Two lame lovers with a risk of falling in the canal together.



Figure 4. Yam Ya-so-thorn presented this moment as a haunting house scene.

2. Lack of knowledge group. Knowledge is a common attribute that makes an obvious difference. This salient distinction allows people to make a comedy about the knowledge issue. People with a lack of knowledge are in the lower position when compared with other groups, so the Yam Ya-so-thon film makes people laugh about illiteracy when a character in the film cannot remember and call out the Thai alphabet.

Moreover, this lack of knowledge characterization applies to people who think they are better off than they actual are (Ferguson and Ford 2008), such as the local millionaire character (Madam Dok-Tor) who tried to be high-society person by speaking English, but she could only speak basic English with a poor English accent. Comedy scenes presented that she never spoke a whole English sentence, and instead spoke in Thai with an English word inserted, such as “Chan-ja-song-tur-pai-yu-kub-my friend-tee krung-thep”.

3. Sex deviance group. Both Yam Ya-so-thon and Yam Ya-so-thon 2 made comedic reference to gays and hermaphrodite as lesser people. The film reinforced an image that homosexuality is negative and wrong, and that all homosexual characters are odd. Two gays are depicted as dwarfs, and they always finish each other’s sentences. One hermaphrodite with a strange taste in attire is presented wearing her

flowery blouses with different flowery pants, wearing very bold make up, and having a disgusting personality.

Not only their appearance, but also behavioural deviances were focused on via homosexual characters. For example, they were portrayed as deviants who were happy to be polygamous, engage in licentious behaviour, prefer sadist sexual behaviour, or act clumsily and foolishly. This was reinforced by the film portrayal of sex in a temple toilet.



Figure 5.
Single deviant with two lovers:
“This is what I want.”

Figure 6. The village headman accosts
the deviants: “Why do you have sex in
the temple toilet?”

4. Stupid people group. Stupid people are lower than normal I-san people. Many gags in Yam Ya-so-thorn deal with people who have stupid characteristics such as awkwardness, clumsiness, tactless and absentmindedness. This slapstick humour in Yam Ya-so-thorn obtains laughs from the ‘fall down’ scenes. For example, Yam falls down on the paddy field when he rushes to interrupt a romantic conversation between his daughter and the deputy, Yam kicks Juey down the lotus pond after she asks Yam to swim to pick a lotus, Yam takes a false step up a ladder because he is angry with his wife for cheering up Wair to be in love with Thanu, Juey hits a hanging lamp, and Thong and Souy enjoy dancing until they fall down on the stage.

Dull or absentminded characters who aren’t acting in the expected proper way are lower persons to make jokes at. For example, Yam can’t burn his son’s gadgets because he forgets to pour some kerosene, a servant places a broom in Thanu’s car in order to help him carry a bag, two bodyguards block the backlit movie view during the temple festival when they want to locate enemies, and Yam asks Juey to plough the field instead of using a buffalo.



Figure 7.
Ploughing the field

Lower-ranked laughs at the higher-ranked

Another kind of humour interaction is the lower-ranked people laughing at higher-ranked people. Through analysing the I-san comedy film to identify what the I-san film maker (on behalf of I-san people) makes fun of, the writer found two kinds of humour interaction: I-san people and the Thai middle class, and I-san people and high-ranking persons.

Humour interactions between I-san people and the Thai middle class were indirectly presented via the taboo concept. Taboos are things that the middle class feels more sensitive to speak about; thus, taboos were prohibited in the public sphere more by the middle class than by the lower class. Taboo is held as a middle class value in terms of unpleasantness, shamefulness, embarrassment, or disgust. To laugh at the prohibited areas of taboo is to laugh at the middle class. Some sensitive areas of taboo in Yam Ya-so-thorn are:

1. Sexuality. The main taboo in Thai mainstream culture is sexuality. The sexuality issue is the most frequently visited area of humour in this film. The film scripts always use strong vulgar language and obscene words/pictures both directly and by way of metaphor, and present many of the love scenes and excreta issues in funny ways. For example, Juey makes the first sex offer even though she is a woman, Thong and Souy engage in continuous kissing until they fall in the water, and Juey catches Yam's organ and thinks it is a catfish.



Figure 8. Yam is scared when Juey desires him.



Figure 9.
Juey: "Gotcha. I've got the catfish."
Yam: Damn! That's mine.
Release it!

2. Death. In Thai society, although death is not a subject for discussion, in a middle class sense, any discussion of death should involve respect and politeness. The Yam Ya-so-thorn film breaks this rule by linking death with faeces when the dead body of Yam's father is shown together with a cesspool of faeces in an appalling scene where normally an audience would be sad.



Figure 10.
Death and faeces
depicted together.

3. Filth. Dirty or disgusting things that cannot normally be mentioned under local customs are plentiful in this comedy film. Yam Ya-so-thon treats faecal matter and flatulence as humour gags. This film depicts an ugly faecal scene when they want to show that Yam's father passed away because of cholera. Furthermore, it illustrates metaphors about faecal matter by Yam saying to Thong's girlfriend, "Don't be worried that Thong will forget you, he will think of you even when he defecates", and Yod-chay telling his parent, "I can't stop missing Souy, she is still in my mind even when I fart".

They also make a pun by employing some wordplay about the word faecal. Thai impolite language calls faecal matter 'kee'. But, the Thai term 'kee-len' (len means play) is playful. In the film script, Yam said "Yes, I'm 'kee-len' and sometime I'm 'len-kee' (play with faecal matter)."

The second way to laugh at the higher-ranked is laughing at high-ranking persons. In the Yam Ya-so-thon context, high-ranking persons that I-san people (the film maker) attempt to persuade us to laugh at are a policeman, a monk, a deputy officer and the provincial governor. For example, a Buddhist monk had to step in the mud along a paddy field to give a letter to Yam and Thon, a policeman frightens a tricycle taxi driver and imposes on him a fine, the welcoming verse libre to new government officers entreats "we hope you won't be corrupt", and the provincial governor is seen knitting at his home.



Figure 11.
Monk: "So boring ! But can't
refuse because I've an obligation
as a senior monk to honour the
layman's request"



Figure 12. Police yells to a driver:
"You may know cars drive fast; you should
ride more rapidly to drive in the right side.
And, you load the overweight, too" (in
reference to the fat passenger).



Figure 13.
Villager to government official:
“Don’t be corrupt.”

Function of Humour: What happens when the powerful laughs at the powerless, and vice versa?

In a prior section, the writer illustrates who is involved in humour interactions, and shows that humour or funny scenes were constructed from interaction between people in different social positions—higher and lower. The two kinds of humour interaction (the higher and the lower laughing at each other) are very interesting because they link to the focus of this paper—the power issue.

Generally, higher-position people are powerful while lower position people are powerless. The Yam Ya-so-thon film displays the way in which the powerful is able to laugh at the powerless; conversely, the powerless is also able to laugh at the powerful. So, in the context of laughter or humour, both the powerful and powerless can laugh at each other. However, the writer doesn’t mean that they both laugh at each other in the same way. There are different ways of laughing between these power relationships.

Repression Laughter

Humour in the form of the powerful laughing at the powerless occurs when Thais/Bangkokians laugh at I-san people and I-san people/Thais laugh at unusual people. In the first case, Thais/Bangkokians laugh at awkward physical attributes such as clumsiness and funny facial figure/skin tone of the I-san people. In the second case as well, I-san people and Thais laugh at the weaknesses of the lower position people—lameness, dullness, homosexual preference, and stupidity. In both cases, the powerful laugh at painful aspects of the powerless. The type of humour interaction that the powerful aim at the powerless is degradation humour or ridicule. The effect of this humour is that I-san people and unusual people are repressed. In a way, this type of humour parallels the superiority theory. Thais/Bangkokians and I-San people/Thais utilise superiority laughter in the way that they repress people who have a lower position in society. Repression humour in Yam Ya-so-thon comedy scenes reconfirms the lower position of the I-san and disabled people, and also reconfirms the higher position of Thais, Bangkokians, and I-san people (when compared with unusual people).

We can imply that repression is the function of humour when the superior use their stronger power over the inferior to confirm their higher position in a social structure. This type of humour is supportive of exercising power through a downward direction from high to low.

Humour in Yam Ya-so-thon shows not only that the powerful laughs at the powerless, but that the powerless also laughs at the powerful. For example, I-san people (such as the film maker) laugh at the middle class and high-ranking persons. The ways I-San people laugh at middle class and high-ranking persons are varied. As the powerless, the I-san people don't laugh directly, but they use two techniques to make laughter powerful—psychic release laughter and incongruity laughter.

1. Psychic release laughter. Psychic release laughing was used to counter the laughing middle class and high-ranking persons in Yam Ya-so-thon. To laugh at the middle class, the middle class was linked to taboo, because taboo issues were more important to the middle class than the lower class. Then, the lower class made jokes about several areas of taboo that are sensitive for the middle class, such as talking about death with an disrespectful sense, and dealing with vulgar sexuality metaphors. So, breaking the middle class taboo amounted to negative laughter targeted at the middle class. To laugh at high-ranking persons, Yam Ya-so-thon linked Buddhist monks and police to taboo. A Buddhist monk was linked to dirt when he walked along a muddy paddy field. The scene of the stained legs and robe of the monk was designed to elicit laughter by breaking the normal expectation of the monk's usual cleanliness. The second target, the police, was linked to dishonest behaviour. The policeman who tried to find a silly mistake by the unlucky tricycle taxi driver was laughed at, because the I-san film maker broke a taboo by exposing the normally hidden dishonourable behaviour of police.

2. Incongruity laughter. Another technique for laughing at high-ranking persons is incongruity laughter. Breaking a schema by creating a conflict between expected things and occurring things is a clever technique to laugh at people who exercise more power. Many scenes in Yam Ya-so-thon start with the traditional state or condition of power and pleasure, but end in failure for the powerful. First, in the I-san welcoming ceremony (Bai-sri-su-kwan) scene, the master of ceremony starts verse libre in his praise of the auspicious meaning of their names to a new deputy and a new agriculture officer, but then in a surprising change of the text libre prohibits the new government officers from engaging in corruption with local people. Second, the film projects a scene that presents Thanu's father as a highly-positioned person because he is the provincial governor who has more power than even the Yam village headman, but that scene ends with the provincial governor in the posture of knitting—an apparent lowly activity that should be beneath the dignity of a governor.

Both psychic release and incongruity laughter are used by the powerless to laugh at the powerful. The powerless laughs at the powerful to the same extent that the powerful laughs at the powerless. Highly-positioned people who should normally be revered through glorification, respect, and obedience in the real world were outspokenly ridiculed with critique or blasphemy through the use of humour. This illustrates the way the powerless resist and lessen the powerful. The effect of this kind of laughing is that the powerful are discredited.

Because the powerless use humour against the powerful as in the Yam Ya-so-thon film, resistance is an important function of humour when the powerful are lessened by the powerless. Thus, resistance humour supports a power exercising model oriented in an upward direction from low to high.

Humour in redressing social imbalance

Yam Ya-so-thon reflects that humour has two functions: repression and resistance. Repression humour allows the powerful to exercise a downward power direction. They exercise their power to repress the lower classes. Repression humour supports this state of power that leads to social inequality. The writer doesn't claim that Yam Ya-so-thon created the social structure or constructed inequality in Thai society, but that humour makes inequality salient and highlights a difference between laughter and the humour target. Humour reproduces social inequality; rectifying this may help stabilise social hierarchy.

Social inequality means that a state of imbalance can exist or occur in society. If humour reproduces and supports this inequality, humour becomes an important mechanism to reconfirm imbalance. Therefore, repression humour is the tool to stabilise social imbalance.

In the opposite way, resistance humour allows the powerless to use an upward movement of power, even though the Thai powerless are in an hierarchical social structure where the expectation is that the lower class should consent to and not go against the powerful. Humour is a practical tool used by the powerless to respond to and counter that repression. Inequality that is reproduced by humour repression weakens, and then a state of balance occurs. Thus, resistance humour functions to lessen social imbalance.

Therefore, the society in which the powerful engage in repression laughter and the powerless use resistance humour is not in an imbalanced state. Imbalance that is reproduced by repression humour is countered and solved by resistance humour. This is the reason why humour has a power to redress social imbalance.

Discussion

Malfunctions of humour are a popular topic in critical humour studies. Humour is not considered to be only the funny things that make people happy, but also a strategy that hurts humour targets (Michael Billig 2005, Ferguson and Ford 2008, and Simpson and Mayr 2010). The writer's study reconfirms this proposition. Moreover, the superiority and psychic release theories chosen to explain the relationship between humour and power in this paper is in agreement with Mark Ferguson and Thomas Ford's (2008) opinion that those theories are the correct theories to explain the "antagonistic social relationship" between humour teller and humour target.

The malfunction of humour was separately analyzed by many researchers. The effect of hostile or negative humour was reconfirmed several times; Lefcourt (2001) and Berger (1996) urge that aggressive humour "separates, divides, and excludes" people. However, the superiority or aggressive humour has only bad functions if we analyse it by isolating it from another kind of humour, the psychic release humour. In a real situation, people do not use the superiority humour alone. Nobody endures degrading laughter at all times. Psychic release is the tool that the powerless people use along with the superiority theory. Likewise, Yam Ya-so-thon presented superiority humour and psychic release humour in unison. While I-san people were

laughed at their figures and clumsiness, they in turn target and laugh at a failure of police and provincial governor.

People generally use both kinds of humour in their daily life, and psychic release humour is able to shield pain from superiority humour. So the malfunction of the superiority humour can not absolutely affect people.

Conclusion

Humour in the Yam Ya-so-thon film is a valid example of how to use humour as a powerful tool to redress social imbalance. There are two kinds of laughter in Yam Ya-so-thon: the higher class laughs at the lower class, and the lower laughs at the higher. The high position persons/characters are Thais, Bangkokians, I-San people (if compared with unusual people), the middle class, and high-ranking persons. The low position persons/characters are I-san people (if compared with Thai people), deformed people, homosexuals, ignorant people and stupid people. Humour in Yam Ya-so-thon has two main functions—Repression and Resistance. The high positioned (powerful) represses the lower-class (powerless) through superiority humour, and the lower classes resist against the powerful through psychic release and incongruity humour.

Two functions of humour lead to the power issue. Repression humour leads to an imbalanced state of power because repression humour reproduces social inequality. Whereas, resistance humour helps the lower ranks respond to that inequality. According to the two functions of humour, this study finds that humour is able to redress social imbalance.

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Queer Representations and Thai laughter: *The Iron Ladies* (2000)

Oradol Kaewprasert*

Abstract

In the year 2000 Yongyoot Thongkongtoon decided to make a Thai queer film, *The Iron Ladies*. The film was loosely based on the real lives of the 1996 Thai national champion male volleyball team. In the film the team consists mostly of queer players: one gay, six *kathoei*¹ and a single straight male. The film turned out to be enormously successful, and became Thailand's second highest grossing Thai film of the year. *The Iron Ladies*, through its comedy genre, reflects a range of attitudes, desires and characterizations from masculinity to femininity, and the sensitivity of the people affected. This paper is divided into two sections. First, film comedy theory is used to examine the film, with the intention of creating a multiple approach understanding of the representations of sexual minorities in Thailand. Second, the discussion moves on to the film's cultural language and socio-political viewpoint, to present the characters' performances.

Queer Representations and Thai laughter: *The Iron Ladies* (2000)

In the year 2000 Yongyoot Thongkongtoon decided to make a Thai queer film, *The Iron Ladies*. The film was loosely based on the real lives of the 1996 Thai national champion male volleyball team. In the film the team consists mostly of queer players: one gay, six *kathoei* and a single straight male. The biographical film therefore represents marginal characters, their gender identities and lifestyles.

The film turned out to be enormously successful, and became Thailand's second highest grossing Thai film of the year. Moreover, the film won four awards at the Thailand National Film Association Awards (the Suphannahong Award).² The local box-office and critical success of *The Iron Ladies* astonished almost everyone.

The film, with its unique perception of the diversity of Thai genders, seems also to have had widespread appeal outwith the borders of Thailand. *The Iron Ladies* topped the Hong Kong box office on its release, and then became a phenomenal hit in many Asian countries like Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, as well as those where homosexuality is under religious or legal restriction like Malaysia and Singapore.

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¹ Sometimes, both terms *kathoei* and 'gay' are used for any male whose gender and sexual identities do not fit the male-female gender binary. In *The Iron Ladies*, masculine gay males or male-to-female transgendered people (or *kathoei* in the contemporary context) are both sometimes called *kathoei* or gay.

² The film won Best Picture, Best Makeup and Best Song categories. Furthermore, Chaicharn Nimpulsawasdi won a best supporting actor award for his queer camp character, Jung.

Later *The Iron Ladies* was sold to more than twenty-seven countries.³ The film became a favourite at gay and lesbian film festivals around the world.⁴

Contrary to the perception of *The Iron Ladies* in its region or at gay and lesbian Film Festivals worldwide, general press reviews from sources in Western countries, specifically the US *New York Times*, and the UK-based BBC and *Sight and Sound*,⁵ show that the film was not well received by those writers. *The Iron Ladies* was accused of representing stereotypical screaming queens. The different reactions to the film by these journalists clearly reflect different perceptions of gender and sexualities, depending on socio-cultural context.

Given that sexuality and gender discourses change over time and between socio-cultural contexts, the immensely well-received *The Iron Ladies* shed light on the changes in Thai queer film history. *The Iron Ladies*, through its comedy genre, reflects a range of attitudes, desires and characterizations from masculinity to femininity, and the sensitivity of the people affected. This paper is divided into two sections. First, film comedy theory is therefore used to examine the film, with the intention of creating a multiple approach understanding of the representations of sexual minorities in Thailand. Second, the discussion moves on to the film's cultural language and socio-political viewpoint, to present the characters' performances.

The film's use of the comedy genre also makes it easier to touch on queer issues. Richard Dyer has argued that popular comedy in particular has a tendency to make use of the contradictory nature of things and attitudes, precisely because it aims to be popular, to appeal to different people with different attitudes.⁶ Nichole Matthews adds that comedy can also be used to break principle structures of gender, sexuality and so on. According to her, the genre provides temporary liberation from the rigidities of social standards.⁷ She further asserts that parody of gender as performance has been used to create political meaning in popular comedy films as it challenges the concept of fixed and stable gender.⁸ Additionally, Andrew Horton calls film comedy a "capitalistic product" in the film industry.⁹ *The Iron Ladies* has proved that comedy can reach people from different backgrounds in terms of locale, and touch on aspects of lives that are difficult, conflicting and stressful. The concept also finds support in Simon Critchley's statement that humour produces a change of situation from repression to humorous pleasure.¹⁰

Approaching queer issues through comedy genre also makes it easier to present the characters' identity as transformable. As Matthews observes, personal

³ "Iron Ladies are coming to town," *Hamburger* [Thai monthly magazine] Nov. 2002: 30.

⁴ The film won the Audience Award for Best Feature at the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and the New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. It was voted most popular movie at Sydney's Mardi Gras Film Festival.

⁵ Stephen Holden, "The Iron Ladies," *The New York Times on the Web* n.d., 20 March 2005 <http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/movie.html?v_id=220944>; Michael Thomson, "Iron Ladies," 16 July 2001, 20 Mar. 2005 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2001/07/16/the_iron_ladies_2001_review.shtml>; José Arroyo, "The Iron Ladies," *Sight and Sound* 11 (2001): 45 - 46.

⁶ Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Films* (London: Routledge, 1990) 111.

⁷ Nichole Matthews, *Comic Politics: Gender in Hollywood Comedy after the New Right* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 52.

⁸ Matthews 66, p. 71.

⁹ Andrew Horton, Introduction. *Comedy/ Cinema/ Theory*. ed. Andrew Horton. (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p. 15.

¹⁰ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 10.

transformation, queer or non-queer, has been used to create humour in many popular comedy films. The examples seem endless, including *Tootsie* (1982), *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993), *The Mask* (1994), *The Nutty Professor* (1996), *Shaggy dog* (2006) and so forth.

Furthermore, Alexander Doty also draws attention to queerness and comedy by saying, “comedy is basically queer.” He explains that the genre promotes “rule-breaking and risk-taking” in mainstream practice,¹¹ as illustrated in *The Iron Ladies* from the very beginning of the film.

The opening credits of *The Iron Ladies*, using baby-faced photographs of the cast and crew, retouched as comic animated bodies changing clothes from male to female and female to male accompanied by a hilarious musical score, indicate that what the audiences are about to see is a comedy, and that its queerness will be approached in a lightweight fashion, not as serious political expression. Introducing cast and crew in the same manner shows that the director does not want the audiences to laugh at his *kathoei* characters but to laugh with them, due to the characters’ exuberant camp performance.

Later, in the end credits Yongyoot honours the real “Iron Ladies.” After the film ends, he respectfully runs the names of the real team prior to his film’s cast and crew. The real “ladies” names are then accompanied by footage of the real team’s glory days, and themselves as persons, images the Thai audiences are longing to re-experience. In terms of gender discourses, the image of the real team also helps audiences in different contexts or times understand how Thai *kathoei* are given more liberty to express themselves in their home country. As Sean Axmaker concludes in his review: “Outrageous – until the credits roll and we get an eye-opening glimpse of the members of the real-life volleyball team. Suddenly these guys don’t seem like such an exaggeration after all . . . at least in some respects.”¹²

Seeing the camp personalities of the real team and the reactions of others to them in the footage makes the audiences realize that after all the film characters are not much more exaggerated than real *kathoei* in Thai society. Of note here are the comments of the real “ladies” about the film. According to their interviews with a Thai fortnightly magazine, *Phaphayon Banteng*, the real “ladies” all like the film characters and are pleased that the film confers their former fame and reorganization back on them. Whether the film characters are outrageous or not, these statements should be taken into account. Danuphon Nueangchang, or Mon in the film, suggests that a person who is familiar with her would acknowledge that her actual personality is like her film character, except that in the film her impersonation is too demure. Pheraphong Duangsant, or Wit (the gay player) in the film, also states that his imitated role is rather too quiet. His actual personality is more exuberant than that.¹³

In *The Iron Ladies*, the male actors remain a highly eye-catching group in terms of their queer camp representation, behaviour, makeup and hairstyles. These elements create a sense of humorousness. The positive reception of the film by

¹¹ Alexander Doty, “Queerness, Comedy and the Women,” *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 33-4.

¹² Sean Axmaker, “‘Iron Ladies’ is sloppy, shrill, silly and clichéd, yet oddly winning,” *Seattle Post Intelligencer on the Web* 5 Oct. 2001, 7 Feb. 2004 <http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/movies/41434_ironladies05q.shtml>.

¹³ “The Real Iron Ladies VS. the imitated ones, gossiping on who is who,” *Phaphayon Banteng* [Thai fortnightly magazine] 13 - 19 April 2000: 53.

particular audience groups, including the real “ladies,” as further discussed below, proves that what is generated by what the film labels as “a camp” is not so much laughter but enjoyment: as Susan Sontag puts it, “Camp is a tender feeling.”¹⁴ Besides creating ‘tender feelings,’ these characterizations produce and reproduce cultural representations and demonstrate how a diversity of gender identities of both self and other are represented.

Later, the film uses a mixture of surprise and anticipation to create humour.¹⁵ When the former macho-egoistic players refuse to be included in a *kathoei* team, coach Bee asks Jung if she has any friends that are good at the game. Chai raises the question, “Isn’t he/she *kathoei* like you?” Besides answering Chai on the gendered question, Jung responds, “Are you crazy, he is a soldier.” It turns out that Jung’s military friend, Nong is a well-built *kathoei* who tries very hard to bring his fantasy into reality. Nong’s hyperfeminine character contradicts the stereotype of a male in a military career and differentiates him from the officialdom around him. The career stereotype perceived as formal, rule conforming and status aware, strongly contradicts Nong’s camp character. His exaggerated performance generates the humor that Simon Critchley suggests lies between the expectation and actuality. Throughout, the film provides its audiences with an endless series of jokes, gags and jests.

At the same time, jokes, gags and humour in the film show that comedy allows characters to express their diverse personalities within a relaxed binary. The various characters of *The Iron Ladies* provide what Doty calls “camp’s tone.” They are represented in combinations of irony, affection, seriousness and playfulness.¹⁶ Beyond local geography, in other places where transgender identities have not played a significant role in public and popular culture, the outrageous feminine caricatures of *The Iron Ladies* could be read from a different perspective.

The director projects the characters as being as different in personality as it is possible to be. The first example is the case of Mon, a *kathoei* player who has an abusive father. The film dramatizes Mon’s traumatic background as responsible for creating her repressed character. Throughout the film, Mon struggles to overcome her resentment and alienation. Her solemnity is time and again lightened by her lively ‘queenie’ buddy, Jung. Jung accesses what Doty describes as camp’s mode by means of her exaggerated ‘bitchy’ performance and sharp-tongued expressions.¹⁷ Her character provides the audiences with an inexhaustible range of queer camp representation every time she appears on the screen. Her camp demonstration and hilarity serve to reduce the seriousness of Mon’s character each time they appear together.

Contrary to Mon’s family, Jung and her parents provide a case study in the representation of identity as it relates to gender and humour. On this side, the film characterizes Jung’s parents with high spirits, as accepting and understanding. They not only accept Jung as she is but protect her from others who detest her. Additionally, Jung’s dad sometimes acts outside the masculine realm as he is seen in one scene with his face masked with moisturiser, his eyes covered with pieces of cucumber, and his head wrapped with a towel in his wife’s beauty salon. Jung’s

¹⁴ Susan Sontag, “Note on Camp,” *Against Interpretation* [1967] (London: Vintage, 1967), p. 288.

¹⁵ Horton, p. 6.

¹⁶ Doty, p. 335.

¹⁷ Doty, p. 335.

parents therefore break the typical unaccepting parental attitudes projected in a number of queer films, such as Man-Shih Yonfan's *Bishonen* (1998), *Boy Don't Cry* (1999) or the Oscar acclaimed, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). According to Jung's and Mon's experiences and backgrounds, the film argues that gender identities are not constructed by early childhood, but personalities and attitudes are.

Afterwards, *The Iron Ladies* introduces a masculine gay player, Wit, with a scene of his engagement ceremony. The ceremony, costume, props and characters with Chinese characteristics vividly remind the audiences of the wedding scene in Ang Lee's *Wedding Banquet* (1993), and the expectations of the parents in the film. Audiences, especially Asian ones with Chinese backgrounds, easily relate to these characters through the issues of dealing with parents' expectations and children's obligations, which Wit, the only son of a Chinese family, has faced.

At the ceremony, Wit's outraged *kathoeys* friends are trying very hard to pass as straight in front of Wit's family. Their passing could be read, as Jack Babuscio suggests, as "the metaphor of theatre," as the characters are adopting different roles from their former ones.¹⁸ In so doing they have to disguise, impersonate, talk, and act contrary to their former ways. In the context of a comedy film, the scene is consistent with Michele Aaron's notion that "passing" is always strictly tied up with the dangers of "failing to pass."¹⁹ The tension creates humour, satire and parody that plays around with the conventional thoughts of Wit's family. In the scene, the involvement of "knowing and knowing to keep it quiet"²⁰ allows the "ladies" and the audiences to share a superior sense of possessing knowledge unavailable to Wit's family. Their superiority is emphasised by ambiguous conversations that imply the characters' real (unacceptable) gender during the scene, with both the audiences and the "ladies" sharing the playful sense of illusion masquerade. The "ladies" and the audiences are collectively holding their breaths, creating bonds between them.²¹ The anxiety of the characters is emphasised by the medium shots capturing Wit and his queer friends pretending to be straight, crushed in a limited area of the frame. The frame also signifies the conformist circumstances in which they find themselves. Their anxiety in a restricted frame creates emotional intensity to strengthen the idea of a compulsory gender role. Power is obtained through resisting family obligations.

In spite of the supposedly tolerant mainstream Thai culture, the film demonstrates the forms of discrimination the "ladies" face in every day life. The levels of prejudice range from curious and humorous gazes, to not wanting them to be included in the team and trying to exclude the "ladies" from national matches.

In reality, most of the time discrimination against men, women, *kathoeys*, the aged, disabled or other social groups exists in Thailand in invisible form. At the same time, the men, the women, *kathoeys*, the aged, the disabled and other groups avoid strong resistance and quietly accept their positions. The mocking of the discriminations in the film proves Critchley's statement that humour can change the situation and have a significant role with reference to society.²² In one scene, when a homophobic player refuses to play in the *kathoeys* team, he is also placed in the

¹⁸ Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the gay sensibility," *Gay and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: BFI Publishing, 1980), p. 50.

¹⁹ Michele Aaron, "Pass/Fall," *Screen* 42 (Spring 2001): 93.

²⁰ Aaron, p. 95.

²¹ Aaron, p. 95.

²² Critchley, p. 10.

background with Jung's legs in the foreground as if he is sitting under her. The scene empowers Jung and eliminates him. The message is thus projected that discrimination should be ridiculed.

To understand more about *The Iron Ladies* it is essential to work out specific language elements, a body of knowledge and meaning of the characters' communication expressions, and to adjust the communicability of information to various frames of attitude, form and to a specific culture. The next section then shifts to explore the interweaving of culture and language in the film, with a focus on the relation between the film's original language and its English translation. The exploration aims to explain why *The Iron Ladies* is differently perceived by different groups of viewers. The examination focuses on the specific culture projected through the language that produces humour for its specific audiences, and the particular form of the medium that make it impossible to translate the significance to the full. Humour in a speech form also creates a special bond only between the creator and a specific group of audiences and alienates those outside this cultural context.

‘Mor,’ ‘Hoi’ and their translations

One of the reasons that Thai films limit their international position is because of specific cultural expressions of language, speech performance and the ongoing construction of characters within a system that does not exist in the English language, or Western culture. Correspondingly, there are many aspects in English language systems and Western culture that do not fully make sense to Thais either. While language delimits the boundaries of Thai films, translation makes its way to international viewers. Still, questions of culture and language barriers run through nearly every facet of films. Since language dramatically represents layers of cultural complexity, the translation cannot carry the meaning of the film in every detail. A sub-titler then becomes an information gatekeeper whose activities are restricted to the space and time of each frame and scene shown on the screen.²³ Consequently, Thai queer expressions produced by the film allow only limited expression of their meaning to a non-Thai speaker.

Culturally, it is acceptable for *kathoey* in Thailand to overtly express themselves in many ways, including camp gestures, flirting and verbal expressions as in some examples shown in the footage of the real “Iron ladies.” However, when they are represented in mainstream films that aim to reach as wide a range of audiences as possible, as with *The Iron Ladies*, to allow *kathoey* characters to express themselves to the utmost, the director follows Thai classical and folk literature by using *double entendres*. The terms subsequently convey *kathoey*s’ sexually suggestive terminology in a more implicit manner. Using sexual *double entendres* in a queer comedy film results in linguistic ambiguity creating multiple humorous meanings. The amusing chatter of *kathoey*-talk is then deliberately laboured throughout the film and Thai audiences generally enjoy these *kathoey* lines. Jira Maligool, as the film’s final screenplay writer, states that, “the characterization and dialogue of the “ladies” are so colourful and complete that many Thai viewers returned to see the movie, trying to pick up its dialogue and queer slang.”²⁴

²³ Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (London: Sage, 2000), p. 294.

²⁴ Atiya, “E-DIOM,” *Hamburger* Nov. 2002: 30.

On the other hand, viewing the English-subtitled version, Carla Meyer from the *San Francisco Chronicle* notes that the film contains low language,²⁵ while Eric D. Snider from *The Daily Herald* rates the film R for “frequently harsh profanity and a lot of vulgar language.”²⁶ This contradictory outcome suggests that something is lost or added in translation, especially to a joke. As Crichtley quotes Paul Valéry as saying in 1921, that “Humour is untranslatable,” Crichtley further explains that humour is extremely difficult to translate or even impossible. More than that, translating a film’s dialogue is limited by the screening time of each scene, and the film production team seems to realize that. In Chinese speaking countries and in Japan, Thai - Chinese and Thai - Japanese glossaries of Thai queer slang were given to the audiences. In the case of English subtitles, without glossaries to clarify queer slang, which has strong double meanings, the translator undertakes to render the full meaning expressed by the film characters.

It is not only the language that conveys a double meaning: the film’s iconographic setting, actors and props are able to facilitate the sense of sexual *double entendre* as well. Along the same lines, Crichtley argues that humour is usually highly context-specific in relation to cultural knowledge.²⁷ The strongest scenario is at the beginning of the film when the director has one of the “ladies,” Jung, sell rice cakes or ‘*khanom pak mor*’ and in the next food stall a catty enemy sells fried mussels, ‘*hoi thot*.’ Having the status of two meanings ‘*pak mor*’ and ‘*hoi*’ or mussel carry a strong sense of sexuality, which is suggestively significant. Literally, ‘*pak*’ means mouth, entrance or orifice and ‘*mor*’ means pot.²⁸ In the Thai context pot also symbolizes a female pudendum and mussel implies the same meaning. When the two sellers fight and mention their products, there is something cheeky between the lines. The humour here is created by shared knowledge of language structure and social structure at the hidden level. When the terms are translated, it is clear that there is a risk in losing the subtlety of the joke in a foreign language. For example, Jung challenges her opponent’s femininity by saying “Look at her mussels, they are rotten and stinky, withered and smelly in the sun.” The translator decided to add extra words to carry the full meaning of the sentence as “...they are . . . smelly in the sun like her pussy.”

As the film progresses, exuberant use of these language patterns continues. The translation makes a very strong effort to transmit the complete sense of the words; however, when a team player criticises Pia’s bisexual boyfriend as ‘*dai na luem lang*’, the translator decided not to, or does not have enough screening time to, put the abstract meaning in the subtitle. This time the translation of the phrase ‘*dai na luem lang*’ is as concrete as “bisexuals, you can’t trust them” since the phrase’s actual meaning is “an ungrateful or unthankful [person].” However, as queer slang the phrase could be translated word by word as *dai* (“getting”), *na* (“front”) i.e. (“before, future or credit”), *luem* (“forget”) i.e. *lang* (“back”) i.e. (“past, after”). Then the meaning of getting credit, forgetting the past turns into queer slang as getting the front, forgetting the back, suggesting a sexual meaning that the sexual practice

²⁵ Clara Meyer, “The Iron Ladies,” *San Francisco Chronicle on the Web* 14 Sep. 2001, 5 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?c/a/2001/09/14/DD196327.DTL>>.

²⁶ Eric D. Snider, “The Iron Ladies (Thai),” *The Daily Herald on the Web* n.d., 5 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.ericdsnider.com/view.php?mrkey=527>>.

²⁷ Crichtley, p. 67.

²⁸ Dannern Garden and Sathienpong Wannapok, *Thai-English Dictionary* (Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2003), pp. 306, 521.

between opposite sexes makes a (male) bisexual forget his former same-sex relations. The playfulness of the terms *na* and *lang* is used again in the title of the film's second part *The Iron Ladies II: 'Before and After.'* The cases of loss and addition in translation show that without explicit translation, the full meaning is not conveyed, but with explicit translation the movie is condemned.

Conclusion

Entering the twenty first century, the movie business in Thailand began to play a bigger role in the media market. The commercial success of *The Iron Ladies* could be seen as the high-camp queer film's triumph over mainstream cinema. Unavoidably, being a commercial product, like it or not the achievement of *The Iron Ladies* created a niche market where queer status is marketed as a commodity. Even though the *kathoey* or queer subject is not new for Thai audiences, it always carries a sensational impression. This niche market, to some extent, allows more voices from sexual minority groups to be heard in Thai society.

In reality, even though the players in their real lives won a national championship, none of them has ever represented the nation in any international arena. It can be said that the changing of society still creates stress and ambiguity for third sex people and queer subjects. Choosing a comedy genre for the film, the story is much better than the real circumstances; the different characters furthermore motivate it by the incorporation of their particular stories. More than that, the genre also allows *The Iron Ladies I* derides issues such as gender obligation, prejudices, intolerance and discrimination.

After analysing the film it could be concluded that *The Iron Ladies* aims to promote queer identities as asking for tolerance and sympathy, with more queer camp characteristics. The camp elements in the film epitomise what Sontag alludes to in her "Notes on Camp," that "camp does not reverse things. It does not argue that the good is bad or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for action (and life) a different – a supplementary – set of standards."²⁹ Without any strong political judgement, *The Iron Ladies* purely demonstrate the social and cultural context in which third sex people in Thailand live.

²⁹ Sontag, p. 105.

Filmography

The Iron Ladies (Satree-Lek). Dir. Yongyoot Thongkongtoon. Pref. Jesadaporn Pholdee, Kokkom Benjathikoon, and Chaicharn Nimpulsawasdi. DVD. Hub Ho Hin Films. 2000.

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“Laugh and Learn” on Contemporary Thai Stage

Dangkamon Na-pombejra *



Abstract

This article discusses the use of humors and comedic devices in Thai contemporary theater as the tools to provoke to the audiences the social and political awareness leading to their self-knowledge. The investigation mainly focuses on three productions reflecting Thailand’s current turmoil between 2004-2009. Firstly, *Mahatsachan Phajonphai Jaochai Hoi* or *The Miraculous Adventure of the Conch Prince* (2005 -late Thanksin Shinawatra’s golden years), the original play adapted from *Sang Thong*, a Thai folk tale and a royal *Lakorn Nork*, depicts the identity crisis of the marginalized and semi-marginalized people in the superficial world of consumerism. *Sat(ta)burui Sood Korb Lok* or *The Beast, the Bum, and the Uberman on the Verge of the World* (2007 – recently after the “silk coup d’état”), the adaptation of Slawomir Mrozek’s *Vatizlav*, depicts the dehumanization of themselves and the others of the people chained together on the island of the corrupted power game. Finally, *Nangta Niranam* or *An Unsung Angel* (2009), the adaptation of Vince Licata and Ping Chong’s *Cocktail*, depicts Dr. Krisana Kraisintu’s self-actualization, against the global capitalist colonization, to selflessly save lives of millions of Aids victims both in Thailand and in milieu of the holocaust wars in the poorest African country.

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Humors and Thai Theater

Normally, humors and comedic devices used in Thai performances, both in farcical skits and in the comic relief scenes in more serious dramas, aim to entertain their audiences rather than to educate them. For the mainstream Thai audiences, a stage play or 'Lakorn Wethee' needs to be entertaining, fun, and free the audience from their daily life frustration. Interestingly, Thai people apply laughter and the 'Siamese smile' not only to express their positive attitude, but also to cover their personal irritation and fear, plus to disguise their discontent comment. In the situation they feel it is cleverer not to express their real feeling openly, Thai people smile to keep distance from any risks. Thais laugh to tell the others that they are not one of, and/or are superior than, those who are being criticized or ridiculed. Thais employ humor not to watch and learn from reality, but to lure themselves that they can escape from their insoluble fact and inevitable fate.

'Lakorn Aksorn' or the theatrical production of the Department of Dramatic Arts, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, is always categorized as a "non-mainstream theater", as it is known for being highly intellectual, but not very entertaining. As a theatre director and a drama lecturer, it is then my task to find the right recipe to cook 'Lakorn Aksorn', using humors and comedic devices as its main ingredients and relishes, to make the production not only highly nutritive and eatable, but also delicious.

Mahatsachan Phajonphai Jaochai Hoi or *The Miraculous Adventure of the Conch Prince* (2005), *Sat(ua)burut Sood Korb Lok* or *The Beast, the Bum, and the Uberman on the Verge of the World* (2007), and *Nangfa Niranam* or *An Unsung Angel* (2009) are the latest three 'Lakorn Aksorn' productions that I have directed. All represent critical social and political issues and urge their audiences to reconsider and revise those hard and head-aching subjects. This article seeks to investigate how these productions utilize humors and comedic devices to portray contemporary turmoil of the country and provoke the audiences' awareness and self-knowledge.

Mahatsachan Phajonphai Jaochai Hoi (from *Sangthong*). 2005

Mahatsachan Phajonphai Jaochai Hoi or *The Miraculous Adventure of the Conch Prince* is my original play adapted from *Sang Thong*, a Thai folk tale and a versed play for the royal *Lakorn Nork*. The play represents the identity crisis of the marginalized and semi-marginalized people in the superficial world of the consumer culture. The production was presented at Manoonphol3 Building, during January 21st – February 6th, 2006. It was in late Thanksin Shinawatra's golden years when his gild mask began to be moved off, showing what had been hidden inside.

Sang Thong, the *Lakorn Nork* itself is one of a kind Thai literature. Typically, Thai classical literature does not demonstrate comical or ridiculous aspect of the high status or authoritative characters. But as a Lakorn Nork and a Thai folk tale, even though it was composed by King Rama II, *Sang Thong* criticizes kings, queens, princes, princesses, court and town people who mistake and misjudge others, especially the main characters, by their appearance. Moreover, at the end of the original play and the tale, Phra Sang has those noble people (who are not noble as they are entitled) punished by those 'lower' characters they have oppressed. This is the example how Thai people utilize humor in Thai traditional entertainment and folklore to camouflage their revenge against the superiors and the false social norm.

In *Mahatsachan Phajonphai Jaochai Hoi*, Sang, the central character or the protagonist of the play is a teenager facing his queerness. The unnatural birth as a colloidion baby which causes him a skin disease, the guilty feeling for causing his mother denounced by his father, the shame for having a ‘kathoe’ step-father and the LGBT family, a crime for causing his step-‘father’ killed by heart attack, the status of a runaway outcast, all these drive Sang feel inferior to the whole world, especially to the dolled up people of the excessive consuming Samont City. Sang hides himself inside his so-called shells; layers of golden body cream (an equivalence of whitening cream for the contemporary Thais), a dark-skinned barbaric camouflage, finally, a golden mask and a princely cloak, to conceal his inferiority complex and to empower his ‘adorable’ appearance. But to do so, Sang exploits himself and others. While covering himself with more and more shells, Sang loves less and less of his real self. At the end of the play, Sang accepts who he really is and peels all his shells off. He and his beloved ones (his mother, wife, and friends) realize that the people of Samont City treat them as a flock of mutants. They agree to walk away together, hands in hands, to build their own home some place else, while the glorified shell of the city is continually torn apart and rotten away.

The play has the heart and soul of the queer theater, according to its message, theatrical elements, and style of presentation. As a queer theater, it applies the camp humors to present the conception of identity as performative, the tragicomic worldview and *la jouissance* or the painful principle. Camp elements used in the play are the grotesqueness, the shocking attractions, the pastiche, the satire, pun, and parody, the cross-dressing, role-playing, and the reversal of bathos and pathos.

Mahatsachan Phajonphai Jaochai Hoi, Scene 5: Bhandhuratana Beach

*Morning sunlight. Bhandhuratana Beach. It looks like a beach of Pattaya. Sang lies unconsciously on the sand. Four transwomen in colorful beach sarong and bikini appear. They are **Bobbi**, **Billy**, **Joey**, and **Joanne**, citizens of the specially governed district “the Island of Bhandhuratana”.*

Bobbi (points at Sang) Look, look, a boy!
 Billy Ooh! Cutie-pie!
 Joey For once in your life, can you not eat any boy you see, bitch?
 Billy Why not? Sweet meat and yummy bone!
 Joanne All right! I’ll report to the Queen!
 Billy Oh yeah? Miss Holy Virgin Detox Vegetarian Princess!
 Bobbi The Queen and the King!

***Bhandhuratana the Queen**, in the immaculate all-white business dress with a stylish straw hat, approaches. On her side is **King**, her sidekick, a drag king dresses in all white business dress with a Panama hat. Four bodyguards called **F4** follow, they are transmen.*

Girls Mama-Queen! Papi-King!
 Bhand. (sees Sang lying) A kid!?!
 King Another runaway kid!

***Bhandhuratana** reaches Sang to examine him. **King** stays out. **Bhandhuratana** tries to help Sang to recover his consciousness.*

Bhand. (to Sang) Son! Wake up! (Sang is still unconscious.)
 (to the girls) Why haven’t you help him? He’s almost dead! Carry him back to the city, I’ll nurse him myself.

***Four girls** are reluctant. **King** steps in.*

King What are you doing, Bhandhuratana?
 Bhand. Saving his life.
 King And then what?
 Bhand. And when he gets better, we’ll send him back where he belongs, or if he...
 King If he wanna stay, you’re gonna keep him, right?

Bhand. (softly) Yes...
 You never learn! Take runaway kids from nowhere, nurse them, give them new life, your love, your trust, and then get hurt by them!
 Bhand. (thinking of her past) I love them.
 King But they hate you, they're afraid of you, thinking you just keep them to eat them later. They lure you, lie to you, steal your stuff, hit you and run away!
 King They go back to where they belong, the world of normal people! And they disgust every second they

stay with you, with us here on this island!
 Bhand. But this kid doesn't look like those guys.
 King Don't judge people from their appearance!
 Bhand. King...Everyone.... I know I'm asking you all too much. I know that you love me. But... I need to love and be loved by someone else other than people like us, someone ... 'normal'. I know I'm crazy, but I want to have my own

King baby, a 'real' son.
 Bhandurata, you should run a comedy club instead of a lip-syncing company! You wanna be 'normal'? Now? It's you who founded the town on this island, to be independent, to 'specially govern' ourselves!
 King (proudly) Bhandurata City!

Bobbie/Billy (beamingly) The heaven for heavenly creatures of all mythical literatures!
 Joey/Joanne A polite term for 'queers', you mean! We have to stay here on this marginalized island, all by ourselves, away from the cities of normal people because they hate us, they disgust what we are!

Everyone hurts.

Joanne It's uncalled for!
 Bobbi We are human being as they are!
 Joey Only with different taste!
 Billy Different appetite!
 King Different from the norms is abnormal! You want to raise this kid up, just to hear him call us 'abnormal' later?
 Bhand. But I know this kid not normal!
 Billy You mean, he's a *she*? The boy's one of our sis?
 Bhand. No, no, no, not I mean, I know he's not like other ones else!

A song 'For Once in My Life' accompanies the characters' words, who perform a begging for understanding' show with their increasing and overwhelming emotion.

Bhand.	He looks very lonely	<i>For once in my life</i>
Joanne	Like us	<i>I've got someone who needs me</i>
Bhand.	Disowned	<i>Someone I've needed so long</i>
Joey	Like us	<i>For once unafraid I can go where life leads me</i>
Bhand.	A son that the parent's ashamed of	<i>And somehow I know I'll be strong</i>
Bobbi	Like us	<i>Long before I knew someone warm</i>
Bhand.	Faking laughter to cover tears	<i>Like you could make my dream come true</i>
4 Girls	Like us	<i>For once in my life</i>
Joanne	Papi King, please keep the kid.	<i>I won't let sorrow hurt me</i>
Bobbi	He has no home to send back.	<i>Not like it hurt me before</i>
Joey	We all agree to consent-	<i>For once I've got someone I know</i>
Billy	and support Mana Queen	<i>Won't desert me, and I'm not doing anymore</i>
Bhand.	To keep this cute pie.	<i>For once I can say</i>
All	Please, King, please...	<i>"This is mine you can't take it"</i>
Joanne	Kind King	<i>As long as I've got love I know I can make it</i>
Joey	Biffy Buffy	<i>For once in my life</i>
All	Manly, Kinky King!	<i>I've got someone who needs me.</i>
	Pleeceassssse!	

(Dangkamon Na-pombejira 2005)

Camp in the play focuses on the reversed ethics of the pretentious mainstream popular culture. While the audiences with ‘queer eyes’ understand the message and the tragicomic vortex of their own community presented in the play, the audiences of the ‘outer circle’ or the public audiences would witness how mainstream and popular consensus evaluate, devalue, and marginalize each human being. They might laugh or giggle because they find queer characters in the play are so funny and were born to be laughed. But sometimes they laugh and giggle with their heavy heart, either because they feel disturbed or guilty, since they had also dehumanized ‘other’ people, or because they, too, thought or acted like one of those artificial beauties on stage.

The slang, jargon, pun and word playing used in each community of the characters in the play urge the audiences to recognize that there are many subcultures within and beyond the mainstream culture they know, such as the gay culture, homeless teenagers’ culture, and the hi-end & trendy youngsters’ culture. Even though the audiences are in the mainstream culture, they could feel inferior, left-out, and marginalized in such communities, if they do not understand the ‘language and codes’ of these particular cultures.

Samont City is manipulated to make it look pretty on the surface by the spin-doctor and the robber baron ‘Samont’. This dictator under the democratic cloak uses his charismatic image and friendly mask in order to be the sole leading person on stage commanding and dictating everything in the city, just for his own advantages. The ‘Phra Thida Ua Arthorn’ (Royal Daughters for Everyone) gala, or the ‘Royal Mating’ TV reality show, is not a state ceremony celebrating women’s freedom of choice, but a lived presentation of selling his daughters to the rich and powerful princes Samont had selected in advance, which earns him millions of dollars from the broadcast license and the voting SMS sent by the program viewers.

Both public audiences and the viewers with ‘queer eyes’ identify the fraudulent, greedy, self-centered, and authoritarian Samont with the Prime Minister at that time. While watching, they laugh and worry in the same time about the current and future situation of Thailand in the hands of Shinawatra.

The anxious laughter and the dark humor of contemporary world, therefore, release and reflect what the urban Thai community in 2005 feels disturbed. They place those issues in front of the spectators, and allow them space to contemplate those subjects. Sawit Wongriehong (2005) points out in his review that:

(The play) unfolds the reality of Thai society and also reflects the concept of identity. It asks the audience to be aware of whom they are; whether they live in reality, or in their self-illusion. ... Transforming the city of the ogress Bhanthurana to the colorful city of the third genders, the play challenges the audiences to laugh while comparing what they see on stage with the actual society.

...At the end of the play, the question that attacks back to the audiences is whether we will allow this kind of ending in our own community. If we won't decline our prejudice against the 'others', we couldn't see anything outside our own mask.

...Though 'Lakorn Aksorn' is always criticized that it is usually too difficult to entertain its audiences. Since its spectators need to share their ideas and insights while watching the play. But this latest production from the

Faculty of Arts has just proven that the speech is only a prejudice. Because if we overlook that preconception, we will be able to travel along with all the thoughts hidden in the play, and will see all the wonders presented on stage in front of us."

(Sawit Wongrienthong 2005)

The application of camp in the play is then remarkably a continuous leap from the satiric and campy humor presented in King Rama II's 'Lakorn Nork' version.

Sat(ta)burut Sood Korb Lok (Vatzlav), 2007

Sat(ta)burut Sood Korb Lok or *The Beast, the Bum, and the Uberman* on the *Verge of the World* is my adaptation of the Polish playwright Slawomir Mrozek's play *Vatzlav*. It depicts the dehumanization of themselves and the others of the people chained together on the island of the corrupted power game. The production was presented at Chulalongkorn University Alumni Association from August 23rd to September 2nd, 2007, one year after the "silk coup d'état" that disposed the Prime Minister Shinawatra.

Sat(ta)burut Sood Korb Lok demonstrates the life journey of a ship-wrecked slave named Yodkhon (Vatzlav). He comes ashore on the island ruled by the bloodsucking Count and Countess Bat (Mr. and Mrs. Bat). The Bats are vampires who feed on the blood of their serfs, Kratha (Quail) and Krajork (Sassafas) the cottagers, for instance. Yodkhon the opportunist submissively performs and transforms to any role in order to gain profits from any social class and force, even dehumanizing himself to a hunted bear for the Bats. Batboy (Jorge), a son of the Bats, cannot accept his father. He runs away and exchanges his freeman's identity with Yodkhon the bear. Yodkhon becomes the proprietor of a strip-tease club that offers its spectators a peek at naked 'justice' which is the naïve Yutidharma (Justine), the daughter of the moony philosopher known as Atchariya (the Genius). Bored at her life, Countess Bat escapes into the woods, meets Batboy the bear, and falls in love with the beast. Knowing they are going to commit an incest, Oedipus the blind old seer of the house tries to stop them, but they ignore what he preaches. Batboy fights Count Bat. The island is chaotic. The serfs do nothing but complain and pray. Suddenly, the unidentified troop, carrying a lance with radiantly waxed Atchariya on the tip, led by General Bushbarian (Barbaro), usurps the whole island. The totalitarian troop leader uses the kangaroo court ordering confiscations, death penalties, castrations, and a gang-rape. Yodkhon, back to be an outcast again, manages to escape from the executioner and makes for another shore. He instinctively saves Yutidharma's baby from drowning. With feebly hope, Yodkhon, carrying the infant in his arms, jumps into the sea and heads for the ambiguous future.

***Vatzlav*, Scene 64-67**

General Barbaro enters. Behind him a **soldier** carrying the mummified Genius at the end of his pole. *Genius points the way with one finger of his upraised hand, his face is waxen, two red circles adorn his cheeks, his lips are heavily rouged. A gold halo shines above his head. Drummers and Lancers follow behind him. The troop stops. Vatzlav puts on his hat and hides under his litter.*

Gen. That does it, men. The war's over. I always said these degenerates would be a pushover.

Enter left Quail and Sassafas escorted by soldiers who prod them in their backs with lances.

Sas. How's it going, neighbor Quail?
 Quail I've got shooting pains in my back.
 Sas. I've been having little twinges myself.
 Quail We must have caught cold.
 Gen. Who are you?
 Quail I'm Quail. This is Sassafas.
 Gen. I didn't ask for your names. Are you rich or poor?
 Quail We're poor, boss.
 Gen. Lucky for you. We have come to liberate you. To help the poor, destroy the rich, as our beloved leader has taught us. *(He bows low to the mummy.)* May he live forever!

He raises his hand as if to strike the Soldier holding the mummy.
 Is that a way to hold him?

Frightened, the soldier raises the pole higher.
 Quail That's it. *(To Quail and Sassafas.)* Well, what do you think of him?
 Sas. Pretty.
 Gen. But kind of stiff.
 Sas. I beg your pardon?
 Gen. Kind of lifeless.
 Sas. *(Putting his sword to Sassafas's throat)* I didn't quite get that.
 Quail Lively, that's the word. Bless my soul, I never saw anyone looking so lively.
 Gen. In the pink.

(Lowering his sword) That's better. *(He picks his ear with his finger.)*
 Sometimes I'm deaf in my left ear... He's lively. He's alive! We've embalmed him a little to keep him from spoiling. The surface may be a bit shiny but it keeps out the rain. In all other respects he's in good health, better than you... And smart! He knows everything. *(To the soldier.)* Higher, you jackass!

Enter left Mr. Bat, unarmed, escorted by a soldier.

Gen. Who's this?
 Soldier Mr. Bat, the capitalist. He sucked the blood of the people.
 Gen. *(To Quail and Sassafas.)* Is that true?

Quail Yes, sir, he sure did.
 Sas. An all-day sucker, that's what he was.
 Gen. Hang him.
 Sas. Long live!
 Gen. The capitalist?
 Quail Of course not, boss. Don't you, Sassafas?
 Sas. Sure thing. No use long-living a man with a rope around his neck.
 Gen. Hmm, you seem to have a head on your shoulders.
 Sas. That's right boss. We're the people.
 Quail That's the wisdom of the people.
 Gen. Go! And never forget that you've been liberated by the liberators.

(bowing) Thanks, boss.
 Sas. *(bowing)* Thank you kindly, boss.
 Gen. *(To the soldier.)* Take this man to the gallows.

Soldier exits with Mr. Bat.
 Quail *(aside to Sassafas.)* Let's get out of here, Sassafas. From now on we'll just have to suck our own blood.
 Sas. Got to keep up with the times.

Quail and Sassafas exit left.
 Gen. *(To soldiers who brought in Quail and Sassafas.)* Hang those fellows, too...

Soldiers make a move to leave.
 But cut the rope. That'll teach them gratitude. First you hang them, then you cut the rope. They're too smart. That'll take them down a peg.

Soldiers exit left.

This political satire on contemporary situations in Thailand is considered an absurd play. It harshly satirizes human follies with dark humor. Each character has his own logic and his actions can be logically explained no matter how absurd they are. From this, the chain reaction affects all of us. Everyone beats the others in a round circle like the clown act in a circus ring. The slapstick humor in the production exaggerates this practice. Each character represents various traits of human behavior, which also reflects those of Thai people. Yodkhon the central character of the play is a person who interprets everything in ways that benefit him the most. His morals are mixed up. Whatever profits him is considered good and whatever not is bad. (Pawit Mahasarinand and Dangkanon Na-pombejra 2007)

The perception of each audience member toward this play vary so greatly. It depends on how interested he is in politics, whether he has a sense of humor, if he is conservative, if he is one of the anti-Thaksin alliance, the anti-coup d'état united front, the royalists, or the typical “play-saved” Thai people. Some laugh their heads off while others giggle. In the meantime, some are very upset, terrified, and angry at the real-life situations the play reminding them of.

H.E. Dr. Bogdan Goralczyk, the ambassador of the Republic of Poland in Thailand, agrees with the previous paragraph. He also adds that although it is intriguing trying to find the rational and respectable linear plot of an absurd play, this play fits perfectly to Thailand's current situation. (quoted in จำอวดนิทานการเมืองสุดแสนขบขัน 2007)

“*Watching this play makes us look back and reexamine ourselves*” Kittisak Suwannabhokin admits. He says the play is most successful in providing its audiences free space to individually contemplate on what the play strikes them. (quoted in จำอวดนิทานการเมืองสุดแสนขบขัน 2007)

Dechito (2007) posts his insightful review on his web log. He states that the main conflict of the play is the conflict between justice and desire:

“*This play is kindly contextualised by the director and some of the scripts have been tailor-made to suit the Thai public's tendency for quick jokes and good puns. Our exiled prime minister is of course inevitably linked to Count Bat himself, who lived on the blood of poor people (well, what a poignant metaphor). Of course, poetic justice rules as Count Bat is brought to pay for his cruelty. ...*

Quite touching is the figure of Oedipus, who tries to uphold the moral code, yet ends up being beaten and gang-raped in a carnivalesque ending by military-like tribal people (or tribe-like military people, if there's any difference). The usurpation of the whole island by the military at the end, I'm sure, would cause chest pain for many viewers. ... Some parts of the play do touch upon a very sensitive topic, especially the figure of Genius. ...

It's really thought-provoking and funny. Most of the people laughed, especially towards the ending. But I on the other hand found it really deeply tragic and shocking -- as it's so true ... too true ...”

(Dechito 2007)

The grotesque humor surreally visualizes the cruel and gruesome usurpation, which is varied, depending on each audience's experiences, interpretation, and expectation.

The absurdity employed in this play reaffirms us that Thai and Polish people can share our empathy not only in comical views, bawdy jokes, and slapstick gags, but also in some identity crisis, social and generation clash, and political angst.

Nangfa Niranam (Cocktail), 2009

Nangfa Niranam or *An Unsung Angel* is the adaptation of Vince Licata and Ping Chong's *Cocktail*. It depicts Dr. Krisana Kraisintu's self-actualization, against the global capitalist colonization, to selflessly save lives of millions of Aids victims both in Thailand and in milieu of the holocaust wars in the poorest African country. The production was presented in the period of 'the Yellows versus the Reds' conflict, during August 20th-30th, 2009 at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center, and on September 4th, at Wang Tai Hotel, Surat Thani, the hometown of Dr. Krisana Kraisintu.

The play has a mix of emotions. It's amusing, ludicrous, tragic, surprising, and touching. To produce and distribute her generic Aids cocktail, the 'gypsy pharmacist' realizes that what standing in the way are actually people's fear, selfishness, narrow-mindedness, ignorance, and infatuation. (Pawit Mahasarinand and Dangkamon Napombejra 2009) Almost all by herself, she then goes directly against governments, world's gigantic pharmaceutical companies, international laws and even against bombs and gun fires in the genocide.

This postmodern drama is a strike back of the Orientalism which always portrays the stereotype of Asian, Thai, and African with the image of a submissive female, or a dependent colony of the developed countries. Postcolonialism believes that the global, hybrid and inter culture are not grown out of the need to understand and accept the differences of each other in the world, but from the consumerist imperialism and the cultural colonization.

In the play, the CEO of the Japanese MSG factory, therefore, wears the Chinese Red Panda costume acting as a cute presenter of 'Ajinomoto'. He later mingles with his overseas 'market', by joining in eating 'Pad Thai' and a 'Ram Wong' circle with the traditional Thai mother and daughter in front of a traditional Thai house and rice field, so as to promote his product in Thailand.

Satire and exaggeration applied in the play intend to contribute the repetition and revision of how abusive and exploitative we are, to the 'others', to each other, and to ourselves. The more we dehumanize the others, the more we dehumanize ourselves. What we are, then, is mirrored by how we treat other people. This is how, in Scene 12: 'High Noon', the legal representatives from Brighton Miles (BMS), with the intention of threatening and upsetting Dr. Krisana, transform themselves from the killer agents in *The Merrix* to a herd of barking bloodhounds.

I also make use of satire and exaggeration as a sugar coat for some heavily informative and head-aching scenes. For example, I change the lengthy, talky, and stagnant Scene 18: 'Health Minister' to a gradually wacky musical scene, and have the Minister sex-changed from male to female character.

Cocktail, Scene 18: Health Minister

Projection : Text “Thai Ministry of Health”, logo fills the screen

Dr. Krisana enters. Two of the health minister’s staff alternately step out and speak to Dr. Krisana as she is waiting. They tell her “The minister will see you now” several times, with long awkward pauses in between. Finally, Health Minister arrives.

(Enter, unpacks his case at his desk for a while before speaking) Dr.

Minister Kraisintu, please sit.

Krisana Minister, thank you for seeing me. I won’t take up much of your time. I simply wanted to know, when do you think we will go to Africa again?

Minister Ah, Dr. Kraisintu... Krisana. It is so good to see you. When I saw your name among my appointments today I must say I certainly smiled to myself. Now, I’m sorry, what did you as me?

Krisana I wanted to know when we would go to Africa again, to begin tech transfer. Well, I’m not sure that we will be going to Africa again, Krisana. That was three years ago when we announced that... 1999 to be exact.

Krisana But we promised to help them make antiretrovirals. You spoke at the World Health Organization.

Minister Yes, and wasn’t it wonderful? A seminal instant in history. For a moment all the world had its eyes on Thailand—and for biotechnology! I have heard that your HIV medications have become the most profitable products in the GPO. You should be very proud, Krisana.

Krisana Thank you, Minister, but we must begin preparations for the technology transfer. There is a lot of information I can put in an instruction manual. However, there is much that must be demonstrated hands-on, one-on-one. There is an art to making pills, as well as a science.

Minister I applaud your enthusiasm, Krisana, and your tremendous accomplishments and contributions to our country, but Africa is no longer a priority for us. But you promised to help them. I promised to help them—Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ghana. We reached out our hands to them. You signed a letter of agreement. They are all waiting for us.

Minister The moment has passed, Krisana. There are other priorities now. I see Thailand becoming a Biotechnological giant, and I see you as a part of that future. A first-world country has different health priorities, Krisana—you know that. Once the bane of tropical and sexually transmitted diseases are tamed, then the more complicated problems of cancer and heart disease can begin to be addressed.

Krisana The people of Africa don’t live long enough to get such deceases.

Minister Exactly, exactly, Krisana, but as Thailand moves into the future, we will need to more directly address these problems.

(Licata and Chong 2009 : 66-67)

At first glance, it seems that the scene intentionally presents the ignorance and pretentiousness of some national politicians. But when the scene develops, we will notice that while the conversation is beautified with the Minister’s songs, dances, and political discourses, her message is cold-blooded and inhuman.

One radical, yet humorous, interpretation in this scene is the politics of color code. The playwrights indicate that Dr. Krisana’s costume is always set in yellow, referred to the yellow T-shirt of Thai AIDS activists, while the opposing characters are often required to wear red or black, such as the Aji-panda (red) and legal representative of the BMS (black). The uniform of pharmaceutical researchers is green, doctors and nurses are in white, patient gown is blue, and the Congolese are in earth tones color schemes. The battle scene between the Health Minister who wears

red versus Dr. Krisana who wears yellow, then, could be seen as a resemble image of the so-called conflict between ‘the yellow shirts’ or the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and ‘the red shirts’ or the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). Most audiences laugh at this juxtaposition because they know that it is not a real political implication of the actual situation. Few are disturbed and disagree because they feel that the play prejudicially and stereotypically rates the yellows decent and the reds vile.

Almost the whole play is set in Thailand between 1984-2002. Consequently, while the audiences watch Dr. Krisana fights against the immense injustice and corruption in the bureaucratic, governmental, and political organizations, they see the national ‘retrovirus’ which had been hidden underneath ‘the smiles of the land’. Most audiences, hence, state that if there is no sense of humor inserted throughout the play, it would be too heavy, too stressful, too horrified, and too tiresome to watch the entire play. Comedic devices in the play, therefore, offer the audiences to learn some vital information they have never seen before in real life.

Moreover, the loony humor and the eccentric choreography strengthen two main concepts of the play; (a) the multi-layered and transcendent reality: the personal reality, social reality, ‘convenient’ reality, surreality, and hyper-reality. (b) the interconnectedness of everything: the invisible human web and the concept of the global family.

In her review of the production, Jasmine Baker (2009: 12B) observes:

“The story of how Dr. Krisana Kraisinu gave hope to millions with her generic HIV/AIDS drug is told in a mix of dialogue, movements and biting satire.

...Touching, honest and refreshingly relevant, although Nangfa Niranam was experimental in mixing spoken word, movement, dance and animation through 22 scenes,—all episodes, based on true events, were straightforward and seamlessly linked.

...Veteran director Dangkanon Na-pombejra stayed true to the original script and its detailed stage directions most of the time, but also added his own quirky choreography and gestures for extra satirical bite, drawing our bittersweet laughter. This was evident during moments in which serious matters were juxtaposed with hilarity, showing how absurd human society has become.

...In one scene, for example, the Public Health minister ignored Dr. Krisana’s plea to extend availability of the drug to Africa as she had promised, preferring to check out new handbags, taste tea and dance a pas de trios with men in tights.

....Apart from celebrating, or glorifying, the humanism of its heroine, the play also delivers a more universal message—that developed countries do not always nurture developed minds, especially when capitalistic greed is the highest good.”

(Baker 2009: 12B)

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Indonesian Comedy: Socio-Cultural Studies of Dagelan Mataram

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Abstract

Studies of humor in Indonesia that have been put more humor in the form of comedy as an artistic phenomenon, with little trace all humor dynamics occur. Buffoonery in Indonesia is basically in almost all the arts, he was often part of the whole performance. Ludruk, Dhagelan Mataram, Lenong Betawi, Stimulat, Warkop, Bebondresan, only appeared in 1900. Noteworthy is the link between comedy with no previous art, Dhagelan Mataram which uses a lot of kethoprak's vocabulary, or Bebondresan (Balinese drama masks), or Lenong stambel comedy which shows more jokes when should appear on television.

I am interested to look at how traditional arts change into comedy performances, and how social conditions and cultural influenced comedy in Indonesia. I also want to find out how daily-life humor adapted into a comedy in the form of art, and seeing that humor is a reflection of socio-cultural conditions of society.

I want to take Dhagelan Mataram performing arts as a case study of this phenomena, based on a consideration that Dhagelan Mataram (hereinafter abbreviated as DM) recorded a comedy that appears earliest in the archipelago.

The basic assumption of this research is to put humor as a way of communicating laden socio-cultural. Humor in a particular society is not necessarily funny in other communities, since it takes the same meaning similarity between the humor and the receiver. This study will look at the forms, contents, and function of humor is expressed, and see socio-cultural conditions that enable a comedy and humor emerge.

Term of Dagelan Mataram emerged in 1936 when a group of slapstick performers from Yogyakarta were invited to perform at the weddings of the son of Pakubuwono X. The word *dagelan* is taken from the stage of *batik* process, whereby the *batik* fabric is half-finished. Meanwhile the word Mataram is an effort of Yogyakarta society to redefine itself as the inheritor of Mataram culture.

A Dagelan Mataram performance will be opened by a music. A music is also a marker of scene changing and closing of the show. Typically used are traditional songs—usually called *gending*, tracing to *gamelan*, from the repertoire categorized as *tembang dolanan*¹ such as Nini Thowong or Warung Pojok. Song is also a marker of the transition from one scene to the next. This children game song can be replaced with the type *Palaran*² or even *keroncong*³.

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¹ Children games songs

² Javanese gamelan music

³ A peculiar music in Indonesia which contains music instruments such as ukulele, guitar, flute and so forth along with a lady singer

As soon as the opening song had finished, then appear a typical performance of a Dagelan Mataram show, which is a monologue. There come a bachelor whom express his feelings as a poor man. He tells a story about himself who have desire to get married, but nobody want to help to realize that desire. Once he asked his father, his father did not care. While her own mother had died, leaving him with a father who sucks. In Dagelan Mataram, that young man monologue called *ngudoroso*, ie when a comedian appeared to open the show by chattering his feelings. If in the story above a man talked about the unfortunate life of a bachelor, another show will be opened with the appearance of a comedian telling about his marriage life. Even though it is common, this *ngudoroso* scene does not always happen in the beginning of the show. Sometimes in another show, the first scene came up with a wife who lecture her husband to read and write Latin text.

The next plot will move toward to the scene of another character who headed to conflict of the story. When conflicts were created and rising, it will be followed by another scene in which settlement will occur. According to the Dagelan Mataram comedian, there is no complete scenario of the show provided. There is only an outline. Director of the show, which is often a group leader, will only mention the story in broad outline: who will appear the first time, who will appear to create conflict, and who will be in charge of resolving conflicts.

This format of performance like the one mentioned above is not the only one. There is also a show which is a further form of a *dagelan* inserted in *uyon-uyon*⁴. One of this kind of show titled Pangkur Jenggleng⁵, where the whole show will feature javanese songs in *pangkur* genre as an accompaniment of the show. Dialogue and songs in the show will appear alternately. Dialogues in this *jenggleng*, in addition to commenting about the traditional songs, usually is a casual conversations of everyday life without any story. In this show, a *jenggleng* comedian (*pendagel*—javanese) have to master the repertoire of *tembang dolanan*, because as well as droll, *pendagel* also required to sing a few number of song. Another style of the show may use songs from *keroncong* or *palaran*. The title of the show usually determined by the type of songs it used.

In contrast to *kethoprak*⁶ performances which experienced on imitative play of royal palace (*keraton*—javanese) life, Dagelan Mataram is more independent in choosing its story. From Dagelan Mataram recordings that we can still listen to now, there was indeed some repertoire that tells the story surrounding the palace. But the recordings mostly, not to call the majority, are folklore. Hatley (1985) writes that *kethoprak* was originally a story of ordinary people and grassroots (*wong cilik*—javanese), but when the authority of *keraton* played a role along with strong sense of nationalism, then heroic stories of the nobles appeared. There are stories such as Arya Penangsang, Damarwulan or Panembahan Senapati found in kethoprak plays. Dagelan Mataram plays are performed in very diverse, there are the play of Wuyung Lesmana, Basiyo Gandrung even a twists of a couple pesky thieves.

⁴ A slow tempo javanese traditional songs and chants along with *sengdikan* (nonsense syllables)

⁵ A way to sing (*nembang*—javanese) a traditional songs interspersed with jokes, without losing the rhythm of the songs that were sung

⁶ A theatrical genre of javanese performing arts featuring actors who may also sing to the accompaniment of gamelan music. It draws its stories from javanese history and romances

With a variety of plays exist, then the costume adjusting the theme of play. A Dagelan Mataram play that based on noble life will feature major characters complete with proper clothing. While clothing for players who acted as servants in the palace (*abdudalem*—javanese) will be dressed in Surakarta style. This *abdudalem* costume will usually used for the play based on the lives of common people, or the form of *Jenggleng* show. In performances of repertory people puppet (*wayang wong/ wayang orang*), then the selected costume will be adjusted to a *wayang wong* performance. Likewise in the characters of *abdudalem*, they used vests, headgear, *batik* fabrics, shorts, and the most typical of it all is the thick white powder on the face.

As a drama performances that have been formed previously, about the year 1880, the *wayang wong* is adaptation of leather puppet (*wayang kulit*) by the authority, in this case is *keraton*. By replacing puppets with humans as a model, the costume made by mimicking the puppet characters itself. It's interesting that if Dagelan Mataram shows wearing javanese clothes in Surakarta style, and vice versa, Surakarta style comedy show will be wearing Yogyakarta style clothing. *Blangkon*⁷ in Yogyakarta style has *mondolan*, looks like wrapped egg on the backside. While *blangkon* in Surakarta has no *mondolan*. According to some comedian, shape of *blangkon* is part of a slapstick material. If the Surakarta comedian mockery of such Yogyakarta-style *blangkon* store salted eggs, then Yogyakarta comedian would say that Surakarta-style *blangkon* fallen and trampled by horses, so that the eggs were broken.

Compared with other traditional arts, Dagelan Mataram staging way more flexible. Dagelan Mataram does not considering the stage too much, except that a modest stage to indicate a stage show. In performances of recordings, broadcasts for radio and cassettes, there are no special stage. Audio performances make the comedian must play a role so that listeners can imagine a place setting. Marwoto comedian, mentioned that one of the strength of Dagelan Mataram players is their ability to present imagination of a space setting to the spectators. The technique is referred to the playing of sound strengths (cf. Kusyudarsana, 1989)

Yuningsih comedian, well known as Yu Beruk, revealed the presence of certain techniques when producing Dagelan Mataram recordings. According to Yuningsih, the position of loudspeaker will be used as benchmarks how the show techniques will be conducted. A setting in the home for example, the one who play as a guest will stand away from loudspeaker, pretending to knock the door or say hello. On the occasion of the author witnessed the production of Dagelan Mataram recordings in radio RRI Pro II, the players turned out to produce a recording by just sitting.

Substance of Humor

The first thing that must be considered in assessing humor of Dagelan Mataram is a story or play (*lakon*). All Dagelan Mataram performances use *lakon* as a guide to bring out jokes. Dagelan Mataram performance titled Junadi Dalang International use a form of puppet show as a structure of performances. Here notice how Junadi performs,

⁷ A traditional javanese headdress worn by man an made from *batik* fabrics

+ (*pocapan*)*meniko to warnanirio satirio ing pringori raden gatotkaca*

Here come the knights in pringori⁸, Raden Gatotkaca

- *lho kepiye to iki, kok pringori, pringgondani. Pringori ngko malah gatel kabeh*

Gosh, it's not pringori, it is Pringgodani. If it is pringori, we'll get itchy

+ *Nggih nding.*

Yeah, you're right

- *Lho, dalang kok nggih ding.*

Hey, how come dalang agreed his puppet

+ (*diulang*) ... *nggih meniko warnanirio raden gatotkaca, gagah miriyani otot kawat balung sapi*

(repeated) or so Raden Gatotkaca, brave as aristocrate, wire muscle, cow bones

- *yo ora ono, ora ono. Otot kawat balung wesi*

You get it wrong again, wire muscle, iron bones

+ *Nggih ya.*

You're right

- *Lho, ono dalang kok manut wayange, iki piye?*

How come dalang obey his puppet, what a strange

This part of *pocapan* supposed to be dalang narrate a character of Gatotkaca, a hero, in good circuitry. The truth is in this joke, *dalang* pronouncing *pocapan* with errors here and there. Dialogue that existed at the opening of *dagelan* provide a context to the jokes that will be presented. The important thing to emphasized is the ability of dalang Juaneidi and his friends to play a puppet show properly. In a sense, if requested to demonstrate puppet drama seriously, Juaneidi and friends will be able to do so. Based on the puppet show context, Juaneidi then performing by hold on the raw structure of the puppet play itself and inventory of contained artistic. In *goro-goro* Juaneidi then switched role to be *punakawan*, in this section they can put up with dialogues and javanese songs.

On another show, we find another form of Dagelan Mataram that use *kethoprak* as the structure of the show. Dagelan Mataram titled Basiyo Gandrung as example. Basiyo Gandrung tells a story about a trick of a governor (*patih*) named Lonhang Pangarso who wanted to marry prince Nurowidayat's wife, son of the king's mistress. To get his needs, Lonhang Pangarso suggested the prince to fight against the new kingdom with a very powerful queen named Siti Jogonegoro Hasyiah. Pangarso Lonhang plan failed because the Queen Siti Jogonegoro Hasyiah fell in love with the prince. Later, known that the Queen was apparently Lonhang Pangarso's wife. It is ironic because Lonhang Pangarso himself left his wife to grab prince Nurowidayat's wife.

⁸ A kind of bamboo plant that caused itch

Just like Junaedi show, Basiyo Gandrung play *kethoprak* setting for a base of joking. When playing Basiyo Gandrung, the comedian had no difficulty, because their own background is *kethoprak* players. If compared with Kethoprak Humor played by comedian Timbul and friends, Basiyo Gandrung still loyal to the structure of a conventional *kethoprak* performances, as well as the ability to run a character according to played role. Comedian Siti Hasyiah for example, although she's well known as *pendagel* (comedian), but she can play the role as a dignified queen, without losing her ability to joke. Even more amazing that the show is played by sitting in a studio space, not a show on stage.

Documentation of Dagelan Mataram performances mostly found in everyday life of common people as the setting. As an example is the most famous slapstick of comedian Basiyo, titled Basiyo Mbecak. Story of Basiyo Mbecak is about the destination of a couple who will attend a wedding party at a distant place. Due to the remote place and lack of vehicles, they intend to go with a rickshaw (*becak*—javanese) ride. So they come face to face with the rickshaw driver named Basiyo. Basiyo is described as a stubborn (*ngeyel*—javanese) person, full of deception and thick with grassroot survival trick.

In Basiyo Mbecak, scenes divided into four sections. First part is the dialogue of the couple in the house, which is preparing to go to the wedding. The second is a scene where the husband and wife met the rickshaw driver, told him their destination, and bargain the price of rickshaw service. One of the key of the show is about rickshaw service rates agreements. When the couple asked about how much they have to pay for the service, the rickshaw driver replied, "*Bayaro sing paling akeh*" (You pay the most), and the passengers agree. The third scene is when the rickshaw driver asked for rest and food supplies. In the fourth scene, there where conflict when the husband and wife arrived at their destination, and intends to pay the rickshaw service. Apparently there are misconceptions among the rickshaw driver with the couple. The driver charged the greatest, which he thought it means that he could asked for all of passenger's money. While the passenger assumed that the agreement means that they can pay as their wishes. Though the passengers agreed to increase the rates, but the drivers still insisted to have more. The scene was closed down as they agreed to go to village chief (*lurah*) to ask for justice. In the fifth scene there is conflict resolution, helped by the chief. The village chief put IDR 25, IDR 50 and IDR 100 in a row, while the rickshaw driver was asked, "*Endi sing luwih akeh?*" (which one is the most?) then the driver answered, "100". Finally, that one hundred rupiah used to pay the rickshaw service.

Plot of Mbecak Basiyo show can be found in another Dagelan Mataram performances such as Sepatu Strandal, Pari Bengkulu or Wajik Klethik. There are also another form of stories such as Popok Wewe. Broadly, Popok Wewe is about three friends who go fishing in rivers. Opened with a family scene of a husband named Darsono who had just returned from Kejar Paket A (learning class of reading and writing) and chased his wife was more capable of reading the Latin text. There described how his wife taught him to learn reading and writing, while her husband's innocence in writing Latin alphabet. After a few moments came two of his friends, Basiyo and Hardjo, who intend to invite Darsono going fishing.

The next scene occurs in a river, with their expertise, we able to imagine the atmosphere of the river and their fishing activities. But once they succeed to catch a fish, Darsono became greed and captured all of the catch. Two other figures, Hardjo

and Basiyo, as the defrauded party seek revenge through the deception of a *popok wewe* (diapers of a ghost). In the Javanese trust, *popok wewe* able to make people disappear so that people who wear the diaper can do anything invisible. Due to the greed, Darsono rushed to grab and wear *popok wewe*. Both of his friends felt that it is the opportunity to cheat back on Darsono, then they pretend to see Darsono disappears when wearing diapers. Climax of the story occurs in the third scene, when the three men went to eat at the stall near the river. Darsono, who feel able to disappear, promised to treat his friends. When both of his friend went away and the waitress told him to pay, Darsono precisely covered up his body with *popok wewe*. Instead of disappear, he actually enrages the stall owner's proprietor. The conflict became greater when Darsono's wife show up and participate to scold on Darsono. Settlement occurs when Harjo and Basiyo come, explaining the situation, pay for food and provide wise advice to Darsono, then show finished.

As previously mentioned, in addition to performances that rely on any particular story, there are performances that don't have any story. This performance contains dialogue interspersed with songs. In the show titled Keroncong, Basiyo, Harni and Ngabdul playing a role as a father, children and servant, who had dialogue interspersed with *keroncong* music. The dialogue is about their daily live, about the history of father's marriage, about the maid who borrow and cut off his employer's trousers. This show also fulfill with comments about the lyrics of the song. This show divided into four parts with *keroncong* music as a marker of scene transition.

Similar form of performance can be found in Jenggleng performances. Jenggleng is emphasizing of Javanese traditional songs in a certain way to make the music sounds more festive. Nowadays, Jenggleng type can be found on TVRI Yogyakarta broadcast. With the format of mutual combination between songs and jokes, Jenggleng show become more interesting for spectators who do like traditional Javanese songs. Inspiring performer of this type of show was comedian Ngabdul, who was often put up with Basiyo, the comedy legend, in 1970s.

The Dagelan

Discuss all the jokes in Dagelan Mataram is not possible here. Therefore to limit the discussion, without eliminating the effort of dissecting, this conversation will be following six stages of knowledge sources. Interpretation phase initiated by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, which known as the general theory of verbal humor (GTVH), based on assumption that the Dagelan Mataram Recordings is a linguistic phenomena. Attardo and Raskin classified these six level of humor in order to revise traditional theories of humor.

The first level is the Language / LA; including semantics, fonetic, morphology, lexicon, sintaksis, and others. In this level, verbal jokes will be analyzed by using language, which is used by comedian to create joke. The second level is Narrative Strategy / NS; a genre or micro-genre used in a joke. There is a standard format of joke (*lawakan*) such as riddle, questions and answers, play on, and so forth. The third level is Target / TA; in the form of individuals or groups targeted for jokes, or laughing matter. The target here could be a person, ethnicity, a particular social group, political preferences, organization, and so forth. The fourth level is Situation / SI (situation), namely the supporting element of a joke. Supporting

elements are things other than activities, objects, instruments, and so forth. The fifth level is Logical Mechanism / LM. Logical mechanism is not a strict scientific logic. Instead, it's a mindset and daily actions that against common logic, it is something like thought patterns attached to ordinary fool. The way somebody holding a fan, while his head moving to left and right: the head is precisely the wrong action, but that was the funny part. The sixth stage is Script Opposition / SO, it is a sentence contains, whole or partial, two or more opposite sense. One side of the sense is what it called a real, serious and common sense. Meanwhile the other side is another sense, in a joke can be something odd, or no longer form of a common understanding.

Those levels developed by Raskin and Attardo is not intended as a single analysis of each stage of humorous material. Stages of humor material analysis used to analyze joke by combining a single stage with others. Combination that occurs either between LA & SO, or NS & LM & TA, and so on. Due to the various combination, it is not possible to present all combinations to analyze jokes in Dagelan Mataram. The following will be presented some humor and analysis.

Example 1.

This dialogue is the first scene of a Dagelan Mataram performance titled Popok Wewe. A poor couple imagining their live ahead. The husband feels guilty of his inability to support his family.

+ *istri* : *Ono gawean kowe gelem po mandangi?*

Wife: I've got something to do for you, will you do that?

= *suami* : *Gelem wis, wong urip ki butuhe nyambut gawe.*

Husband: I will, everybody need a job to live

+ *le muni nek gelem njejeri gendhul ngono.*

If you want to, please line up those bottles

= *Isin-isin opo, yo wis ben, yo ngko sedino nek kiro-kiro kepenak tak lakonane*

I'm not ashamed to do that. I'll try to do it for a day. If I feel ok, I'll keep doing that.

+ *ning kowe gelem tenan?*

Are you sure?

= *Gelem*

I'm sure

+ *Kuwi kepenak, nek kowe gelem tenen ngko tak tarekke wong aku sing dijak omong*

It is easy, if you're serious, I'll take you to the person who tendering that job

= *Gelem, ki pokokke ngko atusan apa iung sepuluh mboko sepuluh, opo satus, satus kuwi.*

I will, that would be hundreds or dozens?

+ *Sing satus, satus apane?*

What hundreds?

= *gendhule kuwi*

The bottles

+ *Ah kowe ki urung dong leh ku omong. Nyejeri gendhul piye kok atusan?*

You don't get it, you can't line a bottle into hundreds

= *lho, kuwi ngo dinggo wadiah kecap opo arep diiseni cuka, ngko dijejer-jejer dhisik le gampang le ngiseni*

Is it soy sauce or vinegar to be filled into those bottles? You should line up the bottles so it will be easier to fulfill.

+ *Kuwi ora dijejer, gendul dikekke ning ngarep toko kae*

It is not line up the bottles, just placed the bottle in front of the shop

= *iyò, iyò, ngko dicedhake sisan, men gari ngusung*

I know, I should collect the bottles to ensure easy to carry

+ *Ngusung nang ngendi? Wong kuwi ora diusung kok njur ngusung. (nayaga tertawa)*

Where will you carry that to? It is not to carry

= *Lho nek wis diiseni, nek dijejer, kuwi njur diusung, ngko diiseni njur diwadahi kothak.*

I thought the bottles the bottle need to fill up. So, I should line up the bottles, lift it up, fill it up and the place it into boxes.

+ *Kuwi ora diiseni njur diwadahi kothak, ndoro. Kuwi gendhul...*

The bottle is not to fulfill nor placed in a box. The bottle...

= *Iyò, iyò.*

Fine

+ *diselehke, kuwi njur kowe tenguk-tenguk nang sanding gendul kono. (nayaga tertawa)*

You put it in front of a store then you sit aside the bottles (laugh)

= *Lha gene kok ono gaweane apik, kok ora ngomong wingi-wingi lho kowe.*

What a great job, you should tell me before.

+ *lha kowe nek gelem aku yo gelem narekke nemoni kang kromo*

If you want to, I'll go tell Kang Kromo

= *Dadi gaweane koyo ngono kuwi?*

That's all the job?

+ *rak yo malah mayar to?*

Isn't it fun?

= *Kuwi nang pinggir ndalan to kuwi?*

I should do that in the roadside huh?

+ *lha iyò*

Yeah

= *Dadi aku ki kon momong gendhul*

Is that means that I will babysit a bottle?

+ *lha yo ora momong, wong jane yo..*

Hmmm, not a real babysit they said...

= *Wong dijak rembugan tenanan ben wipe kepenak, mesakke anak-anak to wis. Sandangane ora tau wutuh, le mangan wis ora ajek, gek bocah gentenan wae le loro. Sing tak pikir rak kuwi. Njejeri gendul, njur cah dho loro, kok tenguk-tenguk...*

Let's discuss for a good life, now what we have is poor children, they wear improper clothes, miss-schedule of mealtime and they got sick one by one. That's what I thought. Sit aside a bottle. while the kids got sick, you just sit...

+ *Lha watone rak entuk upah*

I want the salary

= *Njur gendhule ayu banget po? (mayaga tertawa)*

I hope the bottle is cute (laugh)

Absurdity of this dialogue was built by word *njejeri* which has double meaning, it means catenate or adjacent (L.A). Differences in understanding the word between a husband who need a job to support his family with his wife is the point of humor creation. The husband himself is a target: poor, uneducated, ex-thief, has a lot of children, and face any threat of his family hunger (T.A). The long form of dialogue could lead to direct attention to the punchline/trigger (NS). Here, jokes tried to capture poverty by the form of limited employment options, while any jobs available will require skills (SI).

Example 2. Dagelan Mataram scenes from a show titled Djunaedi Dalang International. This show takes vocabulary of a puppet show.

+ *Mengkono to raden gatutkoco, opo to senjata niro?*

Here come Raden Gatutkoco, what is your weapon?

= *Gatutkaca kuwi ora nganggo senjata, nduwe, gaman*

Gatutkaca bring no gun, he has no gun

+ *Gaman nding, senjata ding..*

Yes, he has a gun

= *Lho, dalange ki rodho edan ki lho*

He is such a mad dalang

+ *Aji brajamusti, setunggal, kalih..*

There are brajamusti weapon, one, two..

= *Koyo wong jajan*

You act like counting some food

+ *Kalih brojolamatan, brojodento, ingkang nomer tigo, nomer kalih kagetan*

Number two brojolamatan, brojodento, then number three, number two is gambling
= Kulino tuku nomer dalange

Seems like the dalang like to play a game

+ *Nomer setunggal entuk anduk*

Number one got a free towel

+ *Ooo, mangkono to raden gatuokoco, nembe ngayahi tugas ngeban dawuh, tugasing negari pandawa, sinten to ingkang sampun tepis miringng negari brata pandawa, meniko warnaniro prabu sutejo bimo naroko suro, putranipun bapakipun ..*

Here is Raden Gatutkoco while doing his duty to Pandawa country, here is Prabu Sutejo Bimo Naroko Sura, son of his father..

= *Gek iki, bapake manak.*

How come a father bear a son?

+ *Eh saking mbokipun. Mangkono to raden sutejo putranipun dewi, sopo?*

I mean his mother. Here is Raden Sutejo son of princess who?

= *Dalang kok takon*

How come dalang asked his puppet

+ *Keno wae, iki dalang aksi kok*

It is fine, I'm a cool dalang

= *Ora ngerti, ngono wae.*

Just confess that you didn't know..

+ *Putranipun, lali. Nggih, ngoten mawon. Putunipun begawan nagaraja. Kadigdayan niro prabu bimo naraka suro yen ngetokken upas, gunung den upas ambrol, segoro den upas, mulak-mulak*

The son, I forget his name., let's just say that he is Grandson of Begawan Nagaraja. The power of Prabu Bimo Naraka when he took out his poison, it will make the volcano exploded and he blew out the sea to turbulent

= *Umeb ...*

Boiled

+ *Ora, ora umeb kok.*

No, it is not boiled

There are such rules for *dalang* whom must be serious in running the show, to master and implement all the vocabular in puppet plays. But in the show above, *dalang* playing the show by violating all rules (LA). For example here *dalang* Junaedi forgot the *wayang* pedigree (the name of Prabu Sutejo Bimo Naroko Suro's mother) then he asked other people, he also arguing the puppet (*eyel-eyelan*) and slpounge some words. Narrative performances of Junaedi Wayang International put on the original puppet stories and then create the violations here and there (NS).

Example 3. The scene of the show titled Palaran Jenggleng. This conundrum (*cangkriman*) chanted in a scene of Palaran Jenggleng.

+ *sinten niku/ wong nunggang kathik mlaku/ kulon tekan wetan/sopo, sopo diruwahi/ bali ngulon alon-alon/ mlaku ngetan*

Who is the man/ he ride vehicles but still walk/ west to east/ he greets everybody/go home slowly to the west/walk to east

= *Coba pisan ngkas nok, bapak kok kupinge rodo ra masuk, kletar-kleler nang kuping, opo yo iki.*

Try it once again, girl. I can't hear yo clearly. Something rushing my ear, what's this?

+ *ojo gumun/ lamun munggal malah mudun/ lamun mudun, munggal/*

No wonder/anytime he goes up, he went down instead/ everytime he goes down, he went up instead

= *lki ora nurun mbokne, Koyo mbahne, mbahne ki jaran*

It's not from his mother like his grandfather, his grandpa is a horse

+ *Yen mudhun kepati-pati/nulyo mudun ndengkeng-ndengkeng lampahiko/ sak sedulur wujud datan anjelijur/ sirah tanpo muko/ ati sak jroning angurit/ urip iro saktebyaran mowo tejo*

He goes down with a vengeance/ he goes down rushing/ all of his siblings are not alike/ head witout face/ dead when alive/ a short life bring lights

= *Cah kok nyolong pehek, cengkokane tiru ramane. Mbokmu mbiyen yo sinden kok nek, ning ra tau mulih.*

What a smart. You sing the way your father sing. Your mother was also a singer, but she rarely go back home.

+ *Sinden kok ra tau mulih ki piye to.*

How come a singer never go home

= *Rak sindene. Lha nyindeni bal-balan. Lha usume tontonan rak nganggo sinden to, mbasan diputerke sorot gelem nyindeni. Lha wong koboi nunggang jaran kok disindeni...(ketawa)*

It's a singer. She sings in a football game. During the season, all the show perform a singer, when somebody playing a movie she'll sing. When a cowboy riding a horse, she'll sing..

+ *Koboi nunggang jaran kok disindeni, rak yo angel.*

It sounds difficult to sing for a cowboy who riding a horse

= *Lha yo nek jarane ketoprak, ketoprak, man man eman man eman, suutt, jarane kepleset, jur emaan...(ketawa). Wis piye, kowe arep ngomongke opo nok?*

.It's a kethoprak horse, man eman eman suutt, the horse slipped, then pity (laugh). What do you want to say?

+ *Niki wau rak cangkriman to pak, tembange niku.(membacakan syair tembang).*

Isn't it a riddle, the song.. (spelling a lyric of a song)

= *Opo bethekanne?*

What is the answer?

+ *Lho tasil wonten terusane. Ojo gumun/ lamun munggah malah mudun/ lamun mudun, munggah ..*

It's not finished yet. No wonder/ anytime he goes up, he went down instead/ everytime he goes down, he went up instead

= *aduh, iku tujuh belas tahun keatas aduh,*

It's an adult riddle

+ *Yen mudhun kepati-pati/nulyo mudun ndengkeng-ndengkeng lampah iro*

Go down with a vengeance/ goes down rushing.

= *nulis ndengkeng (huruf) ka mateni apa?*

Writing a letter K to complete the word

+ *sak sedulur wujud datan anjelujur/ sirah tanpo muko/ ati sak jroning angurip/ urip iro sakebyaran mowo tejo. Bethakanipun, wong numpak pit.*

All of his siblings are not alike/ head without face/ dead when alive/ a short life bring lights. The answer is: people who ride a bicycle.

Conundrum is a riddle game that packaged in the form of traditional songs, the most frequently played song is Pocung (NS). In *conodrum*, the comedian plays two kinds of script, the script first leads to the behavior of people who ride bicycles, while the second script leads to sexual activity (SO).

Example 4. Dagelan Mataram titled Sepatu Strandal.

If the three of previous examples are in the form of dialogue and singing jokes, Dagelan Mataram often use plots that have a great tendency to be funny by itself. Sepatu Strandal talked about a couple of husband and wife who make a living as a seller of secondhand shoes and slippers. The first scene contains dialogue between husband and wife who talk about their live. During the middle of the show third comedian who acts as a buyer appeared.

+ *Niki sepatu sing empun kulo tuku, hak kulo. Niki sampeyan le ngekek'i. mpun to, niki le tuku, niki le ngekek'i.*

I bought this shoes. It is mine. You give it to me. It is clear that I pay for a pair and you gave me another pair

= *lho kok kek-kekan niku priipun, niku sampeyan yo ora benér*

I didn't give it to you, you were mistaken

+ *mangka cedhak teng kali mundhak gelut teng kali lho*

We're now in a riverside, I won't make a fight on a river

= *kulo niki rak empun ngomong, nek tuku sepatu serakit tak kei serakit.*

I told you, if you buy a pair of shoes, I'll give you a pair

+ *Kulo nandukti, boten? Niki sing kulo tuku, niki le ngekek'i.*

I agree. This one I bought and this one you gave me

= *lho, lha niku mawon, kok ndadak nganggo kek-kekan niku pripun?*

You can take the one you bought. Nothing for free

+ *niku mawon, niku mawon, nek ngoten sampetan mboten sido ngekekki?*

How come I just get one pair, so that you give me nothing

= *we lha, ciloko mbokne*

For god sake

+ *Ciloko opo, ngomong rak sing tertib. Sampeyan rak wis kondho, nek aku tuku serakit, regane cukup sampeyan nehi serakit.*

Speak wisely. You told me, if I buy a pair of shoes in a proper price, you'll give me another pair.

Conflict occurs when the buyer believes that when he bought one pair of shoes, he will get a pair of shoes as bonus. The debate in the market can't be resolved, therefore the shoe salesman and the buyer go to *lurah* (chief of a village) to resolve the conflict. Next scene is in *lurah* office is where *lurah* solve this problem by inverting the logic of the buyer.

+ *nek sampeyan wis tuku sepatu, nggowo loro niku. Niku nek tekan ngomah dijuluk bojo sampean entuk mboten?*

Let's say you go home by carrying two pair of shoes, when you arrived at home, is it okay if your wife requested?

= *lha mesti kulo kek'ke.*

Of course I'll hand it over

+ *Mas Sastro gatutkaca, sampean kuli idhini ngeterke, mase niki. Mangke nek wis tekan omahe ngriko, bojone mang jalu.*

Mr. Sastro Gatutkaca, I allow you to accompany this man to his home. When you arrived, you can ask for his wife

= *lho, ming tuku sepatu koyo tembre ngene kok ijol bojo. Wis nyoh, ora sido sepatunan.*

I disagree. Exchanging this ugly shoes to a wife. I'd rather wearing no shoes

Ultimately the buyer return the shoes he took as a bonus. The show closed with the advice of *lurah* which confirmed by the buyer later. Sentences that contain a trap, 'buy one get one' and 'buy shoes and when the buyer got home his wife would asked for the shoes', is what referred to the SO. Both sentences were placed in two scenes that make the story becomes unusual and funny. Supporting situation (SI) is in the world of used stuffs trading, adherence to the consensus (a consensus on key sentence dialogue) and the belief of *lurah* as the problem solver. General logic is reversed, buy one item that means getting what has been purchased, swiced to sense of getting one additional item. And buy shoes and then his wife would asked for, who

is generally understand as the wife requested for the shoes, but in this comedy it is understand as requested for the wife (LM).

Example 5. *Sampean wis kangelan golek, kok mang dol malih?* If it is hard to find the stuff so why do you sell it? (Basiyo dialogue in *Sepatu Srandhal*).

This humor created from the assumption of how difficult it is to find secondhand shoes, so it is hard to get stuff to sell, with such difficulty it doesn't make any sense that those hard-to-find stuff are for sale again? In general thinking, traders would buying supplies (*kalakan*) in the purpose of resale for profit. The jokes thrown by Basiyo try to break that common understanding. The fact that rare items (secondhand stuffs) will be more expensive, because it is difficult to find. But after the stuffs are available, they should be on sale. This existing logical mechanism is in LM phase. Meanwhile the culture to search, sell and buy secondhand items included to SI phase. The peculiar behavior of the trader became targets of humor (TA).

Example 6. In the story of *Sepatu Srandal*, there are dialogues that reveal the jokes style

+ *satus niku mang dol rongatus?*

You purchase a hundred shoes and then sell it for two hundreds?

= yo ora, mangke nek bathi sithik kulo culke

No, I'll release it for a good price

+ *nopo nduwe siki!*

Release it? Does it have any leg?

= *sampeyan yo nyrekal*

You tackled me

This style of jokes known as *srekalan*, which means tackling, it is often takes part in the form of Dagelan Mataram. This *srekalan* occur by diverging general logic in a conversation, to be deflected to the other logic (LM). *Culke* (Javanese, it means released), could be mean giving (in this case, it means agree to sell), but it can also mean to set something free (the context is to released a living creature) so that the tripped question was asking for the ownership of foot (LA).

Humor of Dagelan Mataram occurs by creating a show that use certain form of performances, such as *ketoprak* or *wayang wong*. The show is created by inserting jokes into the story. If example 1. borrows stories from puppet shows, then the play of Basiyo Gandrung, example 2., using typical performances and story of *ketoprak*. Forms of performances on Palaran Jenggleng show, in example 3. can also be found on Pangkur Jenggleng or Keroncongong show. For further, dialogue of humor on this type of performances has connections with a stand up comedy format. But only the show of Dagelan Mataram using knowledge of everyday life, which is close to the life of the comedian, as a subject. Therefore the show consist of dialogue about *sinden*

(Javanese song singer), *mlinjo* soup, or riddle between people who were riding bicycles.

Characterizations in Dagelan Mataram

Characterizations in Dagelan Mataram comedy is basically not different from other form of drama. There are antagonist and protagonist character, and if necessary will appear a character who bring peace between two troubled parties. In some Dagelan Mataram performances conflicts can be solved by providing mutual understanding to straighten fallacy happened, both parties finally realized their mistake. Some other performances presented third party as a conflict mediator. There often the conflict mediator is state apparatus who will provide explanations.

Confession from comedian Waluh can be used to understand how ordinary Dagelan Mataram rise the performance. In performing for some information programs, comedian Waluh always play a role as a subject of several problems which would be informed or explained by the opponent. According to comedian Yuningsih, in jokes there are two party known, one who give feed and other who feedback. What she tried to say is there are comedians whose job to provides the materials to be used as jokes, and on the other hand there are comedians who will process those materials. Ability of both parties to cooperate with each other will determine the success of a comedy show.

In some Dagelan Mataram performances, recent figures who take the jokes is an antagonist whom start the conflict. The character of rickshaw driver in Basio Mbecak is a character who started the conflict with his greed. In entire performance, this figure being funny by telling stories about his own life, as well as being funny using materials thrown by his opponents. The similar mode can be found on the play Sepatu Strandal, Maling Kontrang-kantring, Pari Bengkong, or Degan Wasiat.

Conflict mediator, who can be referred as a figure who able to straighten mistakes, are often represented by character of state apparatus. This occurs because Dagelan Mataram itself is a story about the dynamics of everyday life of society, which politically included to the state community. Therefore figures such as *lurah*, *camat* or nobles are more often displayed as the one who can balance the situation. In commercial *dagelan* shows, the figure of conflict mediator is needed to end the show. The performances which inserted by the government interests, in this case is interests of spreading the development programs, those state apparatus figures should also explain the conflict and its connection to the development program.

To be an explainer figures, there required sufficient intellectual ability. Marsidah comedian tells about how he had to learn some materials for Dagelan Mataram performances in Department of Informations (Departemen Penerangan). He recognized that his background as a college students in the Faculty of Geography Gadjah Mada University Yogyakarta helped him so much in preparing materials for the show. With that adequate preparation, Marsidah able to perform well in explaining the development program in the form of dialogue of the show.

In a show where the conflict can be resolved by mutual understanding between parties, the moral message seems to be conclusion of the show. In Dagelan Mataram show titled Popok Wewe, the advice to not being greedy, unfair to others and behave carefully became the final message which later became the ending of the show.

Likewise in Mbarang Wirang, namely the story of a rebellious child, closed by a scene when the entire family re-united through the awareness of a child to re-admit his parents.

Nonetheless, some *dagelan* performances could presented a good social criticism. In a show titled Maling Kontrang-kantring questioned how poverty drives someone to steal to fulfill the necessities of life, as well as criticism to the moralists who ignoring conditions of poverty as a reason to become thief. In another Dagelan Mataram show titled Impen Dorodasil, narrated how a *lurah* abuse his power to make rules that give benefit to himself. The show was closed precisely by the appearance of a ‘nobody’ character who reveal the deception.

Contrast with the performances that campaign development program, government officials as an informant placed as people who understand the issues, and the people who represented by comedian figure is the one who needs information. Harmoko, minister of information during the Orde Baru administration, writes about how the traditional performing arts can be used as an appropriate media to spread government programs. In addition to providing entertainment, traditional performance can be infiltrated by government information mission to the public. Confessions from few comedians in Ministry of Information circle, Dagelan Mataram performing arts as a media of government programs campaign is essential. It is important in the society of low reading level and limited media information, proximity between performing arts and the community make all information carried by the show easily submitted.

Chapter IV. End

In the previous chapters have described how *kethoprak* have a very close relationship with Dagelan Mataram. In addition to initiate the birth of Dagelan Mataram, *kethoprak* also the source of Dagelan Mataram players. Ketoprak which originally is a folk performing arts with simple equipments and everyday life stories changes when the nobles felt the need to involved in this art.

Royal intervention in ketoprak performances is part of cultural action to express nationalism. By promoting the lives of royal palace noble in a form of heroes glorification. Such cultural expression happens because of the Dutch colonial did not allow society of colonies to show the identity of nationhood. Therefore by lifting the greatness of the king's life, burst of nationalism could be expressed. Unfortunately, the pressure on the nobility story symbolized by *abdidalem* character from grassroots often appear rather to show the contrast between the aristocracy and the common people.

The emergence of radio gives additional space to spread these cultural expressions. With the same spirit of *kethoprak*, radio broadcasts founded by common people trying to display the diverse culture of indigenous natives. MAVRO radio establishment in Yogyakarta then allows the *kethoprak* group named Krido Rahardjo to start broadcasting since 1935. Later, after the independence of Indonesia and then Radio of Republic of Indonesia (RRI) established, this group became *kethoprak* group of RRI Yogyakarta.

Aside from broadcasting ketoprak, Krido Rahardjo group also features Dagelan Mataram performances. Unlike ketoprak which being loyal to heroic stories of the nobles, Dagelan Mataram is more flexible in choosing stories. The story in Dagelan Mataram could be about daily life of common people, repertory of a puppet show, chronicle or just chat show among javanese songs or *keroncong* performance.

Changing of the cosmos traditional rulers (king) to the modern rulers (state) makes the orientation of the show changed. If Dagelan Mataram was originally a cultural expression in the cultural environment of Yogyakarta, authority alteration from the kingdom to modern state caused some different forms of expression. Arts groups, including Dagelan Mataram, which incorporated in RRI Yogyakarta and Information Bureau, had to took part on mission to support the newly formed state. RRI and Information Bureau then affiliate to the Department of Information Republic of Indonesia. Usage of traditional performing arts as a medium to giving information to the community representing ingenious ways. Campaign of development would be more interesting to broadcast in an art show rather than a speech. Besides, performing arts can also became a tool to gather the masses.

Except government, there are other parties who feel their interests can be represented through Dagelan Mataram. Private record companies also use Dagelan Mataram to produce tapes. These tapes allow Dagelan Mataram widely enjoyed, either because they can be broadcast outside RRI broadcasting, and also because the tapes are for sale freely so that people can have and listen the recordings without waiting for radio broadcasting. Products that sponsored Dagelan Mataram performances on radio or tapes is also the one who get benefits from Dagelan Mataram existence. Beyond all of that, the public can invite Dagelan Mataram groups to perform in certain events such as wedding ceremonies, *bersih desa* (village cleaning ceremony) and other community celebrations.

Shifting process at the center of cultural cosmos does not affect the stories of *kethoprak* show instantly. But Dagelan Mataram has more space to adjust to the changes. If *kethoprak* continue to use royal palace environment as a source of the story while common people displayed hierarchically, in Dagelan Mataram people have the opportunity to show their own self. Even in a show titled Impen Daradasih, people had opportunity to criticize the arbitrarily authority. Equivalent to a hierarchical authority in *kethoprak* performance, there can be found government officials figure who gave information or became conflict mediator in Dagelan Mataram show.

It is inevitable that Dagelan Mataram become too similar with *kethoprak*, wherefore *kethoprak* become a regeneration channel for Dagelan Mataram comedian. Hence, when *kethoprak* performing arts dimmed, Dagelan Mataram has a major problem of lacking players to perform in the show. Yuningsih comedian stated that ketoprak group owned by RRI Yogyakarta has only about thirty members now, other than that there is no more junior players. Yuningsih herself has actually retired from RRI, but lack of *kethoprak* comedian forced her to run *dagelan* and *kethoprak* broadcast continuity. Yuningsih overcome the lack of Dagelan Mataram problems by asking Waluh comedian, a former comedian for Department of Information in Yogyakarta, to participate in the production of Dagelan Mataram shows.

There are no successor generation in Dagelan Mataram due to the failure of regeneration. The reason for this is partly because both RRI and the Ministry of Information are not trying to give a proper education for ketoprak and dagelan

comedian. So far, those institution just waiting for a well-formed comedian. Every year, the Ministry of Information arrange an information stage contest in order to find information interpreter. Meanwhile RRI Yogyakarta make a policy for internships as a regeneration step. Unfortunately the process of internship take few years of low-incentive shows which make succession planning does not work as expected. It is ironic that most of the artists involved in the *kethoprak* and Dagelan Mataram unit RRI Yogyakarta is recruited prior to year 1990.

Humors in Dagelan Mataram, as described in previous chapters, can work because both audience and comedians has the same cultural references, which is Javanese culture, particularly those who lives in the neighborhood of Yogyakarta. Daily stories of an agrarian society, chronicle, *kethoprak* play, puppet show, are something nearby and basically is the embodiment of such great culture as source of the story of Dagelan Mataram. In the cultural sphere where there are a cosmos of farmer's life and a cosmos that centered to the authority of a king, Dagelan Mataram took a middle position. It became an effective tool for the authority to convey ideas, and vice versa Dagelan Mataram is also a tool to reminding the authority policy.

The Rhythm of the Blues: Humor, Fantasy and Melancholy in Philippine and Singaporean Gay Writing in English

Miguel Antonio N. Lizada *

Abstract

The paper is part of my ongoing research that seeks to examine the interplay between modernity and the production of gay sexual identity as articulated in Philippine and Singapore poetry in English. Of particular interest is how gay writing through its themes of fragmentation, dislocation, melancholy and nostalgia functions as critical texts that interrogate the complex engendering of modernity. The focus of this paper will be the anthologies of Filipino poet Ronald Baytan, *The Queen Sings Blues: Poems 1992 – 2002* (2007) and Singaporean Ng Yi-Sheng, *Last boy* (2006). Humor and parody in both texts are extensively used to depict retellings of cultural myths, the reframing of urban space and personal anecdotes. Closer examination of selected texts would reveal however that underneath the laughter and play are experiences of pain, melancholy and dislocation. In this paper then, I argue that humor and melancholy are essentially two sides of the same coin, that sexual identity much like the total and totalizing experience of modernity in late capitalism is characterized by a sense of splitting of selves and dispositions that nevertheless cohesively inform each other: pain and/with/in pleasure, laughter and/with/in tears and vice versa.

Although defined in different specific terms across historical movements and societal transformations, melancholy has generally been seen as an experience of loss and regarded as either a destabilizing or unstable force in the current of things. As we will see later on in the discussions and the literary explications that follow, this sense of destabilization is not completely a negative thing but is rather a critical valuable potential which, when activated, opens new thresholds in the understanding of human experience.

To understand this, it would benefit us to first see how melancholia was perceived and interpreted throughout Western history. Classical philosophers saw melancholia as a bodily, physical presence, specifically as a form of black bile (*melaina-kole*) which when produced excessively creates an imbalance in the body that eventually causes particular illnesses (Flatley 33-34). Medieval Christian interpretations of melancholy on the other hand saw the disposition as essentially a sin, as a rejection of “the glory and presence of God” (Flatley 35). Renaissance writers who revived some of the Classical philosophies built on the Classical interpretation by believing that it is precisely this unstable imbalanced disposition that gives birth to the genius. They saw melancholy as a “kind of heightened self-awareness” (Flatley 36) that intrinsically characterizes the poet’s temper. In building his theories in psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud used the notion of melancholy extensively by

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showing how the experience of initial loss becomes the necessary birth pains for the ego and along with it, the formation of identities and affects. In all cases then, we find how melancholy as the experience of loss is essential not only to the formation of human self but to the understanding of the self and quite possibly human relations as well. Melancholy is not merely an experience but also a perspective that generates precisely from an experience of loss.

Walter Benjamin in his seminal works on modernity and urbanism positions melancholy in the same way. In his reading of Paris through the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin sees urban experience as essentially a successive sequence of fleeting, fragmentary moments that paradoxically are but repetitions within the same system. Such experience, Benjamin argues forms the cause of *ennui* or “boredom” (Gilloch 211). Melancholy in this regard then allows for a perspective that identifies the “impoverishment of human life” (Gilloch 208) and the “ruination of urban experience” (Gilloch 211). Benjamin does not stop there. He goes on to argue that it is precisely this experience of loss and the critical optic it generates that “might allow one to gain access to the historical origins of one’s suffering and indeed to the logic of historicity itself” (Flatley 65). Melancholy then functions as the gravitational force of sorts that pulls together what Benjamin calls a *constellation*, a “combination of surprising historico-political insight that brings with it a joltingly electric sense of emotional investment in the possibility of transformation” (Flatley 72). Melancholy for Benjamin then not only provides an optic for perceiving urban material realities but possibilities for articulating and transforming histories and interpretations of histories.

My reading of the poetry of Ronald Baytan and Ng Yi-Sheng, two openly gay poets from Manila and Singapore will draw its critical purchase primarily from Benjamin’s reading of modernity. The paper seeks to identify how melancholy, particularly one that departs from the experience of gay sexuality, articulates the alternative histories and dispositions as they are activated precisely by the experience of loss. It should be noted as well that what is particularly interesting about these works is that at first glance, the poems are not exactly melancholic. In contrast, they are actually extensively humorous and parodic. Towards this, I am interested to know how such articulations function as viable and rich forms of critiquing the urban production of their own modernity. In other words, what can be critically gained by talking about what we have lost, and in a way, even laughing about it?

Modernity of Manila and Singapore

The relationship between modernity and urbanism is an interplay between time and space. Using its etymology, *modus* meaning “now” or “present,” I see modernity as the articulation of *present* time in relation to the *past* and the *future*. As a movement that followed the Age of Enlightenment and a transformation wrought by industrialization and capitalism, modernity’s concept of the present is one grounded and ultimately oriented towards notions of progress and even utopianism. Urbanism then is the material and spatial production of this articulation. Through architectural designs, transformed landscapes and infrastructures that regulate human and capital flows, urbanism reproduces this concept of time-through-space.

Noticeable in the urbanism of Manila and Singapore as two postcolonial Southeast Asian cities is that their modernities are characterized by a constant negotiation between two opposing forces – a dialogic grounded first in their *pre-/post-*colonial past and secondly by their orientation towards a globalizing and globalized destiny.

For Singapore, it is the tension between the global and the local, between the progressive and often individualized “cosmopolitans” and the conservative value-systems of the “heartlanders.” This negotiation is materialized through an urbanism that is vertically oriented. Verticality here is not just about the high rise buildings and the need to accommodate a growing population of locals and migrants within a limited space. I argue rather that verticality is a critical subtext that grounds the narrative patterns of Singapore’s urbanism. First, it points to the compression of landmarks, “historical” architecture, cultural symbols in order to articulate Singapore’s simultaneous posture as a Southeast Asian nation and a global city (Goh 2005). It also points as well to the systematic destruction and (re)construction of urban space as the notion white-washing is in a way a form of verticality, of putting “new” things on top of “old” or “obsolete ones.”

As such, the notion of verticality is not only evident in Singapore’s physical landscape. It is seen as well as an orientation that directs urban and cultural policies in order to accommodate the tension between global and local. It speaks as well of the corporate, hierarchal top-to-bottom narrative that disciplines the production of spatial and official discourses.

Conversely, Manila’s modernity rests on the notion of horizontality. To understand this, we have to explore one critical aspect in the cartography of contemporary Manila: that is a city without a physical Center.

Intramuros in colonial Manila was the seat of the economic and ecclesiastic power of the Spanish empire. The tall walls of Intramuros then did not just help repel invasions; they symbolically contained and compressed within Intramuros as well the narratives of guns, gold and God. The Allied liberation at the end of the Second World War that destroyed much of Intramuros did not simply mean an obliteration of infrastructures. The explosion that ruptured the core city spurred as well a massive exodus towards the fringes and enabled what were once communities and spaces in the periphery to develop into more urbanized spaces. For instance, Makati and Ortigas once suburbs are now regarded as the business districts that integrate Manila (and the Philippines) into the economic global network of nations.

The post-war reconstruction and brief economic boom of Manila saw as well the rapid migration of families from the provinces. Having no money to buy or to lease out living spaces, these workers live as informal settlers in what used to be the center of the city. What was once the powerful center of Manila now has two paradoxical functions. On the one hand, it is no longer the center of formal economic power (Makati and Ortigas are). Yet on the other hand it still functions as a critical center in that the spaces house workers who provide necessary cheap labor (e.g. serving as janitors, cashiers, street sweepers etc.) that maintain and support much of Manila’s infrastructure.

I speak of two things then when I argue that the urban production Manila’s modernity is fundamentally horizontal. First I point to the dispersal wrought by the literal explosion of the center. This migration does not simply refer to the rapid

urbanization of the fringes but the development of multiple internal narratives and systems that do not cohere and often compete with the narratives of other spaces in the metropolis. Tangential to this is the so-called ruralization of Manila (Caoili 1988; Berner 1997). The occupation of informal settlers in the center has both physical and socio-cultural implications. As this occupation is now literally in the heart of the metropolis, this presence influences much of the policies and patterns of urbanism that spatially articulate the tension between the increasingly ruralization of urban space and the need to function as a city in a globalized world. Such influences include among others: the continued proliferation of gated spaces to separate the increasingly indeterminable distinction between private and public spaces and the construction of infrastructures that seek to negotiate, partition and space out the conflicting and contesting narratives within the city.

As such, the modernity of Singapore can be seen as one characterized by notions of compression, condensation and linearity brought about and produced by an urbanism that is intrinsically vertical. In contrast, the modernity of Manila is experienced as a sense of flatness, incoherence, confusion and spacing out.

In what follows, I shall read several poems written by Ronald Baytan and Ng Yi-sheng with particular emphasis on how gay inflection colors the experience of melancholy and how this notion of melancholy-through-humor responds to these patterns of urbanism through poetry as medium of choice.

Ng Yi-sheng and the Cosmology of Oblivion

Striking across the poetry of Ng are motifs and themes that revolve around the notion of cosmology. His poems are extensively colored by cosmic imagery and concepts from speculative and science fiction. I would argue then such a creative practice is a critical response to the silencing of particular identities that are not incorporated into or recognized by the narrative of official discourses. As Kean Fan Lim in “Where Love Dares (Not) Speak Its Name: The Expression of Homosexuality in Class” (2006) remarks “Homosexuals are apparently tolerated only to the extent *that* they remain interstitial spaces, *invisible* to public eyes” (Lim 137). I argue then that is precisely this silencing, this lack of identification within the polis that forms the nucleus of gay melancholy in Singapore. In using these cosmic imageries and motifs then, Ng reorders, develops and constructs constellations that generate new zodiacs of meaning.

It can then be argued that although the situations and images are not specific to Singapore alone, the parodic flavor of Ng’s poetry functions then as a commentary on the instability of sign systems articulated by dominant and official narratives.

Ng’s poem “Legend” demonstrates how such a critical practice can be achieved:

I am reading to my cousin’s children. I have to teach them the concept of Africa.

The people are like us. Only their skin is black. They are mildly incredulous.

The story is about Anansi. Do you like spiders? But they help us to eat mosquitoes

He traps the world's common sense in a calabash. *Like coconut, or maybe papaya*
 ("Legend," 1-4)

What is interesting in this poem is how the speaker constantly interjects and creates his own commentaries and insights on the material, on the perceived mainstream knowledge of particular histories and legends. He interjects his concept of race (line 2) and about how people respond to seemingly unpleasant creatures such as spiders. He also recontextualizes particular material objects. The conclusion of the poem articulates Ng's insight: "So if you are still stupid, *I say*: / blame story. Not Anansi. ("Legend," 10-11), emphasizing then the potential of the speaker to reposition the production of meaning of particular practices and their consequent receptions.

The practice of rewriting cultural myths and narratives is also the subject of Ng's other poems. In the poem "Naka," Ng speaks of a Tokyo that is "inside out," parodying and ultimately distorting the urban cosmology of the sign systems of Tokyo and possibly Japanese culture:

There's a Tokyo inside-out:
 streets of gravel, wooden paneling.
 Instead of floodlamps, giant bonsai,
 subway channels full of carp.

The scraped skies and Freon moons
 all packed into restaurants,
 grand pavilions of grease and octopus carts,
 Yamaha motorbikes revved up the escalators.
 ("Naka," 1 – 8)

Although the poem makes no references to Singapore, I argue that what is more important is here is how Ng constantly asserts an alternative perspective and vision of urban experience. Here in this poem, Ng takes an urban landscape and creatively pulls it inside-out, revealing the critical and otherwise colorful and material subtexts that color the production capital and human flows of a particular city. In the case of Tokyo, Ng reveals that the subtext that governs the articulation of Tokyo's modernity is conflation and coherence and various forms of human materiality (bonsai, Freon, motorbikes) as well as "natural" objects that are nevertheless specific to Tokyo or Japanese culture. As such, like the position of the storyteller he assumes in "Legend," Ng positions himself as one who experiences particular materialities and urban experiences beyond the realities articulated in official discourses.

Ng employs the same technique in "Quetzalcoatl." Here the speaker speculates that the "Messiah will come like Cortes / against orders from the crown, sailing tall ships / to Earth" ("Quetzalcoatl" 1-3) likening then the experience of final human salvation ironically to the narrative of colonialism. Ng's rendition of the arrival of this Messiah is not without a taste of cosmic-themed humor and possible allusions to celebrities of popular culture:

He will descend in his glittery spacesuit
 on a velvet gangway of tissue lilies,
 stopping to high-five millenarians
 in feathered hats.

Behind and before, a sea of gunmen,
 ready to kill for the kingdom of god
 and a handful of beads.

Up to the mike and a sea of recording angels
 (yes, the apocalypse will be televised).
 (“Quetzalcoatl,” 5 – 13)

In mixing religious beliefs, historical narratives and references to pop culture, Ng suspiciously replicates the pattern of semiotic compression Singapore’s urbanism materializes. What makes this rendition humorous however is the incoherence of this creative compression, parodying and mocking then the very same material production that characterizes Singapore’s modernity. The humor seems to speculate that like the similarities of Christian salvific history and the birth of colonial oppression, the urban narrative that governs the articulation of the official story and spatial practices of Singapore is likewise a silly myth. For one, both the Christian story and colonialism share histories of selectivity, judgment and violence against those who do not adhere to the conventions trumpeted by those above. The same can be said then about the policies of Singapore and how they render those beyond the boundaries of official discourse as invisible. Towards the conclusion, Ng posits that salvation and happily-ever-after then comes with a hint of violence:

The sound of a trumpet and he will marvel
 at this brave new planet, his for a thousands,
 at the odd new of his body,
 still fresh, like murder upon tongue.
 (“Quetzalcoatl,” 33 – 37)

In this regard, the mention of “brave new planet” as a possible recontextualization of the utopian (and colonial) term “brave new world” functions as a possible parodic critique of the kind of utopian orientation that Singapore’s spatial articulation materializes.

Finally, the poem “White Apes” articulates both the anxieties of those who produce the official discourses of progressivism as well as the fate and possibly hopes of those who stray from the path. The poem presents otherwise tragic stories such as that of a “king and a queen of the Ashanti tribe” (1) who “crashland their plane in northern Suffolk. / Their son is found, the sole survivor, / and raised by hedgehogs” (“White Apes,” 1 – 3). The poem moves on to talk about other stories that follow the same tragic pattern, of children being separated from their families and being nursed by animals in the wilderness.

Ng then moves on by tracing the course of human societal transformation from being “feral beings/in every tundra, woodland, velt” (“White Apes,” 15 – 16) to being “hunters” who “ran with the pack” and whose “legs grew strong” (“White Apes” 23 – 24). Until finally:

We are legion
 We crisscross the globe
 forever laughing at the natives
 for speaking to animals
 and never listening.

How we go
 where black man, white man
 will not go:
 to the crypts of Egypt, the canopy layer,
 to missing continents.
 (“White Apes,” 25 – 34)

In the end, Ng warns us of the fate of the children of those who venture into the unknown, into the productive enterprise of human progressivism and quest for enlightenment and possibly racial superiority:

How we go to the surface of Mars
 waiting for the shipwreck,
 not daring to think
 what creatures might wait in the darkness
 to claim our children.
 (“White Apes,” 49 – 53)

In this instance then, Ng seeks to express the anxiety of the instability of progressivism. The reversal of the identity and disposition of the children articulates how there will be those who will in the end fall beyond the linearity of progressiveness. It can be said then that such a fable of sorts in a way mimics parodically the fate of homosexuals in Singapore. Singapore’s gradual and quick venture into cosmopolitanism opened as well the thresholds for new identities that have fall beyond the categories of official discourse.

In remapping and reconstellating meanings through parody then, Ng converts (like in “Naka”) the experience of melancholy of the silencing and shows how official discourses are in fact unstable and may very well fall apart at the hands of those who see them for the kinds of ruination they create, for the myth they wish to propagate. In saying “We are legend” (“White Apes, 48) Ng points to two meanings of the word: on the one hand, a fiction (as opposed to reality) and on the other, a force to be reckoned with. In his poetry, Ng Yi-sheng shows that the gays in urban space may very well be both.

Queening the City: Ronald Baytan’s Poetry

If Ng Yi-sheng’s parodic rendition of gay melancholia wrought from a vertically oriented urbanization was done paradoxically through a creative discourse on cosmology (space as infinite and wide), Filipino poet Ronald Baytan’s response to the horizontal outward-spinning urban patterns of Manila can be seen through a notion of interiority, through a discourse on the body. In Baytan’s poetry, gay

melancholia is characterized not by the loss of voice or place, but by nostalgia for proper nostalgia, for the ability to give a name and face to memory. Like the flattened metropolis characterized by spaces with different multiple identities, much of Baytan's poetry in *The Queen Sings Blues* (2007) is thematically linked by a discourse on the facelessness, darkness and anonymity of memory, particularly those of his past lovers.

In "La Puta Del Mundo" (itself a parody of Gluck and Neruda's poems), Baytan assumes the persona of an older gay man talking to a seemingly younger one:

To the question, How many men
Have you slept with? I cannot tell

You. But I mean to ask, This week
This month this year this garden?

How could I count when I have loved
Them only in the absence of light?
("La Puta Del Mundo," 1 – 6)

One might notice as well how the uneasy, awkward enjambment, use of capitalization and placement of punctuation marks formally develop and extend this placelessness and incoherence. The melancholy wrought from the inability to maintain tangible, long-term relationships is likewise articulated:

Why should it matter then if I could not
Keep them or count them? I have lost

Faith in the possibility of encounters,
In the meeting of lost halves.
("La Puta Del Mundo" 23 – 26)

The inevitability of loss of both human relations and memory of such relationships forms the poem's final insight. This time, however, the speaker shares a bit of advice (or perhaps a sense of foreshadowing):

I shall not change for you, beautiful one.
The men shall be counted and forgotten
And you too shall forget you ever asked.
("La Puta Del Mundo" 37 – 39)

For Baytan, this whole discourse on the fleetingness of memory is ultimately played out in and by the body. The body here does not just function as the nexus of these incoherent, fragmented memories but as the site for play and parody as well. In fact, the parodied and playful body itself becomes the medium for articulating this melancholy. In "Queen," Baytan sees himself as a cross-dressing beauty pageant queen about to pass on the crown and leave the scene. The poem begins with a possible childhood memory:

Mama, the rhinestones are falling one by one
 Because I always put the crown on my head
 When you and Papa are sleeping. Imagine:
 A fairy at the center stands with her wand
 That stirs glowing waves of magic like sea
 Shells in the dark. The crown is divine.
 (“Queen,” 1 – 6)

The rather humorous reimagining ends nevertheless with a contemplation of the fleetingness of experience. Like the time of the beauty pageant queen, there is a beginning and an end:

Mama, as you sleep in the other room, I am
 Sushmita, head up, teeth, white, lips red and wide,
 Hands touching hips, foamy bosom out, tummy
 Tucked. In my mind, Mama, I am holding a fresh bouquet
 Waving to a feverish crowd, and you are there crying
 Because it’s your son’s farewell walk as queen.
 (“Queen,” 25 – 30)

Towards this, the kind of “queening” Baytan speaks of is the experience of the body of the beauty pageant queen. It is a kind of performance but what is performed ironically is the melancholy of the fleetingness of memory. As a response to this, focus then is placed on the present. In “Cup,” the speaker likens himself as a porcelain decoration, receiving and desiring again experiences of pleasure without a face.

Let me be a cup
 Empty and open
 Seeking
 The many tongues
 Of love.

I am cold
 And plain is etched
 On my porcelain skin.
 Many lips have pressed
 Promises of love
 On my mouth.
 (“Cup,” 1 – 11)

Ultimately, he contemplates on the inevitability of death of body and the passing of memory:

I am strong
 Heat has hardened
 My heart of clay,
 But my body is yellowed
 By the seasons.

Before the years
 Break me apart:
 Beloved, I pray:
 Come
 (“Cup,” 17 – 25)

“Come” here points to two things: the arrival of the lover and at the same time, sexual orgasm. Aside from the word play, what is also noticeable is the notion of immediacy, the need to accumulate more and more experiences and sensations of pleasure.

In Baytan’s poetry then, the geography of the city becomes the anatomy of the body. Baytan’s queened body parodies and performs the melancholy that mirrors the incoherence and flattenedness of the city. Like the beauty pageant queen, there is a beginning and an end, there is the crown and the final walk. What matters more then is to live every moment, to relish every rose thorn, every camera flashed. Oblivion in this city is inevitable. What matters for this poet are not the remembering of names and faces but knowing that there are those who “came” and who will come.

Conclusions, Recommendations and Invitations for Further Work

I have now presented several poems in which I argued how patterns of urbanism are mirrored and refracted by the literary production of two poets. There are certainly more poems in the volumes they have produced. Baytan and Ng for example also creatively retell particular historical anecdotes and cultural myths. the challenge now is to apply these generalizations into richer more nuanced categories for examining the interplay between the modernity and poetry and ultimately the difference a gay/queer identity makes.

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How Can Synonyms Become Funny? A Case Study into the Use of Transformative Literary Devices in Unnarut Roy Rueng

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Abstract

Normally a synonym is a word that has the same meaning or nearly the same meaning as another word (e.g. *unusual* and *aberrant*, *mom* and *mother*, *adequate* and *enough* etc.) Very often, synonyms are used in poetry so as to make the poem more colorful or to retain the original meaning. However, Khun Suwan, who composed Unnarut Roy Rueng which is one of the most famous humorous pieces of literatures in Thai, made use of synonyms for humorous purposes in the scene of transforming some characters in the story. That is, she makes use of the synonyms to construct two possible readings of the scene. This challenges most basic concepts in humor theories which contend that a humorous event should consist of two incompatible entities instead of something similar. Our study finds that Khun Suwan constructs a suitable context for the synonyms to activate meaning opposition between real transformation and fake transformation of the characters. The scene then comes to have two contradictory readings.

1. Introduction

Unnarut Roy Rueng is a Thai humorous literature composed by Khun Suwan. It is written in a form of prose which is similar to many literatures that are composed for play like opera in western culture. However, Unnarut Roy Rueng has never been played on stage. This is probably due to its humorous plot and the linguistic style used by the author, as she violates the convention in composing a (normal) literature. Some even claimed she was abnormal. From the point of view of humor analysts, on the contrary, it can be said she is very creative and her work is worth studying in depth.

Before talking about the analysis of her story in depth, let us have an overview of the story. Khun Suwan started the story with the character named Unnarut and then introduced many characters that originally belong to other literatures and folk tales. Therefore this story is like a mixture of many well known characters, most of which are, however, given new ridiculous roles. Some well known heroes become servants or come to have inferior roles, while some well known heroines become ugly non-human beings unlike a typical heroine in Thai literature.

Talking more specifically about her linguistic strategies, the scene of transforming some characters to prepare the army for fighting with the opposition in the story is composed with one interesting linguistic device, that is, synonyms. The

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interesting point is not the synonyms themselves, but how the author made use of them. Normally, every joke has two possible readings caused by two incongruous meanings or script opposition (Raskin 1985), therefore the more the two meanings contrast, the more possible the text will be humorous. Synonyms, on the other hand, are normally employed only when one wants to retain the same meaning in the text. This is due to the nature of synonyms that are words which have near or the same meaning. So it seems impossible that synonyms can be a good resource to make a joke. However, Khun Suwan made it possible when composing Unarut Roy Rueng. She employed synonyms in the scene of transforming some characters to prepare the army before setting the war. More specifically speaking, she makes use of synonyms to create incongruity between real transformation and fake transformation.

2. Incongruity and Script Opposition

Before we analyze the scene of transforming characters in Unarut Roy Rueng and how Khun Suwan made use of the synonyms, let us consider the background concept to be used as the framework in this study first. The history of research on language and humor is long and rich. Numerous researchers from different sciences have made a great effort to find out how humor is provoked or what makes people laugh or even just mildly smile. In the past humor scholarship has been dominated by psychologists and philosophers who mostly believe in Incongruity Theory. It was just around the late 1970s that linguists acquired a role among the central players of humor research, especially verbal humor. Raskin Victor (1985) is one of the first scholars to apply a semantic theory, the script-based semantics, to analyze joke text systematically. He is concerned to discover how and why humorous text is funny and different from non-humorous text. His theory, of which the key notion is script opposition, is still harmony with the school that sees incongruity as the very essence of humor. Incongruity Theory has a long history and has been often taken as a basic. Let us consider some famous definitions:

Kant (cited in Morreall 1987: 47) said “Laughter is an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”

Shultz (1976: 12) said “Incongruity is usually defined as a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke”.

McGhee (1979: 6-7) said “The notions of congruity and incongruity refer to the relationship between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation, so forth. When the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous”.

Attardo (1997), one of Raskin’s students, contends that both notions of incongruity and script opposition are cognitive, since they rely on constructs such as *concept* and *expectation*. Scripts are collections of semantic information embodying the cultural knowledge of a society pertaining to a given subject. As such this cultural knowledge can be a set of expectation.

Raskin’s script-based theory, however, focuses more on the verbal humor or joke text, where the words employed can activate incompatible or opposed scripts. “Opposed scripts”, according to Raskin (1985: 108), are *local antonyms*, i.e. two

linguistic entities whose meanings are opposite only within a particular discourse or solely for the humorous purpose of the discourse. Therefore they are different from antonyms defined in the traditional way such as *dichotomous*, *binary* and *gradable antonyms* given by Lyons (1977). Let us consider an example analyzed by Raskin (1985: 117-127).

“Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper.
 “No,” the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in.”

At first, the word “doctor” activates the script DOCTOR, but then the words describing his wife and her reaction to the patient activate another script, that is, LOVER, which opposes to the first script, i.e. actually the story is not concerned with a visit to a doctor so as to get a treatment, but adultery.

When standing alone, it is impossible that the script DOCTOR would contrast with LOVER. However, in this context, it is made possible. Attardo (1997: 400) elaborates Raskin’s explanation of local antonyms with reference to this joke that the locality requirement of the Script-based Semantics Theory of Humor is to be interpreted as constructing a context in which being a doctor is the opposite of being a lover. Thus, construction a suitable context in which one script is opposed to the other is the essence of a humorous text.

By *context*, Attardo (1997) means the set up of the story or the initial verbal part of the text, in our study; however, context will be extended to cover the knowledge of tradition in writing Thai literature. This is important since it is very usual that a literature in Thai when containing a scene of preparing for fighting, it will have a scene that narrates how the characters transform themselves. This prior knowledge could be a good set up that helps activate script opposition in the reader’s mind when he or she finds that the story does not follow the tradition and thus faces an unexpected event.

3. The technical term

The term “synonym” to be used in this study will cover both a word that has the same or nearly the same meaning as another word and any word that signifies the same thing or person as another word. Therefore, both common nouns that have similar meanings and proper names which signify the same character or person will be classified under the term “synonym” in this paper.

4. Analysis and Findings

In this section, we will examine how Khun Suwan made use of synonyms to make her story funny or to cause the humorous conflict between real and fake transformation. The extracts to be analyzed here are part of the scene called “transformation scene” (in which the characters normally transform themselves). It is concerned with transformation when preparing the army before setting a war (see the full text of this scene in the appendix). The scene gets started by the character named *Naag Uthaj*, who wanted to search for her husband because he had left without saying a word. According to the beginning of the scene, she is presented as she wanted to

pursue her husband with a large group of soldiers. The story presents her as if she was the chief command of the army and she was the first person who transformed herself. After that, the story starts with many characters which are presented to be her followers and work for the army. They are all narrated to change themselves, but with the use of synonyms they remain the same as they used to be.

The original text is presented in Thai and then each sentence will be translated into English, of which the Thai synonyms including Thai proper names will be transcribed with phonetic symbols.

Original Text in Thai [Extract 1]

1	จำจะยกโยธาคดลาไคล	ตามองค์พระอภัยมณีเสขฐา
2	ว่าพลางนางแปลงกายา	เป็นองค์ผู้ดาเยาวมกลย์
3	รู้พลได้ก็กลายเป็นโยธา	ไยอราแปลงเป็นคชสาร
4	พาสี่แปลงเป็นอาชาชาญ	พระพรหมงานแปลงเป็นท้าวธาดาคา
5	ไทรสรให้แปลงเป็นสิงหราช	สฤณชาติให้แปลงเป็นนักงษา
6	พระราเมศแปลงเพศเป็นราม	พยัคฆาแปลงเป็นพยัคฆ์

Broad Translation [Extract 1]

1	(I) will bring an army	to find my husband
2	While, uttering a spell to herself she transformed herself	to be Sūdaajawwāmaan
3	Riiphon turned into Joothaa	Ajāraa changed into Khótchāsān
4	Phaachii changed into Aachaachaan	Phráphrommaan changed into Tháawthada
5	Krajsŭn changed into Sīnghàràt	Sākunchāat changed into Pàksāa
6	Phīrāraameēt changed into Raamaa	Phajākkhaa changed into Phajākkhii

At the beginning of the scene as mentioned earlier, *Naan Uthaj*, who is presented as the leader of the army, changed herself into *Sūdaajawwāmaan* which literally means ‘a young beautiful woman’. According to our best knowledge of Thai literature, there is no character entitled with this name, so it is not a transformation from one character into another character. Besides, such a name has a typical meaning that a heroin in Thai literature tends to have. Therefore, it can be said that she just transformed herself into a woman. More specifically speaking, she did not change herself at all i.e. she remained the same as a woman as she was. It seems that what she did has no clear purpose, but a reader might think that she wants to conceal her real identity like changing from one woman into another woman. However, as the story continues, it gradually reveals that like her no one in her army has completely changed at all. The ridiculous points lie clearly in the following lines where a linguistic pattern repeatedly occurs in a formula of

[A] changed into [something/someone similar/identical to A]

The slot [A] is filled by common nouns or proper names signifying many characters, of which some are human, while some are not. The words that are put in the slot [something/someone similar/identical to A] are synonymous with those put in [A].

Let us first consider the first sentence in the third line of the extract 1 again.

ຂ້ຽພດໃຫ້ກຳລາຍເປັນໂຢຄາ

Riiphon turned into loothaa

The sentence gets started with the word ຂ້ຽພດ *Riiphon* which means ‘a large group of soldiers’, and then it is followed by ໃຫ້ກຳລາຍເປັນ *hàiklaaipên* which means ‘turned into’. This initial part of the sentence, especially the verb phrase ໃຫ້ກຳລາຍເປັນ *hàiklaaipên* strongly activates the script of CHANGE or TRANSFORMATION. In the reader’s mind, *s/he* would expect that the following word must be a word that refers to something different from ຂ້ຽພດ *Riiphon*. However, the word ໂຢຄາ *loothaa* ‘army’ comes up. And this contrasts with the previous activated script, since no transformation really occurs; a large group of soldiers is quite similar to an army. This conforms to not only Raskin’s notion of script opposition, but also Kant’s saying “Laughter is an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”, since what is expected is not fulfilled. Next, let us consider another sentence in the right hand column of the same line again.

ໂຢຄາແປລົງເປັນໂຢຄາ

Ajāraa changed into Khótchāsān

The recursion of the pattern [A] changed into [something/someone similar/identical to [A] is clearly seen: ໂຢຄາ *Ajāraa* ‘elephant’ ແປລົງເປັນ *Pléngpên* ‘changed into’ ໂຢຄາ *Khótchāsān* ‘big elephant’. Also, in the following line the same kind of animals, the horses, changed into horses.

ພາຫຼີແປລົງເປັນອາຫາ

Phaachii changed into Aachaachaan

Likewise, ພາຫຼີ *Phaachii* ‘horse’ changed into ອາຫາ *Aachaa* ‘horse’ or ອາຫາ *Aachaachaan* ‘brave horse’. Here we focus on the word ອາຫາ *Aachaa* only, since Khun Suwan might add ຫາຍ *chaan* ‘brave’ in order to rhyme with the third syllable in the following sentence. Therefore the horses retain their original forms; no transformation occurs.

Similarly, other kinds of animals have appeared to change their forms, but then synonymous words are used to collapse their transformation.

ໄກວສຸງໃຫ້ແປລົງເປັນສິນທຸກາຫຼີ

Kraisvān changed into Sinhāṭāat

ສຸກຸນຫາດີໃຫ້ແປລົງເປັນປັກຂາ

Sākunchāat changed into Pāksāa

In the left hand column, ^{ไกรสร} *Krajsǝn* means ‘lion’ which is almost the same as ^{สิงห์ราช} *Singhāṛāat* ‘lion king’. Following the same pattern, *Sākunchāat* ‘bird’ was changed into *Pāksāa* ‘bird’. Therefore, in fact both characters of lions and birds have not undergone any real transformation at all.

However, there is one pair of synonymous words referring to a kind of animal that appears to cause a transformation. Let us consider the sentence in the sixth line on the right hand column in the extract 1 again.

^{พยัคฆาแปลงเป็นพยัคฆ์}

Phaiákkh_{aa} changed into Phaiákk_{hii}

The sentence starts with ^{พยัคฆา} *Phaiákk_haa* which means ‘tiger’, followed by ^{แปลงเป็น} ‘changed into’ and ^{พยัคฆ์} *Phaiákk_{hii}* which means ‘female tiger’ or ‘tigress’. It can be said that it is likely that there is a transformation in this part since the gender of the tiger is changed. Nevertheless, as both words still refer to the same specie of the animal, there is not a big change and this sentence is still fit into the formula mentioned above: [A] changed into [something similar to A]. More importantly, it is very common in Thai literature that a word may derive in different forms and occur in combination like a plural noun or a collective noun, for example, ^{ปักษาปักษี} *PāksāaPāksī* ‘birds’ or ‘a group of birds’. Based on this tradition of word derivation, we argue that *Phaiákk_haa* and *Phaiákk_{hii}* are synonymous words. Therefore, it cannot be said that a complete change or transformation really occurs, but just a slight change.

Besides synonymous common nouns signifying animals, several proper names referring to the same characters are also made use of to generate a script opposition between REAL TRANSFORMATION and FAKE TRANSFORMATION.

Extract 2

^{ขุนแผนแปลงกลายเป็นพลายแก้ว}

Khūnp_hēen changed into *Phlaaj_kēew*

The sentence gets started with the name ^{ขุนแผน} *Khūnp_hēen*, which is a proper name of a well known character in Thai literature, followed by ^{แปลงกลายเป็น} ‘changed into’ and ended with ^{พลายแก้ว} *Phlaaj_kēew*, which is another name of this character. At first, the name ^{ขุนแผน} *Khūnp_hēen* together with ^{แปลงกลายเป็น} ‘changed into’ apparently generates the script of TRANSFORMATION. A reader would expect that ^{ขุนแผน} *Khūnp_hēen* would change into someone else. However, another name of his comes up. Even though ^{ขุนแผน} *Khūnp_hēen* is referred to with another name, he remains the same character, but looked younger, since the name ^{พลายแก้ว} *Phlaaj_kēew* is originally used to refer to him when he was a child.

This extract, however, still fits into our formula [A] changed into [someone similar to A], since there is no complete change or real transformation into another

new person, but just a slight change in his age. The character still looks similar to (but not identical) the one referred to in the initial part of the sentence.

Sometimes Khun Suwan made use of the proper names of some gods in Hinduism to generate a contradictory reading of the transformation scene as [A] changed into [someone identical to A] Let us consider an example that occurs in the sixth line in the extract 1 again.

พระสุวรรณแปลงเพศเป็นธำมว

Phráraamêet changed into *Raamaa*

This sentence reads *Phráraamêet* changed his gender into *Raamaa*, nonetheless both *Phráraamêet* and *Raamaa* signify the same god “Vishnu”. Moreover, there is no change in his gender at all.

The other god, Brahma, is also presented as if he was transformed into someone else as shown below.

พระพรหมแปลงเป็นท้าวธาดา

Phráphrommaan changed into *Tháawthada*

Phráphrommaan is a synonym of *Tháawthada* signifying the god Brahma. Literally, this sentence reads the god Brahma transformed into the god Brahma.

More interestingly, though a few cases, Khun Suwan also plays on the real transformation of some characters in Thai literatures. Let us consider the extract 3.

Extract 3

อุณการรณนั้นเป็นบุษบา

Ūnaakan changed into *Bùtsäbàa*

ปิ่นหย้าแปลงกายเป็นธำมว

Panjī changed into *Ōajaan*

In the original version, *บุษบา* *Bùtsäbàa* was changed into *อุณการรณ* *Ūnaakan* and *ธำมว* *Ōajaan* changed into *ปิ่นหย้า* *Panjīai* respectively. Khun Suwan, however, reverses all the names of the two pairs of characters. Apparently, there seems to be a transformation in this part, but in a reverse order. Nevertheless, if we take a closer look on this word play, it is likely that the author refused the real transformation and tried to bring all the characters back to their original forms. Therefore, a contradictory reading occurs between the real transformation in the original literature and the newly made-up transformation in Khun Suwan’s work.

In this case, we may need to group them into another structure as

[A] transformed back into [A]

Even with another new formula, it still generates a script opposition of REAL TRANSFORMATION and FAKE TRANSFORMATION. A reader needs a prior knowledge of the transformation that really occurs in the literature that these characters belong to. And, with this knowledge s/he is surprised with the reverse order which happens to collapse the real transformation.

In conclusion, it can be said that there is no real transformation of any characters at all in this scene except the transformation of the word forms that have the same or near meanings, or signify the same things or persons, and also the reversal of characters' names which are really transformed in its original version. There are two kinds of words that the author made use of: one is the common noun, the other the proper name. A reader might feel that s/he is deceived to expect a transformation like those occur in traditional literatures. Khun Suwan wittily plays on this expectation by giving the initial context of preparing the army that suggests a need of transformation, but then makes use of synonymous words to generate a fake transformation. At the micro level, we can say that the script opposition generated here is REAL TRANSFORMATION vs FAKE TRANSFORMATION, whereas at the macro or more abstract level it can be classified under REAL/NOT REAL which corresponds to one of the three metascripts proposed by Raskin (1985).

5. Conclusion and Discussion

According to the study result, synonyms are made use to construct contradictory readings in two patterns:

- (1) [A] changed into [something/someone similar/identical to A]
- (2) [A] transformed back into [A]

For (1), both common nouns and proper names are employed, while in case of (2) only proper names of well known characters that originally undergo a real transformation are played upon. However, both of the two formulas generate the same script opposition of REAL TRANSFORMATION vs FAKE TRANSFORMATION.

Speaking more specifically of the play on the senses of REAL and UNREAL, it can be categorized into two types. One, with reference to the first formula, is a play on the similar meanings of words or the proper names used to refer to the same characters. The other, with reference to the second formula, is a play on the real transformation of well known characters as Khun Suwan switched their names to reject their real transformation in the original version.

In general, this piece of Khun Suwan's works has an implication that she wanted to violate the traditional convention of composing a literature in Thai which normally has a scene of transformation in which a character is turned into someone else such as those happen in *Raammākian*, *līṭphrāḷḷ*, *Khoomtṛṇ*, *Daaḷāṅ* (Cholada Ruengruglikit. 2006: 570-576). Her satirical method is very creative as she made use of synonyms which include both common nouns and proper names of some well known characters. With this method, no real transformation occurs, but change of word forms and reversal of proper names. The reader is mislead to expect characters' transformation, but then humorously faces mostly words' transformation instead.

In traditional literatures that have transformation scenes, on the other hand, a character is normally turned into a new character with completely different appearance. More importantly, the character usually has a serious purpose when transforming. For example, in *Kēwṇāāmaā* the heroine named *Naaykēw* transformed herself into a man in order to fight with an ogre (Cholada Ruengruglikit. 2005: 1061). It is likely that fighting with the foe is not a job of a woman or the heroine. That's why *Naaykēw* needs to transform herself so that she can perform the task well. Therefore, her transformation suggests more suitable appearance to fit the job as well

as to gain more ability to fight. Similarly, *Bútsābāa*, who was changed into *อุณว* *การณ* *ṭunakaan*, has a serious reason; the transformation is needed for her safety when travelling outside her native town.

In Unarut Roy Rueng, on the contrary, there is no serious reason behind the (apparent) transformation at all, even the one with a slight change. For example,

พยัคฆาแปลงเป็นพยัคฆ์

Phaiákkhaa changed into *Phaiákkhii*

Transforming a tiger into a tigress or female tiger does not neither show any clear purpose nor indicate that a female tiger has more capability in fighting. Instead, it is ridiculous and satirical that a job of fighting should be in a female's hand. Similarly, when *Khúnpḥēn* changed into *Phiajêkêw* as shown in the extract 2, it is ridiculous as well that a child could fight better than an adult. As a result, all the apparent transformations become ridiculous or look like unreasonable transformations.

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Appendix

จำอะยกโยธาคล่าไคล

(I) will bring an army

ตามองค์พระอภัยเพษฐา

to find my husband.

ว่าพลงนางแปลงกายา

While, uttering a spell to herself

เป็นองศ์ผู้ดาเยาวมาลย์

to be Sūdaajawâmaan

she transformed herself

ฐัฟลให้กลายเ็นโยธา

Riiphon turned into Joothaa

ไอยราแปลงเป็นคชสาธ

Aiāraa changed into Khótchāsāan

พาฐึแปลงเป็นอาชาชาญ

Phaachii changed into Aachaachaan

พระพรหมงามแปลงเป็นข้าวชาดา

Phrāphrommaan changed into Thāawthada

ไกรสรให้แปลงเป็นสิงหราช

Krairān changed into Sīṅhārāt

ศกณชาตให้แปลงเป็นนักษา

Sākunchāat changed into Pāksāa

พระราเมศแปลงเป็นรามา

Phrāraameet changed into Raamaa

พยัคฆาแปลงเป็นพยัคฆ์

Phaiākkhaa changed into Phaiākkhii

นาคาเป็นพระยาวาสุกรี

Naakha changed into Phrāāaawasūkre

โกสิย์แปลงเป็นข้าวหัตถ์นัยน์

Koosii changed into Thāawhātśānāi

พระสุริย์มั่งเ็นทินกร

Phrāsūrian changed into Thinnākwan

ศศิธรเป็นดวงแสงไขว

Sāsithwan changed into Duuangkhēekhāj

เจ้าพลงงามแปลงนามเ็นมั่งเ็นไวย

Cāwphaaiaaam changed into Muunwai

ชาลวะมั่งเ็นให้เ็นกมลภา

Chaalāwan changed into Kumphaa

พระอิศวแปลงเ็นพระศลิ

Phrāṭisūuan changed into Phrāsūlii

ทอฬีแปลงเ็นมทิงษา

Thwāraphii changed into Māhṅsāa

เทเวศรแปลงเ็นเทวา

Theewēet changed into Theewaa

กีนจาแปลงเ็นกีนจู้

Kinnaaraa changed into Kinnaarii

พระยาหงส์แปลงเป็นหงส์ขาว

Phrǎiaahōŋ changed into Hěemmarǎat

พระดาบสแปลงชาติเป็นฤๅษี

Phrádaabòt changed into Ruusii

โคกตายกายเป็นควัว

Khoḥ changed into Khaawii

มฤคิแปลงเป็นมฤค

Márukhii changed into Márukhaa

มยุเรศกลายเพศเป็นมยุงพลัน

Máyurēet changed into Juun

ทศกัณฐ์แปลงเป็นยักษ์

Thotsǎkan changed into Jáksǎa

อุณากรรณนั้นเป็นบุษบา

Ūnaakan changed into Bùtsǎbǎa

บ้านหยาแปลงกายเป็นอ้ายโน

Panli changed into ʔaajan

ขุนแผนแปลงกายเป็นพญายแก้ว

Khúnphĕen changed into Phlaajkéew

สี่พระควาเพ็ดแพ้วเป็นยี่หว้าน

Sijǎtra changed into jǎrǎn

คนธรรพ์ให้แปดเป็นคนธรรพ์

Khonthan changed into Khonthan

นางพิณกลายกายพลันเป็นฉันทอง

Naanphim changed into Wantthoon

ต่างคนล่าแดงแดงฤทธิ์

Everyone shows off its power

ทิศพิศไปหว่าบสยบสยบ

shaking the land for ten directions around

โยธาเหลือหลายกายกอง

The army is full of people

คับคั่งทั้งท้องสนามใน

flocking together in the battle field.

Animation, a Seriously Funny Subject in Cross Cultural Telling Tales

Millie Young*

Abstract

The exchange of personal histories is a universal past-time – story telling gives us enlightenment about our world and entertainment. What helps in our understanding in this exchange is the humour.

Animation as a tool for conveying story can supersede the mere translation of text giving audio, visual and literal signifiers that help cross over cultural barriers.

“Jokolat is stuck in the jungle again with his possessive and jealous elephant. Diichai is holding a party and all the village girls are invited...what can Jokolat do to trick his elephant and go to seek a potential love?”

In this love triangle story “Mere Wife” adapted into animation by Millie Young from oral histories and traditional tales gathered from the Karen Hill tribe there are universal truths and humour in culture specific situations.

The aim of the paper, as part of ongoing research of traditional tales and oral histories about elephants and mahouts in Thailand is to:

- Analyse ‘Mere Wife’ to explore the role of animation in adding humour to tell tales that cross cultural boundaries.
- Question the implications and effects of recording oral histories, which looses the teller’s unique voice that is adapted to each telling.
- Explore why it may be necessary to record stories from cultures’ whose traditions are under threat by the changes in globalization.
- Explore how this sharing to a wider audience can be used to help maintain some of their cultural identity for future generations.

In this paper I will be discussing the thought process and development of ideas that went into the creation of the ten minute animation *Mere Wife by Millie Young*¹, about a mahout, an elephant and his wife. This story was gathered from research in Northern Thailand between 2000 and 2008. I will be discussing the role of animation as a story telling medium, refer to the anecdotes that were part of the research on oral histories and traditional tales about mahouts and their elephants and how these were interwoven into one particular tale to give it an authentic feel to my own interpretation and telling of that tale. Plus I will discuss the importance and role of capturing and sharing these tales to new audiences.

The exchange of personal histories is a universal past time – story telling gives us enlightenment about our world and entertainment within our world. Oral personal histories are often intertwined with historical events, cultural ideologies and traditional stories. These stories offer an opening up of experiences, a shared understanding of the world we live in and a basis to form judgment and decision making in our own lives.

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¹ Mere Wife (2009) directed by Millie Young <http://www.youtube.com/millieanimation>

For the purpose of this paper oral personal histories will refer to anecdotes and stories told about in first hand, first person or third party characters that the teller knows. The exchanges involved only two or three people and the details held some importance to all present. The situations are based on a truth or truths of an actual event. These stories were exchanged in a loose oral setting with the teller acting as the narrator to the events and the audience passive in the main (apart from the odd chortle), to their receiving of the tale. Most of these oral histories like traditional stories, have a moral dilemma or moment of enlightenment (learning) that the teller has gleaned from the event(s). Their aim in telling is to get a connection with and emotionally move the other individual(s). However, these stories are often embellished with details real or adjusted to the author's telling of the tale. They are exchanged in situations for entertainment and in some sense are used to develop a (further) common agreement or ideology. They are told in a reflective way, with the teller acting as the interpreter of the events (usually offering the coded ideology with which the audience is expected to subscribe to) and use the recognizable archetype roles for the 'players' (possibly including themselves) involved in the tale. Essentially the most common archetypes (from Film analysis) that appear, being those identified by Chris Vogler in his book *A Writer's Journey* are The Hero, the Mentor/Friend, The Herald, The Shadow, The Threshold Guardian, The Trickster, and the Shape shifter.²

Traditional story telling for the purpose of this essay refers to the oral tradition of passing on stories that have some common theme and enlightenment to a specific culture or audience, where the same basic elements of the tale have been passed on through various exchanges - possibly they may have started as informal personal histories, but through the development of different telling have become a set pattern of characters, events and outcome. They are however, much; like the oral histories, open to the interpretation of the teller/narrator at any/each given telling, and thus the stories themselves are mutable and able to adapt to changes in audience and environment with each new exchange. The aim of the traditional story is not just to move and connect to another individual, but also to make the personal universal. A good story has, in the words of Karl Iglesias,

“... someone who wants something badly and is having trouble getting it”
And this simple definition needs three primary elements to make it a story: character, character goal and conflict.’³

But this is not the only explanation of story, which can come in many varying forms, especially when derived from different cultures. Story especially when presented in animation can

‘be understood as a sequence of events taking place over a particular period of time. The narrative events are informed by a chain of causes and effects, both subtle and explicit, the ultimate outcome of which is a specified moment of resolution.’⁴

² Chris Vogler in his book *A Writer's Journey* Taken from *Ideas for the animated Short – Finding and Building Stories*, Karen Sullivan Gary Schumner Kate Alexander Focal Press, 2008.

³ Quote from Karl Iglesias. Taken from *Ideas for the animated Short – Finding and Building Stories*, Karen Sullivan Gary Schumner Kate Alexander Focal Press 2008.

⁴ Dr Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, Routledge, 1998.

This is significant in particular when crossing cultural and contextual boundaries. The notion of story and significance of the events, time and place are informed heavily by the culture from which they have derived. This in turn is open to different interpretations by an audience that, in the context of the given text *Mere Wife*, through new technologies is receiving the story in many different contexts both culturally in terms of experience and placement and in their relationship to the storytelling. In terms of the audience's accessibility to media in such a variety of contexts (ipod, PC, telephone, cinema, TV) this experience can be both deliberate, personal and intimate or accidental, disengaged and fragmented. Therefore each individual receives a very different experience and subsequently a different interpretation.

NO two people have exactly the same perception of an experience, because factors such as cultural identity impact interpretation. People who identify with subcultures within dominant societies can ascribe culturally specific meanings to what they see, regardless of the intentions of the creator.⁵

However this does not negate the telling of tales from sub-cultures to a more global culturally diverse audience, I believe it actually enhances and develops the dominant ideologies present when alternative forms are presented (which question and develop the dominant position). In fact it is the very presentation of these alternative perspectives into new contexts and interpretations that I believe can help bring new fresh understandings into our lives (and stories). As a British person living in Thailand I am constantly amused in the almost daily discovery of a new logic with which to look at things in the world I thought, at 40+, I knew. And ultimately these fresh perspectives are funny. This notion of a new logic presented in a different context to a familiar situation was coined significantly well by Antti Vuorio, Tampere Festival Director, one of my fellow ten or so foreigner festival attendees, at the Teheran International Animation Festival 2000, when he said,

“It’s the things people really understand, but don’t!”⁶

What helps in our understanding, and thus makes it a more universal theme in these exchanges, is the seriously important role of humour. In Dr Paul Wells book *Understanding Animation* he discusses the 25 ways to start laughing (specifically about animation).

‘Theories of comedy have proliferated ever since humankind started to laugh, and no one is any closer to knowing why human beings make absurd noises in response to innumerable things that amuse them. Every one would claim to have a sense of humour, but it seems that everyone does not possess the same sense of humour, so what’s funny remains an entirely relative thing. In whatever shape or form, comedy can be silly or subversive, purposeful or perfunctory, observational or

⁵ The Animation Bible, Maureen Furness Laurence King Publishing.

⁶ Antti Vuorio, Tampere Festival Director at the Teheran International Animation Festival 2000.

offensive, but always possesses energy and ‘life’ the intrinsic imperative of animation’,⁷

I will be using some his theories within this discussion, exploring the elements that make telling tales funny, in particular, the role of animation in making the humour and story accessible to a wider audience.

“Creating animated movement is a triadic process of experience, observation and description. The animators uniqueness comes through selection or perceptual biases from experience and observation in the natural world.”⁸

Animation as a tool for conveying story can supersede the mere translation of text from one language to another - giving audio, visual and literal signifiers that help cross over cultural barriers. The medium, the sound, the image and the time frame all combine to act as the storyteller. Although not ‘alive’ and able to adapt to the situation the content is so well controlled that unlike film, which captures real time and is then manipulates and edits it into a different time and ordered sequential form, the creation of animation involves breaking time down into it’s minutest form (1/25th per second) and then recreating a new visual and physical reality in it’s own precise timed world. The word animation derives from the Latin word *anima to breathe life into (something)*. The animator, acting as the creator, making all the decisions on form, size, weight, shape, colour, environment, sound and light, time, gravity – all the visual physical varieties and possibilities are available within their imagination in order to tell the story. The animator is creating the ‘life’ within the story – this is akin to alchemy or magic (when done well) and this is then open to the audience to receive in wonderment much like they would in a ‘live’ storytelling situation.

I aim through analyzing *Mere Wife* to show how the role of animation maintains this freedom of expression of the traditional storyteller’s personal unique voice and how the accessibility of the visual language and the influence of the new globally accessible formats, such as the internet, allow for these stories to be accessed by wider audiences thus opening a wider understanding and appeal for the cultures from where they were derived. This is particularly significant with *Mere Wife* which is derived from research with Burmese Karen who historically have lived and worked with elephants for over 4000 years and whose present circumstances with the military Junta in Burma are under serious threat of being lost. Along with the significant drop in the use and need for elephants in forestry they are being forced into a transient lifestyle, often resulting in living as ‘stateless’ people in refugee camps along the Thai/Myanmar border. They are dependant on their oral histories to maintain some cultural independence, existence and identity in a fragile situation. This transient life and state of perpetual threat to community has meant that these (traditional and personal) stories along with the cultures and traditions of the people are on a brink of disappearing if they are not recorded and shared to a wider audience. Their stories, not just about the present experience, but the oral histories and traditions of ‘long long ago’ are rich with textures and very fabric of human life, and this is something, no matter how far detached we have all become, universally we all share.

⁷ Dr Paul Wells *Understanding Animation* Routledge 1998

⁸ Quote from animator Leslie Bishko *The Animation Bible*, (2008) Maureen Furness Laurence King Publishing

Mere Wife came about from a number of visits to Thailand where I spent months at a time in the Elephant Nature Park(ENP), Mae Taman, North of Chiang Mai and in the Thai Elephant Conservation Center(TECC) in Lampang. It's made up from the stories and anecdotes exchanged between the mahouts, the owner of the park, Sangduen 'Lek' Chailert, Richard Lair, the foreign liaison elephant conservation expert at the TECC, other visitors and elephant enthusiasts and myself. I originally came to Thailand in search of a story that could be animated. I wanted it to be about elephants, a topic that I was initially aware, and now ten years later absolutely sure, I know very little about – but want to know more. At that time I had won a bursary from Meridian TV in the UK to research for another animation; but it was not enough money to realize and make a film. So I decided to broaden my horizons and research something new, and essentially something that without that money I would not have been able to do. I had no idea what I was letting myself in for when I set off for Thailand in December 2000, and the complete turn around it would have on my life. Tens years on I am now living and working in Thailand, I have made the film, plus four short documentaries and another animation, I have had exhibitions of my paintings and continue working on and with the people who work with elephants and still more work is in the offing. From the outset, my very first encounter with an elephant in Thailand I was astounded and amazed, not just by the animals themselves, which are truly magnificent, but what caught my attention and has maintained my interest is the elephants with their mahouts. Without them, I could never dream to stand so close, to interact, to play with an elephant... that's playing with me! Through their careful eyes I saw the elephants. And subsequently a whole world has been opened. So in looking for a story, it was this symbiosis of existence I became fascinated in recording.

Essentially there are two stories interwoven in this adapted tale. The main body of the story is, I have been assured, a traditional tale from the Karen – but in that lies part of the essential mystery of tales... in subsequent telling to various Karen people in and around Thailand the tale apparently bears no familiarity... to others again it is true. Either way I was told it initially by Lek (who is half Thai half Karen). The beauty in the oral tale is its mystery origin! Hence the often familiar opener of 'Once upon a time long, long ago...' This tale I was assured is the explanation as to why the Karen mahout prefer the female elephants and can be heard to call their elephant their wife (so very 'Just So Stories...' Rudyard Kipling).

The second part of the story derives from various anecdotes about jealous elephants. As part of my research I spent on summer vacation in 2004 interviewing mahouts with a variety of questions, which led to the key question:

“Between you elephant and your wife, whom do you love most?”

Peels of laughter usually surrounded the answers, and almost to a man they said their elephants, she doesn't answer back! However, one significant answer came from one mahout at TECC, he loved his wife more, to which all the mahout burst out laughing shouting he was afraid of her! Some jokes need little cross-cultural translation...

This particular jealousy love triangle is a familiar circumstance among mahouts; and a source of much amusement and jokes. In a male dominated (working) society where much of one's time is spent in subservience, as a carer to the elephant's every need, as well as them being the dominator (controller) of the same elephant,

whilst working for at best minimum wage - they are open to peer pressure both in admiration for good care and control and ridicule of their elephant's faults. Mahouts are very low down in social class terms, despite the importance of their role in the future of the revered elephant. However the 'job' has a certain status within it's own context. The mahouts work in a symbiotic relationship with their elephants. Many have learned the 'trade' through a generational lineage. Although more and more this is not the case as traditional work in the forest is scarce and the only opportunities are in the tourist industry, which often doesn't suit the hardened characters of the old timers who are more used to the solitude of the forest. However the peer relationship is still evident and with the long hours spent with their elephants there is much room for jokes. This type of humour can be seen in many cultures, often in low paid male dominated hard labor situations where the object of the works' control, be it the machine being operated, the stove, the ship, the vehicle, the tool etc becomes the metaphor for the jealous lover/wife preoccupied with their life. Their lives are controlled and manipulated by their work and it or the object with in the job takes on anthropomorphic qualities. Which when it comes down to it, is very funny.

In *Mere Wife* the stories have been woven together and ultimately create a cyclical story returning to a scene of the elephant and the mahout together in harmony. However the story contains a twist and I shall explain that later.

So this is essentially a love triangle story *Mere Wife* adapted into animation by Millie Young from oral histories and traditional tales gathered from the Karen Hill tribe. There are universal truths (the need for love and the presence of jealousy) and humour (One of the loves is an elephant – which are without doubt humorous in their visual context – but even more so when this is then put into the role of a wife) in culturally specific situations (it is set in a Karen village), yet it contains familiarity, a universal truth. The medium used in the animation is cut out elephant dung paper, a subliminal signifier that is playing with the notion that the medium is (part of) the message. (Perhaps the cynics may suggest that pure love is made of a crock of *elephant sh*t*). The imagery style gives the visual coding a naive art feel lending itself to the telling of a traditional tale. The style of the characters and the colours chosen were indicative of the Karen handicraft art, the characters are dressed in traditional style clothes (still worn today) adding a timelessness to the story.

It contains the three primary elements to make it a story: character (Jokolat), character goal (He needs love) and conflict (A jealous elephant).

“Jokolat is stuck in the jungle again with his possessive and jealous elephant. Ditchai is holding a party and all the village girls are invited...what can Jokolat do to trick his elephant and go to seek a potential love?”

This is the premise for the story, which starts with the narrator's words lending the feeling that is this an ideal situation, she introduces the audience to Jokolat as a young boy, his life as a mahout, which is bound up with his elephant. This is certainly not a universal theme, nor a common experience on the surface. However there is a significant amount of the potential audience who is familiar with another tale, *Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling and animated by Disney studios. In that tale of a young boy living in the jungle, being brought up by the wolves and animals of the forest and the story holds a strong romanticism and nostalgia in much of the English speaking world... and beyond despite the unfamiliar setting, a romanticism that is still

projected onto the relationship of the elephant and mahout to this day. However, the primeval notion of living among wild animals seems somehow deep-rooted in our collective human psyche.

As his situation becomes more apparent Jokolat's role essentially becomes a universally familiar character, the story's romantic 'hero' in search of his true love and through him the story is told. Although we may not have our lives bound up with an elephant, many peoples lives are restricted by, their work or care for their siblings/parents and find themselves trapped and having to find ways to trick to be able to get some 'freedom' to find their love. So essentially our hapless mahout is a symbol for 'everyman', the elephant a metaphor for a binding love/work/care relationship that acts as an adversary or jealous partner in the search for love/a wife initially the goal to make his life complete.

As a young boy we see the boy and elephant playing together in the river, the passage of time into adult hood passes with simple visual progression (they get bigger) and we then see Jokolat now dwarfed by the large elephant but working in unison.

"So there you have it a harmonious relationship, what could be more perfect?"

However the dilemma is introduced by a slight question in the narrator's tone:

'Jokolat is not happy. His friends laugh and tease him,

"Your elephant is jealous, she is worse than having a wife! She has you wrapped around her trunk!"

Here the humour takes on an all too familiar tone, the elephant takes on role of the nagging wife. No matter the culture the world over there is a commonality with the female wife role being that of a jealous nag! And as suggested earlier there is in its familiarity humour to be had, especially with the visual of an elephant as the wife! The desire of Jokolat then is to go to the party of Diichai, but how? A trick has to come in to play, which is suggested by his friend, Narong, acting as the archetype 'herald' calling him into adventure by offering a solution to the problem,

"Why don't you get a radio, then while your elephant is sleeping try leaving a pillow with the radio playing in your hammock."

As far-fetched as this may sound, (and this was taken directly from an anecdote) the plan works. It too has parallels in modern global context where many parents/wives/lovers are tricked into thinking their husband/lover/son/daughter is safe home asleep – when a pillow has been placed in the bed. Jokolat is seen creeping off and then at the dance, where he meets a beautiful girl called Artee. Naively he declares

"This could be the start of my true love".

There follows sequences that cover a period of time illustrating the building of the relationship toward the marriage day, here is where animation plays a role both in story telling and in humour, condensing the information. The ability of animation to compress a high degree information visually coding the events to develop a sense of drama and tension. There unfolds a repetitive sequence of events including the

cockerel as a (comic) signifier of time passing that set up sense of domestic routine and also act as a humorous precursor for the later breaks from that routine. At this stage the elephant – presumably still duped by the radio trick is happily compliant to the situation. Gradually however we see dissent from Artee,

“You care so much for your elephant when you leave her for only one night, yet you leave me every night on my own! I think you care more about your elephant than you do for me!”

Here we see the set up of the parallel between the wife (to be) and the elephant. Both are needing the universal dilemma of love: commitment. Then there is that other the age-old problem a balance of domestic and work life. And as a solution Jokolat consults with the headman (The ‘mentor’ archetype who helps him out) and a date is set for their marriage.

At this point in the preparations for the wedding we would normally see the bride’s preparations – however, here we see Jokolat lovingly washing and dressing up Mae Boon Ma the elephant for the occasion. At the wedding she stands behind the celebration, and wipes away a tear. This small flicker of emotion, which animation lends itself to, adds small commentary to the proceedings. Is she crying for happiness of the day’s events or mourning the loss of her love? The days events end with another momentary action on the screen – a fly makes it’s way into the food as it is packed away. The narrator’s stern voice points this out, but the action essentially is lost in the visual kaffuffle of the colorful dancing couples reflecting how many a small but important detail is lost in the melee of special occasions.

The earlier domestic routine is re-played, with the addition of scenes of Artee, alone in her newly built home. A classic comedy devise repetition allows the audience to become familiar with the scene and then the break in the routine is made recognizable and the point is emphasized, usually to comic effect. This is where cultures the world over can recognise this situation. The very seed that creates the so-called ‘nagging wife’ and but of so many jokes is often created here in these lonely moments – the jealousy has now reversed and she cries,

“Jokolat thinks more of his elephant, saving the sweetest bananas and sugar cane for her, than he does of me! He would rather see me waste away than eat the precious meat!”

Here she is referring back to the wedding food. But within the words there is deliberately placed innuendo. She is not getting enough attention from her husband, there are other appetites that are not being satisfied. Again the parallel to many newlywed couples who then slip into domestic routine have experienced is the drop in the sexual activities. And often the antidote to this need in women is then satisfied with a higher food intake! Artee starts to transform. As the routine continues she is becoming bigger and bigger. Then the crisis moment she opens the preserved meat where the elusive fly has been hiding all along. A humorous sequence of distortion and chaos ensues with Artee and the fly whirling around until significantly it goes up her nose! We hear Artee’s cries of anguish,

*“I’m not beautiful anymore! I can’t go out! I can’t leave the house!
You wont love me anymore!”
But Jokolat did love her.’*

Here the humour takes a more serious and empathetic line. Rather than pander to the negativity in the nagging wife jokes. We see Jokolat almost desperate to maintain the routine, caring for his needy elephant and caring for his needy wife; Artee's visual metamorphosis into a huge 'elephant like' form, and the narration is heard crossing over both dependents mixing up the possibilities of whom it might be referring to,

"Why do you always leave me? I have no one to talk to. I have been so lonely. What have you brought me?"

*'Animation possesses the special ability to render psychological, emotional and physical states, and as such can properly highlight the humour which emerges from self-consciousness. In depicting the frailties and idiosyncrasies of the body; the deep prejudices, concerns and neurosis that inform daily life; and the difficulties inherent in trying to communicate, the animated film properly represents humankind's own recognition of the inherent comedy within the human condition'*⁹

The predominant message that now takes over the story is that of not merely a search for love but for happiness within that love. The differences and changes that occur in life that make this hard. Jokolat has to decide – his elephant or his wife (going back to my earlier questioning⁹) in this story he opts for his wife and in that moment there is a sense of loss, we see the elephant disappear off in the distance, with another mahout, the romantic ideal disappears, perhaps too, a metaphor of the loss of elephants in this domestic setting in Thai life.

But this is not the end of the story.

Artee and Jokolat return to a domestic routine, but it is still not balanced. True love has not yet been reached. Artee is still needy and lonely. He is seen working even harder to feed her appetite. There is something missing.

Again he visits the headman, who offers,

"For True love to work you need to work together. Show Artee how much you love her"

Finally we see Jokolat offering Artee some beautiful material (to cover herself) and make her feel beautiful again. By now she is enormous, and together they go to the river to bathe. This joint activity with symbolic reference on may cultural levels of cleansing, caring, washing away, renewing, rejuvenating, blessing and transformation are all condensed in the animation as Artee swirls in the water, and emerges in a parallel action to a previous scene with Mae Boon Ma, from the water. Together with Jokolat, now she has become a beautiful elephant.

The story here returns to the traditional tale, the animation allows for the fantastical and the impossible. The story reinforces the romanticism of the relationship with the elephants and mahouts being like a marriage, it gives a satisfaction element that order is restored, that this is how it should be, but with this

⁹ Dr Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, Routledge, 1998.

ideal there is a tinge of the price that is paid for this ideal and a notion that this too is a fragile state.

*'Humans are pattern seeking creatures...the gifted animator, along with the music director/composer and the editor, understands the psychology of musical design and seeks to trigger parallel responses through conscious manipulation of various visual patterns: repetition and rhythm; the movements of characters and background; the predictability of the story; and the pacing and editing of the finished work.'*¹⁰

The aim in making this an animation was to capture the essence of the story(s) into a form that was accessible to many. That would hold their interest and to give credence to the many authors. To voice the Karen's belief to a wider audience so that it might not be forgotten. The narrative patterns employed enable ease of understanding on a variety of literal and symbolic levels. The music draws you in with a cacophony backdrop of jungle sounds

While not played out in a gag style comic repertoire as often expected in cartoon this tale and it's transformation into animation does have an underlying universal humour while reflecting the original (spoken) text. It can be easily contextualized and has enough familiarity in the relationships that allow a wide (even global) audience to enjoy the story. The aim by mixing the original tale in with anecdotal stories has attempted to give the viewer the experience of the storyteller. Using narration to a minimum but giving layers of 'real' sounds all recorded in the jungles of Northern Thailand. The tale is told in a way with enough visual and aural layers acting out the story and symbolism, in conjunction with the music (which is Northern Lanna style) that it gives a natural accent to the piece. This then opens up the possibility to a multitude of interpretations, which allow a personal view for each individual.

*'The conventions of language are learned by groups of people, allowing them to understand images they see, as well the sounds they hear. The extent to which we experience different types of art- our 'visual literacy'- affects our appreciation of various forms of expression. Sometimes people see something they are unfamiliar with and are instantly attracted to it. More often, they gravitate toward things that relate to their past experience and shared cultural norms.'*¹¹

Hopefully this piece has that attraction. Not just for me as an artist, but essentially because of the story being told and the voice it projects. In crossing cultural boundaries/ borders/ delineations of cultures when creating art we can hope to extend our knowledge, develop our understanding and create something that goes on to live in a further wider context than just oneself. It must be said that the making of the film which was the main project film for my MA Sequential Art and Illustration, was limited by budget, time and facilities, but the essential ingredients, the *story* remain true to my intent. It does demonstrate the role that animation, in particular

¹⁰ Sven E. Carlsson, publisher of the website Filmsound.org (The Animation Bible, Maureen Furness Laurence King Publishing).

¹¹ The Animation Bible, Maureen Furness, Laurence King Publishing.

short animations, can have in capturing and sharing these stories and maintaining the ‘life essence’ of the storytelling experience. The modern audience, with their infinite access points and fickle attention span can still experience something of the magic of these stories in the animation. The metaphoric and symbolic qualities that animation possesses team up well with the magical and the fantastical essences of the traditional tale in such a way as to give new meanings while sharing the old. The voices of sub-cultures can be heard and universally shared. The humour highlighting the human qualities, failings and needs we all share. Our need to laugh at ourselves no matter what our experiences is part of the human psyche and what helps make up the collective memories we all share. Globalisation can appear to swamp the individual in many ways, but ultimately the democratization of forums like **youtube** allow the individual story to be shared, and give everyone a chance to laugh a little at themselves.

Factors Influencing Comprehension of Comic Strips

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Abstract

To increase interest and motivation, recently humor has been integrated into foreign language learning and teaching. However, understanding jokes in a foreign language is difficult for many learners for several possible reasons: the nature of the jokes, support for comprehension (e.g. visual support in comic strips), and the language itself. This study examines the influences of these three factors on ratings of funniness of cartoons by Thai learners of English.

Eight cartoons were presented to 32 subjects in four formats: original comic strip in English, comic strip in Thai, dialog only in English, and dialog only in Thai. Each subject was asked to rate two cartoons in each format for funniness and to give reasons for their ratings.

The findings show that the nature of the jokes and the presentation format (comic strip or dialog) had little effect on learners' ratings of funniness, but the learners found jokes in Thai funnier than jokes in English, suggesting that the difficulties of processing a foreign language interfered with the subjects' understanding of humor. The subjects' stated reasons for their funniness ratings, however, contrast with the ratings data. Although subjects did mention problems with translating English as a reason for rating cartoons as not funny, the predominant reason for finding cartoons both funny and not funny was the nature of the jokes. The implications of these contrasting findings are discussed.

Humor in FL Classroom

The importance of humor in foreign language (FL) classroom is not only viewed as fruitful means of enhancing student's motivation to learn English, but it is also considered as valuable tools for foreign language teaching and learning in a number of ways. For example, they are likely to be used for relaxing the class, getting a lesson started, increasing the involvement of the broadest possible range of learners, and providing learners a more active role in learning (Prodromou, 1992). Significantly, humor cannot only help students increase their awareness of cultural factors in language learning, but also ease them to understand the inseparable link between languages and cultures (Muqun & Lu, 2006).

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Since humor can facilitate FL learning, nowadays, many different kinds of humorous texts, including comic strips (a sequence of drawings that tells a story), have been increasingly promoted in language classrooms as authentic reading materials in foreign language teaching and learning. For many years, the researcher has been using English comic strips for foreign language teaching and learning in Thailand. Unfortunately, most of the students who are non-native English speakers think that English comic strips are not funny. The main reason is that most of them fail in comprehending English jokes. Effectively, there seem to be several factors influencing comprehension of this kind of humorous text.

Influences on Comprehending Humor

Humor is one of the more complexes of humor behaviors (Ritchie, 2001). This is because comprehending humor and considering it funny can be influenced by a variety of factors such as cultural factors, humor competence and language competence (Bell, 2007). However, in FL classrooms, there are probably three sources that seem to have a strong influence on comprehending comic strips. These three influences which can serve as both a contribution and constraint to humor comprehension will be discussed as followed.

Language

Humor seems to be difficult for many FL learners to understand when the content of humor is expressed in language. This is because language of humor contains various features that have the potential to make people laugh or find jokes amusing. Similarly, a number of words and expressions in comic strips can make a contribution to conveying a sense of humor.

However, the language of humor can be created differently due to a different type of humor. Much humor is normally deliberated by an ambiguity, or double meaning. Comic strip is also a kind of humorous production which is usually expressed by both linguistic and scriptal ambiguities (Cook, 2000). While the scriptal ambiguity is likely to be created by activating two different and incompatible scripts, linguistic ambiguity seems to reside in jokes dependent upon exact wording like puns, which have an element of ambiguity or double meanings deliberately misleading the audiences followed by punchline (Ross, 1998).

The scriptal ambiguity is the nature of comic strip that makes the joke funny; however, hundreds of times, puns are used to make the joke of English comic strips funny. Not surprisingly, they seem to be difficult for FL learners to understand because in the pun, the relation of language and reality seems inverted. That is, by virtue of exact wording, a linguistic form which appears to represent one reality suddenly rebounds upon itself and creates another.

It is obvious that language is a strong influence on perceiving and comprehending verbal humor which is likely to be created by linguistic elements. That means in order to grasp the ambiguity of the joke and understand it, learners

need to understand vocabulary and word ambiguity intentionally created to be humorous. Consequently, without an appropriate degree of linguistic ability, foreign language learners might encounter difficulty or even failure in comprehending humor, including comic strips. This suggests that language tends to become a barrier for FL learners when trying to understand jokes.

Support

In reading cartoons, readers should pay attention to all the verbal and visual details of each cartoon, since there is an interaction between language and image (Tsakona, 2009). According to Tsakona, although humor in cartoons can be produced via the verbal and the visual, or solely via the visual mode, picture can serve as three main functions. Firstly, it can serve as an illustration of the verbal joke, without adding to the humorous text. Also, it can serve not only as a contribution to the humorous effect by providing supporting information not contained in the humorous text, but it is also responsible for the production of humor.

It seems that not only the language used which is responsible for the production of humor, but it is also the picture and the interaction between them that contribute to the humorous effect. In fact, pictures are likely to play more role as scaffolding for the comprehension of humor, especially for foreign language learner. That is, on the one hand, cartoons carrying a joke told in pictures are able to convey a complex message in a much more immediate. On the other hand, cartoons in pictures seem to ease the way for readers to comprehend the joke.

However, although it seems that pictures serve well as the support for humor understanding, at the same time they might also cause some problems. This is because structured understanding provides conceptual scaffolding for interpreting newly encountered experiences. Consequently, without this understanding, cartoons presented in structured pictures become a barrier for comprehension instead.

Nature of joke

What makes people laugh seems to be a matter of individual sense of humor and cultural differences. However, there are three main theories trying to explain what makes things funny. They are superiority theory, psychic release theory and incongruity theory. Humor can be viewed as performing the social functions of aggression, rebellion, or solidarity (superior theory). Humor can also be viewed by the other two traditions in humor theory which are release theory, a psychoanalytical approach in which humor is views as the outcome of release, and incongruity theory, a cognitive explanation in which humor seems to result from the perception of incongruity (Cook, 2000: 73).

Incongruity theory, which was applied to verbal humor by Raskin (1985), attempts to explain what causes people to perceive humor in things, events, or texts, by adopting the notion of the schema in order to define how incongruity is related to

the joke perceived as funny. People find things funny when schemata are either broken or overlap (Cook, 2000; Raskin, 1985)

Schema, originally a term in cognitive psychology, was generally developed by Bartlett (1932), who suggested that people tend to alter their perceptions and memories of events to fit their internal schemata (Scovel, 2001). In fact, schema theory has become an important concept in reading theory for almost 30 years and has been a prominent area of foreign language reading research since then because it directly influences the comprehension of the texts. Additionally, after its appearance, schematic knowledge has significantly played an important role in language teaching theory for many decades. It was soon also applied to the research of reading where schemata are recognized as a reader's existing concepts about the world (Barnett, 1989).

According to schema theory, the reader brings previously acquired background knowledge organized into interrelated patterns, or schemata, to the reading process. Then the reader creates meaning by relating the text to this background knowledge. Schematic knowledge is not only engaged to process incoming information by relating it retrospectively to established patterns, it also works prospectively to project anticipations about what is to come. In many situations, schematic processing allows people to interpret new experiences quickly and make a guess at what is likely to happen next.

Normally, schemata, which are very influential in reading comprehension, are classified into two types: content schemata and formal or textual schemata (Carrell, 1988 and Watson Todd, 2004). However, content and formal schemata play different roles in text comprehension (Barnett, 1989). Content schemata refer to people's expectations about situation and events based on their real world experiences (Bartlett, 1932). Therefore, readers who are familiar with the content of a passage, whether written in their first or second languages, understand and recall more than do readers less familiar with the text content (Widdowson, 1983). Similarly, FL learners having joke schemata are likely to comprehend comic strips better. This is because cartoons are likely to be funny when the expectation is broken. That is why when the learners have no expectations on the comic strips they are reading, they find the cartoons not funny.

Readers also need a good knowledge of formal discourse structure or formal schemata because knowing how a text is organized can influence the comprehension of the text (Grabe, 1991). The knowledge of how texts are organized equally influences the comprehension of the texts because they define reader expectations about how pieces of textual information will relate to each other and in what order details will appear. However, different types of texts have different conventional formal schemata. Comic strips also have different textual structure that need NNS learners activate different connection formal schemata to interpret and comprehend them. It is clear that humor often contains incongruities; therefore, a schema for joke structure constraints the learners to expect incongruity or a punch line when processing a joke. Therefore, English comic strips will not be comprehensible to FL learners if they cannot activate their formal schemata to the texts.

The reader's ability to recognize different types of textual organization and to create expectations on the basis of a standard rhetorical structure affects reading speed and comprehensibility; shared formal schemata are helpful for the reader and the writer to negotiate meaning of the text (Carrell, 1983).

Now, it can be seen that schema theory, which can help explain students' comprehension problems and suggest the kind of background knowledge they need (Watson Todd, 1997), is not only important to language teaching and learning, but it also plays an influential role in humor comprehension. One of the major reasons humor is comprehensible is because most of the events fit our schemata. In other word, comprehension is generated when such schemata are found. Therefore, to properly comprehend jokes, learners need to be able to activate an appropriate schema, and if they fail to activate or have a lack of appropriate schema, joke will not be found funny.

Jokes also require cultural insight to comprehend and appreciate because while schemata seem to be universal and shared on the one hand, a great deal of schemata is shaped by culture on the other hand (Scovel, 2001).

The Present Study

Although to understand comic strips requires variable knowledge, it can be seen now that there are three major variables influencing humor comprehension: language, support, and nature of joke. However, it is worth noting that all of these influences can provide both positive and negative effects toward the comprehension of humor. That is, on the one hand, they can support the comprehension. On the other hand, they can confuse learners and constrain their comprehension. As a consequence, the present study is worth doing since it is unclear how these influences actually work and what the role these influences play: as a support or constraint.

Since it is not clear how these valid factors influence FL learners' comprehension in comic strips, this must be taken into consideration. Therefore, the research question of the present study is that: **How do language, support and nature of joke influence on comprehending humor?**

The focus

There are several types of comics such as panel, gutter, balloon and caption (Saraceni, 2003). However, the focus of this study is on comic strips which are more popular as they become a regular feature of daily newspaper and its popularity rises steadily due to the expansion into the internet. All of the comic strips taken for the investigation were derived from the website <http://comics.com> collected in 2008. The following criteria were used as a guide to choose comic strips that are suitable for the analysis of this study. The comic strips must employ of both words and pictures. They must be organized into three to four sequential units or frames. They must also carry simple jokes with low to medium degree of complexity and ending in punch lines.

Finally, they must not carry obvious pun or an allusion. After piloted twice due to the time limitation, only eight comic strips were chosen.

Research Methodology

Subjects and design

The subjects in this study were 32 first-year undergraduate students majoring in English at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. They were asked to be the subjects of the study. All of them are Thai and taking the fundamental course, where they need to read comics strips as a part of the objectives of the course, during the second semester of academic years 2008 with the researcher. Most of them are female but the gender is not the focus of the study.

This research was quasi-experimentally designed to investigate the factors influencing humor comprehension. In order to investigate humor, various ways of measuring humor can be developed. One option is to ask people to rate humorous stimuli, for example on preference, appreciation, and funniness. In fact, rating scales have been used for investigating humor in many fields of studies. For example, Huber and Leder (1997) asked the subjects to rate funniness of the original cartoons and adapted version with more or less compact concerning the number of panels. A cartoon consisting of fewer panels is considered as more compact. Since it can be assumed that there is a relation between ratings of funniness and reading comprehension, rating scale questionnaires were used as a research tool for this study.

In order to test if the variables influence the comprehension and to eliminate the sequential issues in presenting the comic strips in questionnaires, four variations of cartoons were created to aid the investigation. Thus, the questionnaires were designed into four sets of cartoon variations. The variations of the questionnaires (SET A-D) were varied by three variables: language (English versus Thai), support (pictures versus dialogues) and nature of joke (eight jokes). These variations were created to promote the investigation to meet the objective of the study.

The questionnaire included two parts: the first part contained background questions to obtain background information about the cartoons reading; and the second part contained tables that subjects were required to rate their attitudes toward the amusement of the strips with yes-no rating scales and some space to write down the reasons. The purpose of part two is to assess the attitudes and opinions toward the amusement of cartoons investigated.

Due to the variations, all of the subjects read the same eight cartoons but in the different variations. There are four variations in four sets of questionnaires. Each cartoon was presented in different versions in each set of the questionnaire. Whereas the cartoon was presented in English with pictures in set A, the same cartoon was presented with the same picture but translated into Thai in set B. Also, the cartoon was changed into English dialogue and presented in set C while it was presented in Thai dialogue in set D. To conclude, the four variations of the strips are as follows: 1) the original English strips presenting in frames with pictures and captions (P.E.), 2) the pictures from the original and unaltered version were removed and then the

captions were transcribed into dialog (D.E.), 3) the English captions of the original English strips were translated into the equivalent Thai (P.T.), and 4) the pictures from the original English comic strips were removed, then the captions were transcribed into dialog and translated into the equivalent Thai (D.T.). All of the four variations of cartoons were mixed together in a table-list design (SET A-SET D) are shown in Table 1 as the following:

Table 1: Variations of the Cartoons Presented in the Questionnaires

Comic No.	SET A				SET B				SET C				SET D			
	P.E.	P.T.	D.E.	D.T.	P.E.	P.T.	D.E.	D.T.	P.E.	P.T.	D.E.	D.T.	P.E.	P.T.	D.E.	D.T.
1	✓					✓					✓					✓
2		✓					✓						✓			
3			✓					✓		✓				✓		
4				✓	✓					✓					✓	
5	✓					✓					✓					✓
6		✓					✓					✓				
7			✓					✓		✓				✓		
8				✓	✓					✓					✓	

Method procedure

The subjects were tested individually at the beginning of a normal teaching period. They were asked to read series of eight cartoons and then rated their attitudes and gave their opinion toward the investigated cartoons presented in the questionnaires. The questionnaires were handed in to them randomly and they were asked to complete the questionnaires taking up to 40 minutes. The subjects were asked to read eight comics strips and answer whether they think the strips are funny or not.

The analysis

It is important to note that the data analysis of this study is based on the assumption that all of these factors: joke, support, and language may not interact together for the production of humor, although they are likely to collaborate one another to create humor.

There are two types of data for analysis. The first data which is quantitative is derived from the rating scale whereas the second type is a qualitative data derived from the open-ended questions.

- First, a frequency count of all ratings was done. Then, the researcher tried to analyze and compare the influence of the variables as follows:
- Language variable: pictures in English versus pictures in Thai and dialogs in English versus dialogs in Thai

- Support variable: pictures in English versus dialogs in English and pictures in Thai versus Dialog in Thai
- Joke variable

Then, the corpus of the subjects’ reasons, which is the second type of qualitative data, was collected. After the corpus of all reasons was set, they were divided into four themes: Language, Support, Nature of Joke and Not relevance. In this stage, these themes were used as a basis for coding. Then, sub-themes were created later after looking at the data.

Findings

Results from the rating

The findings from the rating data showed that the nature of the jokes and the presentation format had little effect on the subjects’ ratings of funniness (See Table 3 & 4). However, the findings revealed that the learners seemed to find jokes in Thai funnier than jokes in English (see Table 2).

Table 2: Frequencies toward language variable

	Funny	Not Funny	Total
Thai (P.T. & D.T)	60 (31, 29)	68 (33, 35)	128
English (P.E & D.E)	37 (20, 17)	91 (44, 47)	128
Total	97	159	256

It can be seen from this table that cartoons captions interact with visual to create humor.

Table 3: Frequencies toward support variable

	Funny	Not Funny	Total
Picture (P.T. & P.E.)	51 (31, 20)	77 (33, 44)	128
Dialogue (D.T. & D.E)	46 (29, 17)	82 (35, 47)	128
Total	97	159	256

Table 4: Frequencies toward nature of joke variable

Cartoons	Funny	Not Funny	Total
1	9	23	32
2	9	23	32
3	19	13	32
4	13	19	32
5	9	23	32
6	11	21	32
7	16	16	32
8	11	21	32
Total	97	159	256

This table shows that cartoons number 3 and 7 seem to be the most funniness of the investigated cartoons.

Results from the subjects' reasons

On the contrary, the findings from the subjects' stated reasons contrasted with the ratings data. Their answers revealed that the nature of jokes were likely to influence their comprehension in humor. The preominent reasons of why they think the jokes funny and not funny were illustrated through Table 6-8 shown below:

Table 5: Frequencies of all reasons

Reasons	Funny	Not Funny
Nature of joke	N = 84	N = 134
Language	N = 10	N = 22
Support	N = 2	N = 3

Table 6: Frequencies of reasons on each cartoon

No. of Cartoons	Funny	Not Funny
1.	N = 8 e.g. - the joke is understandable - it's strange	N = 20 e.g. - it is more like a conversation - it is an English joke - it is confusing at ending
2.	N = 7 e.g. - the character gives an unexpected answer to the other character	N = 22 e.g. - the content is very confusing
3.	N = 18 e.g. - there is a punch line at the end	N = 9 e.g. - understand the joke but don't think it is funny
4.	N = 11 e.g. - it is closed to real life	N = 17 e.g. - it needs too much thinking
5.	N = 6 e.g. - the joke can be located	N = 19 e.g. - the story is too short to understand
6.	N = 10 e.g. - the content is funny - there is a surprise at the end	N = 18 e.g. - don't understand what the cartoon really tries to say
7.	N = 14 e.g. - it is dirty - there are some contrasts	N = 11 e.g. - it is just a simple story
8.	N = 10 e.g. -the character is funny (one character shows superiority to the other character)	N = 18 e.g. - don't understand the ending

Table 7: Frequencies of reasons on language variable

Language	Funny	Not Funny
Thai cartoons	N = 4 e.g. - using funny wordings - language used is funny	N = 0
English cartoons	N = 6 e.g. - the use of ambiguous wordings - wordings used are funny - language used creates funny	N = 22 e.g. - don't understand the meaning of vocabulary - don't know the meaning of vocabulary - cannot translate

Table 8: Frequencies of reasons on support variable

Support	Funny	Not Funny
Pictures	N = 2 e.g. - picture creates funniness	N = 1 e.g. - the facial expression of the character shows no feeling.
Dialogues	N = 0	N = 2 e.g. - no pictures illustrated

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the investigated factors influence on humor comprehension; therefore, the research was designed in order to investigate the influences separately so that it can be seen how the variables influence the comprehension of humor.

In general, the findings of the data analysis from the rating scale show that while language, presentation format (comic strips or dialog) and nature of the joke are difficult to separate from one another. This means whereas they cannot be separated, they all seem to have influences on humor comprehension.

However, in the attempt of treating the three as separated, this study found that the nature of the jokes and the presentation format had little effect on learners' ratings of funniness whereas the learners found joke in Thai funnier than jokes in English. It suggests that a joke in one language is not funny in another. It is also true that the language variable seems to be the key factor contributing to humor comprehension and indicates that the difficulties of processing a foreign language interfered with the subjects' understanding of humor.

The comic strips investigated in this study consist of four panels. According to Saraceni (2003), unique characteristic of comics is the arrangement into sequences of panels in which linguistic and pictorial elements interact with each other. Although it is believed that a cartoon consisting of more panels seems to generate more humor (Huber & Leder, 1997), the present study reveals that the pictorial element tends to be the least influential factor. However, this element, intentionally used for illustrating the verbal joke, still plays an essential role in the comprehension of humor.

Interestingly, the data analysis on the reasons for the subjects' funniness toward the cartoons investigated reveals that the subjects' stated reasons for their funniness ratings contrast with the rating data. The analysis of corpus of all reasons illustrate that the predominant reason for finding cartoons both funny and not funny was the nature of the jokes. It seems that the nature of joke, relying on the individual, is an influential factor contributing to humor comprehension, no matter the languages are and with or without support (pictures). In other words, the EFL learners can comprehend the cartoons in English if they are familiar with the nature of joke generated. If they cannot recognize where the jokes of the comic strips are, they tend to be unable to understand the jokes.

According to schema theory, the students' comprehension problems on jokes can be explained as having a lack of appropriate schema or fail to activate the schema for joke. However, some of the findings reveal that there are many of the students who seem to understand English comic strips and think they are funny because they are willing to switch schemata when they found some new evidence in the text suggesting that such a switch is appropriate. However, from the corpus of the students' reasons toward the funniness of the comic strips, some of the students refuse to perceive new information or switch their schema. This leads to the failure in comprehension of humor in comic strips.

Another interesting finding is that there are several students that have humor competence; they seem to understand the jokes they read, but they found that the

cartoons are not funny. It is not clear why they do not appreciate the jokes due to various factors. However, while the occurrence of humor is universal, what is considered funny differs cross-culturally, and even between individuals of a shared culture (Raskin, 1985). This confirms the idea that humor is unlikely to travel well from one culture to another and definitely requires much more than knowledge of linguistic forms.

In this study, two methods of analysis to investigate on the influences contributing and constraining the comprehension of humor were applied. Both of these approaches attempt to generate the findings on how these factors influence comprehending humor. However, the two types of approaches clearly contribute to different results. While the use of quantitative approach can strengthen the findings with some objective evidence, the qualitative approach, which seems to be less objective, can not only reveal some interesting and unexpected findings, but can also provide insights into the nature of different approaches that seem to contribute to distinct findings. This study, therefore, suggests that switching the perspective in analysis may worth doing for contributing to distinct results.

The methodological implications of these contrasting findings are also worth to be discussed. Since the findings from rating scale, which is used to check whether the given cartoons are funny or not, seem to contrast sharply with the findings from the subjects' reasons, it might be worth noting that the investigation relying on only rating is not the best thing to do.

Another implication of the present study is that the generation of explanation to jokes in English is very fruitful and essential for FL learners. An explanation of why a joke is funny will aid the student grasp the ambiguity of the joke, and thus gain a better understanding of English vocabulary. It should also note that comic strips in Thai should be firstly illustrated in order to generate explanations to the classes so that the learners will be able to recognize jokes in English created in comic strips and finally comprehend this kind of humorous text better.

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Humor and Pathos: Filipino Diaspora Drama
(Carlos Bulosan's *The Romance of Magno Rubio* and
Chris D. Martinez's *Welcome to Intelstar*)

Carina Chotirawe *

Abstract

Theatre is often seen as a vehicle of entertainment, with humor as an integral part of it. There are also, however, countless examples of dramatic works, written and produced for the purpose of entertaining its audiences that have had a profound effect on an audience beyond mere amusement -- especially in instances when a serious, melancholy note is interspersed with the laughter and levity that the play evokes. In the case of the Philippines, this interlacing of the serious and the hilarious is grounded in the reality of prevailing social conditions --poverty, marginalization, discrimination, human rights and other forms of injustices that have been brought to the fore in many of the plays written and staged in the country.

This paper explores the humor inherent in the growing Filipino Diaspora as seen in two Filipino plays, Lonnie Carter's 2002 *The Romance of Magno Rubio* based on a short story by the same name written by Carlos Bulosan, and Chris D. Martinez's *Welcome to Intelstar* (2005). The former, one of those pieces "written in humor, anger, bitterness, love, compassion, contempt," as Bulosan admitted in a letter to a friend, depicts the hardships of an illiterate Filipino migrant laborer in the U.S. in the 1930s who finds himself in a pathetically laughable situation of being duped into a long-distance courtship (via letters dictated to a scribe) with a white woman he meets via a lonely-hearts magazine, interpreted symbolically as the Philippines' relationship with America. The play is largely told in rhymed couplets, reflecting a centuries old Filipino literary tradition, the playwright finds out, called *balagtasan*, a form of oneupmanship in rhyming verse.

The latter, reviewed as "heart-rending and rip-roaringly funny" comedy is set in modern-day hi tech world of call centers with Filipinos being trained to feign American accents and familiarity with technical gadgets and appliances they cannot invent, produce or sell.

These two plays reflect a phenomenon of our time where by the latest estimates over eight million men and women or one out of ten Filipinos live and work in as many as a hundred countries around the world since no jobs are available for a vast majority of the labor force. The 'Call Center phenomenon,' described in the second play, is seen as not entirely removed from the OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker) experience largely because Filipinos in call centers, while working on Philippine soil, speak and interact with callers from other countries in a nebulous, no-man's land of distant time zones.

The two stories, while stark portrayals of the plight of Filipinos from the 20th century onwards, are a reflection of a country where the

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Diaspora does not only reveal belabored iterations of a people's sadness, but captures what writer Jose Dalisay poignantly describes as "comic suffering and not tragic suffering."

Comedy and its opposite lie in the same disposition of feeling, and they are inside the process which results from it. In its abnormality, this disposition is bitterly comical, the condition of a many who is always out of tune; of a man who is at the same time violin and bass; of a man for whom no thought can come to mind unless suddenly another one, its opposite and contrary, intervenes; of a man for whom any one reason for saying yes is at once joined by two or three others compelling him to say no, so that yes and no keep him suspended and perplexed all his life; of a man who cannot let himself go in a feeling without suddenly realizing something inside which disturbs him, disarranges him, makes him angry...

All the soul's fictions and the creations of feeling are subjects for humor.."

Luigi Pirandello, "On Humor"

In "a narrow hotel room" in Stockton, California acclaimed writer Carlos Bulosan, himself a migrant worker with only a grade school education, disabled as a result of an accident suffered in his childhood and illnesses that plagued him all his life, wrote "The Romance of Magno Rubio" a short story based on the lives of his compatriots who had left their homeland to live a harsh life working on the farms in that area. The story centers around, "*Magno Rubio. Filipino boy. Four-foot six inches tall, Dark as a coconut. Head small on a body like a turtle. Magno Rubio. Picking peas on a California hillside for twenty-five cents an hour. Filipino boy. In love with a girl he had never seen. Girl twice his size sideward and upward...*" (p.34)¹ who embarks upon a fantasy love affair with an American woman by the name of Clarabelle. As E. San Juan, Jr. reminds us, the story is not realistic "but a satiric portrayal of a contrived situation, with strong allegorical and didactic elements...[that]...mobilize the tendentious potential of caricature, incongruities, and ribald exaggeration found in the genre." (San Juan, 119)

The all male cast of workers in the story reflect the sexual demographics of Filipino migrant labor which according to Carey McWilliams from 1920 to 1930 some 1395 Filipino men entered California for every 100 Filipino females giving an excess male population of 39,328 (Brothers 236) The reality of this situation make it understandable that workers earning "only two dollars fifty cents a day" (35) such as Magno Rubio would so crave female companionship and intimacy leading to possible marriage enough not only for him to seek that in "...one of those magazines that advertised the names and addressed of girls for one dollar." (36) Pathetically this pursuit that Magno Rubio claims has given him purpose and direction in life costs him much more than just that one dollar since he has to pay for the services of a scribe who happens to be another worker with slightly more schooling to read and write his love letters who "demanded a flat rate of vie dollars per letter" (35). The financial demands soon increase exponentially as "Clarabelle's plea of love became more

¹ The play was presented in Filipino and for reasons that the writer of this paper has not been able to obtain the script the short story version written in English by Carlos Bulosan will be cited instead.

fervent in every letter” (41) so that they include gifts, requests for assistance for the “little brothers and sisters” (38) she was still supporting as well as at least two hundred dollars to pay for her travel expenses when she finally journeys to California for what turns out to be their first and last meeting. In other words, in this transactional relationship he might have fared better engaging in the services of a commercial sex worker as many of his peers were wont to do in order to find gratification. The saga ends, predictably, with Magno Rubio arriving at her hotel only to see her “in a car pulling out from the curb. She was beside a man with brown hair and thin moustache. She was laughing, he was laughing too.”(43) As San Juan concludes, “Disillusion for Magno begets a sense of pathos: but comic distance eventually supervenes, and life returns to routine work in the end.” (120)

This obvious commodification of love attests to the Marxist notion that Capitalism leads to alienation as elaborated by Alan Aldridge in his study, *Consumption*, “Price does not reflect the value of labour and therefore obscures the social relations of production. This leads to a double distortion: Commodities are treated as if they were persons possessing agency, while persons are reduced to commodities bought and sold for their labour power.” (p.78-9 Alan Aldridge, Malden, MA: Polity, 2005) Magno Rubio belongs to those groups called nomad harvesters, people who cannot settle on the land they themselves cultivate, an idea which itself is oxymoronic belying the contradictions within monopoly capitalism’s penetration of California farming whereby the migrant workers reap and harvest on land that does not belong to them and the fruit of their toil is remitted back home not in the form of agricultural produce but money. These labourers can be seen as the pioneers of what would later become the phenomenal Filipino diaspora of today where by latest estimates 8.2 men and women or about one in ten of the total population of the Philippines are living and working abroad in places other than the U.S. These Filipino overseas workers (OFWs as they are known) are now deployed in ninety four countries around the world since no jobs can be availed of in their own country. The government-run POEA or Philippine Overseas Employment Agency has therefore estimated that as many as 500 to 3,000 people are leaving to seek employment abroad every day.

What is considered most pathetic about his situation is not, however, his state of indigence as much as it is about the perception of how ridiculous it is that a man, not only of his financial status, but social status, education, ethnicity, nationality and physical looks, could deem to comprehend so complex a subject as love. Love, an abstract notion poets and philosophers have sought and failed to satisfactorily define is a word consistently mentioned in the story from the very first line of dialogue where our hero insists, “I love her” despite the fact that Claro invokes the grotesque in his question “But how could you?”...” She’s twice your size sideward and upward.” With this Magno Rubio emerges into an anti-hero, as a simple person thrust to extraordinary circumstances, not because love is an extraordinary notion but because, as the literal antithesis of the traditional hero who is supposed to be larger than life, this diminutive common man has attempted what can only amount to being a farcical and Quixotic enterprise of ignoring one’s inferiority and trying to attain, not the unattainable woman in the courtly love tradition, but the foolish pursuit of romantic ideals in extravagantly, chivalrous action. In that same argument he musters up the courage to retort with a heroic questioning, Has size got anything to do with love? I mean real love, an honest love?” (34)

To Magno, however, simply the idea of having an object for his affection, illusive though it may be, with or without any assurance of reciprocation, already constituted love and affection. Bulosan's narrative follows conventions readers are familiar with from fables and other forms of story-telling with patterns of repetitions with slight changes as the story progresses that help heighten suspension and thicken the plot. The audience soon learns, through Nick the narrator, how there was a "cost" involved in this entire exercise of love declaration. According to Magno, "It's very complicated. At first there was only a gallon of wine. Later he thought of making some money. I don't know where he had stolen the idea, but it must have been from the movies. He demanded a flat rate of five dollars per letter." (35) Apparently, Magno's love would also intensify as a result of this endeavor hence, "...I wrote to my girl everyday. I earn only two dollars fifty cents a day. Still I had to write to her. I love her. You understand, Nick." (35) hence, "Realizing that I truly love the girl, that I can't live in the world without her, he demanded one cent per word." At that rate, the scribe would soon be overcome by greed, and, "Realizing that I truly love the girl, that I can't live in the world without her, he demanded one cent per word...And do you know what, Nick! He wrote long letters that I couldn't understand. And he used big words." (35) Ultimately, in true capitalistic fashion whereby cost is determined by the law of demand and supply the cost of these love letters would escalate to "...ten cents per word!... You heard me right...I paid him twenty dollars per letter!" (36)

Lest the reader be let to think it is the cost that Magno is so indignant about we learn that it is actually the fear that the person paid to write the letters in his stead is actually taking advantage of Magno's illiteracy and courting the woman for himself. He tells us magnanimously, "I don't mind paying him that much money. But the words were too long and deep for me. And again I say: how would I know if he hadn't been writing for himself?" (36) turning himself immediately into a fiercely jealous lover necessitating the services of an honest scribe. It is also at this point in the story that the improbability of this supposed "courtship" of Magno who is continuously likened for both his physical attributes and gestures as a monkey, is emphasized. The burlesque verging on disgusting descriptions include the unsightly coughing up of "the slimy wad of tobacco in his mouth" as he "jicked the brown shreds of saliva dripping down his thick lips with the tip of his serrated tongue", the baring of "his ugly teeth" and worst of all the inserting of "a finger in his hairy nostril to extricate a slab of dried mucus. He made a face when he pulled it out, looked at a minute, flung it aside and wiped his hands on his trousers."... "Magno Rubio seldom washed his clothes, if he ever did. He had the same rags on him all the time, even when he was in bed. It was insufferable to sit beside him at the dining table. He smelled of mud, sweat and filth, and more, he smelled like a skunk." (35-37) The humorous descriptions here verge on the use of scatological humor which is categorized as low culture since it deals exclusively with bodily functions like defecation, urination, flatulence or vomiting. In sum not only is Magno unworthy of lofty sentiments in the courtly love tradition (it is perhaps worth reminding here that this story is entitled "The Romance of Rubio Magno" and romance, especially chivalric romance, is a literary genre of high culture that originated in the aristocratic circles of medieval Europe) he is even not worthy of being categorized as a full-fledged human being. The illusiveness in the notion of romance is also a reminder that by stark contrast there looms the reality of anti-miscegenation laws that banned not only marriage but in some cases sexual relations between members of two different races. In California the law was first passed in 1850 stipulating that Blacks,

Asians and Filipinos could not marry a member of the white race and was not repealed until 1948.

This emphasis on Magno's inferiority is obviously not merely an observation of the conventions of courtly romance but a satiric contrived situation in a story with strong didactic and allegorical elements that mobilize, as E. San Juan Jr. avers "the tendentious potential of caricature, incongruities, and ribald exaggeration found in the genre. They ingeniously expose the fakery of the invented and fantasized object inhabiting Magno's imagination." (119) As many other critics have observed Magno's object of affection is not only in the figure of Clarabelle but America itself – America the country which colonized the Philippines from 1898 to 1946 which once had plans to annex this group of islands inhabited by their "little brown brothers" – a term coined by William Taft, the first Governor General of the Philippines as its forty-ninth state.² Therefore Philippine experience as a colonized subject which comes with its own historical specificities is therefore unique which means that the typical immigrant circumstance and mindset might not be applicable in the case of Magno Rubio and his fellow laborers with their subaltern consciousness. It might not be surprising too that the proverbial American Dream which while credited as responsible for building a cohesive American experience as a national ethos of a land of limitless possibilities attainable through hard work to achieve a "better, richer and happier life," as articulated by James Truslow Adams in 1931 has also been blamed for its overinflated expectations especially by leftist critics who have argued that despite deep-seated belief in the egalitarian American Dream, the modern American wealth structure still perpetuates racial and class inequalities between generations. These commentators note that advantage and disadvantage are not always connected to individual successes or failures, but often to prior position in a social group. (See for example Heather Beth Johnson *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth* or Mark A. Smith *The Mobilization and Influence of Business Interests in The Oxford Handbook of American Political Parties and Interest Groups* (2010)) No doubt, these "overinflated" expectations resonate in the figure of Clarabelle the "...girl twice his size sideward and upward" in the recurring refrain, its comical overtones tingeing with sexual innuendoes heard over and over in the saga of Magno Rubio's failed romance.

This fixation on the part of Magno leads to manifestations of affection that come in the form of monetary sums and consumer goods which he showers on his lady love over and above the fees he has spent to procure her as well as to declare his love for her in the letters he has been sending. The pastoral is skillfully juxtaposed with modernity, for example, in one description of Magno as he "...grinned like a goat...carrying a big bundle under one arm. 'I'm giving her a radio,' he said. 'A combination radio-phonograph. It costs me nearly two hundred dollars.'" (p39) A love token to one's lady of a phonograph, a byproduct of Thomas Edison's 1877 invention could not be more American. After all the American Dream traces its roots not only in the principles of hard work but also the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence which not only states that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights" including "Life,

² The idea of expansion through colonization is also an extension of the nineteenth century belief in its "Manifest Destiny" that America was destined to expand across the North American continent eventually providing a rationale behind the annexation of Puerto Rico, Guan and the Philippines. British poet Rudyard Kipling's poem based on this concept "The White Man's Burden" is subtitled "The United States and the Philippine Islands."

Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Happiness can come to Magno with magnanimous goodwill disproportioned with the size of his body and pocketbook with his manifestations of all symptoms connected to love be they lovesickness, love tokens or the struggle with the attempt to define love even to the point of fighting in ways reminiscent of the mock-heroic tradition over the much coveted lock of hair sent supposedly by Clarabelle to not one but two men. In the words of the narrator, "He's happy, Claro... He has a girl, that's why he's happy." (39) whereas for Clarabelle the pursuit of happiness is equated with a material value, a fixation on money and worldly possessions that she can acquire with the privilege of a woman belonging to the dominant race in this country that is now Magno's terrain.

This reading of "The Romance of Magno Rubio" as a critique of Philippine enamorment of the U.S. and its consumerist and capitalistic ethos and practices can also be applied to a contemporary text set in the Philippines and not the U.S. in what Chris D. Martinez in 2005 calls a "One-Act Call Center Monologue" *Welcome to Intelstar* which won third prize for the Carlos Palanca Memorial Award for Literature (the country's most prestigious and enduring literary contest often dubbed the "Pulitzer of the Philippines") that same year. Born in 1971 Martinez is a Philippine scriptwriter, director, and producer, who has worked in both film and theater. He moves with ease in the world of popular culture and also directs television commercials as a living. His first feature-length film, *100*, was highly acclaimed and won several awards. He is the author of the book *Laugh Trip and Last Order sa Penguin*, which was nominated for the Philippine National Book Awards. His educational background as a student in an exclusive boys' school and subsequent graduate in Business Administration from the University of the Philippines, Diliman have been credited for the dominant urban middle-class sensibilities he displays in his writings.

In his play *Welcome to IntelStar*³ the experiences of Magno Rubio more than half a century ago have altered quite dramatically. The subject matter concerns Filipinos employed by an American company –the fictitious IntelStar, but the setting is not in the United States but rather in the Philippines itself. The play opens at the Central Office of IntelStar, a leading call center company that offers U.S. directory assistance. A call center is a centralised office used for the purpose of receiving and transmitting a large volume of requests by telephone. It is operated by a company to administer incoming product support or information inquiries from consumers. To minimize on the cost involved companies in the U.S. find it cheaper to outsource these services to third world countries where overhead in terms of rent and wages are not as high, than to administer such services on U.S. soil. The hour-long monologue actually takes place in actual real time with the audience supposedly assuming the role of a class of newly recruited batch of call center agents being given an orientation by a trainer who goes by the name of Ma'am Chelsea, hence the term "interactive comedy" has been used to describe this play.

The supposed hires are in fact a new generation of the aforementioned "Little Brown Brothers." Describing the ability of Filipinos to speak English as a "linguistic bonus" in his introduction to *Brown River, White Ocean: An Anthology of Twentieth-*

³ The play came to the attention of this writer at the 6th Malaysian International Conference on Languages and Literature in Putrajaya Malaysia from a presentation on **Phanastasmatic constructions: Language and humor and the interrogation of identity in contemporary Filipino comic plays** by Dr. Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta from the University of the Philippines, Diliman.

Century Philippine Literature in English Luis H. Francia muses on the fact that this might have been “the only advantage to being colonized” (ix). The Spaniards might have occupied the Philippine islands for over four hundred years and Tagalog (or Filipino which is now the national language) has a large number of Spanish or bastardized Spanish vocabulary but strangely enough “Spanish never took hold the way it did in Latin America, or the way that the Spanish form of Catholicism did.” Instead American political and military dominance following the Spanish-American War at the close of the nineteenth century would bring forward an effort to educate the native people starting in 1901 when six hundred American teachers arrived on board the USS *Thomas* (hence the name “Thomasites”). If Spanish colonialism was cloaked under the guise of fervent religious proselytizing the American mission, according to Francia was instead “to spread the gospel according to Thomas Jefferson \$ Co., and later to make us forever imagine the ethereal beauty of white Christmases, Coca-Cola bottles in hand. . . Having been denied mass public education by the Spanish, Filipinos took to learning their ABCs and nursery rhymes like the proverbial ducks to water.” (x) Barely able to express himself verbally in any language but his native tongue Rubio Magno’s greatest disability was his inability to read and write English. On U.S. soil all he could do is to comprehend so much English as to take orders from his supervisors to toil the land enough to eke out a living for himself and his family back home who belong to the poorer, underprivileged socioeconomic class. Ma’am Chelsea, on the other hand, having had, what Francia terms “[A]n American-inspired education” (x) has at least, in theory, acquired the means toward social mobility. She appears on stage as the prototype of what the disciples of her creed aspire to be “...a typical well-scrubbed Makai middle management yuppie: high-heeled patent leather shoes, smart-looking, Armani-inspired suit and freshly manicured French-tipped nails; pleasant and perky-she speaks English fluently with what is known in the call center circle as a “NEUTRAL AMERICAN ACCENT.” (3), armed with a PowerPoint presentation and, not to forget, a spill-proof-Starbucks coffee mug that completes her get-up.

Chelsea’s lecture is meant to orient the trainees on what they can expect as well as what is expected of them in this particular profession in terms of etiquette, conduct and most importantly, it seems-- the ability to communicate effectively in English. The session starts off with her customary congratulations and greetings that come with the feel-good pep talk format complete with the usual cliché “...give yourselves a big, big, big round of applause” where she “starts to clap and invites her audience to do as she does” (4) It is worth applauding to land oneself such a job not only because the unemployment in the Philippines is high but that there is also underemployment that many graduates have to settle for as in the case of overseas domestic helpers many of whom have college degrees but are unable to find suitable jobs for themselves. And since she immediately underscores the fact “that IntelStar gives one of the best compensation packages in the industry. Aside from regular salaries, bonuses are given to those who perform way beyond what is expected of them.” (4) workers who have passed what she deems “our series of rigid tests and interviews” should be even more exhilarated, shouldn’t they? Most importantly, however, is that since one major criticism of the kind of service offered by offshore call centers which are often deemed to be of lower quality when a service is outsourced and particularly exacerbated when that outsourcing is combined with offshoring to regions where the first language and culture are different. Some consumer callers find linguistic features such as accents, word use and phraseology different making the call center agent they are speaking to difficult to understand. For this,

Chelsea offers a crash course, not on how to improve one's knowledge of English but how to approximate the accent of a native speaker of American English so as to lend credibility to the products and services these potential call center workers are dealing with so that the caller will never suspect that at the other end of the line the speaker is not a blonde, blue eyed attendant. Since these people are not native speakers of American English (in his classification of Three Concentric Circles World Englishes, linguist Braj B. Kachru places the Philippines and other formerly colonized nations in the "Outer Circle") what is required of them is to fake an accent (something that is quite common is it surprising that a result of a random Google search on the topic of "Faking an accent" would yield results as diverse as "How to fake a convincing French accent", "Faking your way to fluency," "Simulated immersion in Language learning –Fake it till you make it." For a foreign speaker trying to learn another language some level of affectation which is the act of taking on or displaying an attitude or behaviour not natural to him or her self is crucial is it not? Ironically enough whereas fakery or forgery is commonly regarded as a sign of inferiority the ability to ape or to fake an accent is a matter of great pride in the case of Chelsea who wonders out loud why it is that "...we, Filipinos, do not realized how blessed we are to be the only English-speaking people who can perfectly fake an American accent. By the end of this year, there will be 100,000 Filipinos working in call centers." She also pompously reiterates, with sentiments echoing the Manifest Destiny concept, "[I]t is our destiny to thrive in this business. It is our fate to be the call center capital of the world." Her manifesto ends with her paying homage to vestiges of American pop culture "Thank God for Sesame Street! Thank God for Hollywood! Thank God for MTV! I mean, thank God, period!"(7)- and here one is reminded of how the Philippine colonial history has often described conclusively as "Four hundred years in a convent and fifty years in Hollywood."

Armed with her impeccable "California-neutral" accent, PowerPoint presentation and of course a spill-proof Starbucks coffee mug Ma'am Chelsea proceeds with her pronunciation lesson which Martinez ingeniously turns into an interactive session with the audience simulating the staff members she is supposed to be orienting. Some theatre critics have suggested that some of Chelsea's lessons are part of a standard call center's language improvement exercises starting with tips on how to pronounce tag questions "in a neutral American accent." (9) :

Did he?	Didee
Does he?	Duzzy?
Was he?	Wuzzy?
Wouldn't he?	Woody?
Wouldn't you?	Wooden chew?
Hasn't he?	Has a knee?

after which she generously ads tips. "You see, the secret lies in the following letters. Let me show this slide.

She clicks on her mouse to change the slide. A new table of letters and words appears.

T+Y=	CH	What's your name?	Wachername?
D+Y=	J	How did you like it?	Howia like it?
S+Y=	SH	Bless you!	Bleshoo
Z+Y=	ZH	Where's your mom?	Werzher mom?

The exercises in the slides are accompanied by copious explanations and pronunciation rules that according to this version of Professor Higgins playing Pygmalion "...can also be observed in words like "ejucashen" or "indivjuat" or "grajuashen." (9)

However, fixing her trainees pronunciation skills in the hopes of them shedding any trace of their accented English is still not sufficient and there is still one more matter she needs to attend to. One of the ways to counter criticism and doubts regarding the quality of services offered by a call center is to make sure that caller/customers start out believing that the person on the other line is actually American. In order to effectively create that illusion as soon as a call is put through to an agent you answer it with the same format "Hi, this is Chelsea. City and state please?" That's how I always begin my call. "Hi this is Chelsea. City ad state please"(5) adding that "it's very important that we have –what" (Pauses.) Correct! An American-sounding name. Like Chelsea! I mean what can be more American than Chelsea, right?" concluding that "It is mandatory that we have here at IntelStar" (6). The idea behind this is not to facilitate the pronunciation that foreigners will have of agents' names since traditionally Filipinos have Spanish sounding names which because of strong religious roots are either saint names or biblical words. It is not uncommon for a person to have multiple names since many also honour their parents and grandparents by naming their children after them. What usually happens is that it is more common for Filipinos to be known by a nickname that is either in duplicate form like Jun Jun (Jun for Junior) or Lyn Lyn or a name ending with the ng consonants as in Ping or Ding or duplicated ng words like Ding Dong or Bong Bong. One can go forever into the trivial or humorous nature of Filipino nicknames but, as Chelsea reminds us, these names belong only in the Philippine context and any aspiring professional introducing themselves with such names will never be taken for an American. Worse still, she reminds her audience, "[O]ur customer would suspect right away that we are not centrally located in the US. And that's a big, big no-no! They're not supposed to know that we're on the other side of the globe. I mean, what can be more Pinoy than Ma. Leonora Teresa—or Bayot for that matter. It's such a giveaway. Don't you think? So the first order of the day, I mean, of the night, is to choose your American name." (6)

With that Chelsea assumes the right of being able to re-Christen the names of her new recruits.

"She singles out a man from the audience.

CHELSEA: You! What's your name? Teodoro Albarillo? You can be a Teddy. Or a Ted? No, this is much better: Todd! Todd! That's it! Todd! Not Toad, Todd! (She singles out a girl this time.) You, Miss, what's your name? Jennilyn Grace Humbrado? Jennilyn Grace. To me, Jenny is okay. Lyn is okay. No offense, but when you put them together you sound like a

Pinoy taxicab. You know, like Ronalyn Taxi, Lyndon Taxi or LynlanLaniellou Taxi. Okay. I know! For you, let's use Grace instead. Is that okay? You like that? Uh-huh! Or better yet, instead of Grace – we'll use Gracie. You like it? Uh-huh! Good for you, Gracie." (6)

The act of naming and renaming of people, structures or places has always been a common practice throughout the history of colonization. The most pertinent example of all being the name of the Philippines itself that King Phillip II of Spain in 1556. In an entry in the online Dictionary of War Macedonian Suzana Milevska discusses the politics of name changing in connection to her native Macedonia seeing renaming as a war concept that could be interpreted as a strategy for erasing ethnic, cultural or gender identity without using any aggression or causing any direct material damage. It functions as a conceptual weapon of destruction, as a kind of wage war or a contest between the old and new identity layer. (http://dictionaryofwar.org/concepts/Renaming_machine retrieved July 26, 2010) Taking the liberty of naming or renaming someone is denying them their historical and cultural identity. In the case of the staff of IntelStar, the definite “no-no” in Chelsea’s lingo is any Filipino sounding name that which she denigrates collectively as “Taxicab names.” Such names are themselves a reflection of a feature of a culture that is fun-loving (hence penchant for fun sounding nicknames) and personal alliance systems that are anchored by kinship. Philippine personal alliance systems are anchored by kinship, beginning with the nuclear family to whom a Filipino’s loyalty goes first to (the overseas workers phenomena is sustained largely by this strong sense of filial loyalty. Amalgamations of names might sound incongruous and as such devoid of meaning that a name should be endowed with but in a child it represents a union of his or her parents or grandparents in a taxicab it represents what might be the one and only means of eking out an honest living by someone who has probably purchased this vehicle with hard earned remittances of a wife working in a foreign country for the sake of their four children whose names are creatively combined as “LynlanLaniellou.” Yet, if that is not condescending enough for someone who opts for the name Chelsea there is also the matter of last names that leads her to frown upon a name like “Bayot.” In terms of hierarchical classification a native Filipino last name is obviously inferior to a Spanish sounding one – more so in this case one which is further denigrated like “Bayot” which in some Filipino dialects happens to have the pejorative meaning of “homosexual.”

With the business of naming and renaming over Chelsea has effectively “baptized” though perhaps in this case with coffee in lieu of water, the kind that is served while they have the privilege to lounge “...in the break room upstairs at the 23rd floor” where staff “...can watch CNN, read USA Today and catch up on the top stories in the US.” (18) or if they choose to “can only be brought into work areas if it’s contained in a spill-proof mug. (She shows off her mug.) Just like this mug which I got from Starbucks. It’s nice isn’t it?” (12) Coffee is an important part of the job since call center staff operate in a different time zone, “...if it’s 8 AM in Makati, it’s 7 PM in New York” (13) Chelsea reminds after assigning them the task of memorizing the map of the US –the fifty states, their capitals and the different time zones from East to West, Alaska to Hawaii soon to supersede their consciousness of their archipelagic nation comprised of eighty one provinces in merely one time zone. In so doing Chelsea is also successful in mapping the changing face of the colonized mindset of a modern-day Filipino who need not leave Philippine soil but is already

identified by an American-sounding name, dexterously giving out information that is there at their finger tips, "...from addresses to phone numbers. From movie listings to restaurant reservations" (5), coping professionally with irate customers or verbally abusive or obscene calls with an admirable level of detachment, keeping in mind Chelsea's mantra to "...never ever hang up on your caller. Just let him vent. Do not butt in as he verbally abuses you. And try to apologize when there is an opportunity to do so." (15) Noting the choice of pronoun used for this particular type of caller one could only be reminded that physical and emotional abuse is always prevalent as a sordid reality faced by overseas contract workers the world over—the kind of reality that provoked what was supposed to be a comment made in jest by a Philippine cabinet member during the Gulf War when hundreds of Filipinas barricaded themselves in the Spanish Embassy in Kuwait because they were afraid for their lives after some were raped by soldiers from both the Kuwait and Iraq armies. When told of the incidents the high-ranking government official commented that if rape is inevitable, "Why don't they just lie back and enjoy themselves?" (<http://feminism.eserver.org/gender/sex-work/trafficking-of-women.txt> retrieved July 23, 2010) One comes to realize that eventually the ultimate form of "neutralization" is a denial that reaches a level of betrayal reminiscent perhaps of the biblical denial of Jesus Christ by Saint Peter. In the play, Chelsea recounts a fresh personal experience in a manner whereby the narrative could even reach didactic proportions. As a sort of prologue, she begins by saying "...there's this other call that I got just three weeks ago, it was sort of funny but you'll learn a lot from this story. I got a call from an old Filipino lady in San Diego. She had this thick Tagalog accent."

"...*she reenacts the call. She also mimics the way her caller talks.*

CHELSEA: "Hi, this is Chelsea, City and state please?" "I am from San Diego in California." "Yes, ma'am, how can I help you in California?" And she goes, "What?" "How can I help you in California, ma'am?" Then she says, "Are you also a Filipino?" I was shocked! But I regained my composure and go, "I'm sorry but due to security reasons, I cannot disclose that information." She goes, "You are! You are a Pinay. It's true what my *kumares* told me. Dial 411 and a Pinay will answer you. I can hear it in your voice. You are a Pinay. How is everything back there in the Philippines?" Then I go, "I'm sorry but due to security reasons, I cannot disclose that information." Then she says, "So, I am right? You are from the Philippines." And I go, "We are centrally located." "*Uy, 'eto naman*, it's just the two of us! Tell me, what time is it there? What is Manila like these days? I haven't come home for 20 years *na*. I miss all of my family back there." "I'm sorry, ma'am, but is there anything else I can help you with?" "Just talk to me. Make me *tsismis*." "I'm sorry, ma'am, but is there anything else I can help you with?" (17-18)

When Chelsea relates her story up until that point and goes on to say "As much as I wanted to..." one's guess might be that she was very tempted to give in and reach out to the expatriate whose absence from the Philippines is only a physical one judging from the way she is pining for a connection in whatever form with the land of her birth. As it turns out, Chelsea was fighting with the urge to rid herself of the annoyance of this persistent caller thus breaching her professional training. Instead

she triumphantly announces “As much as I wanted to hang up on her, I couldn’t. Big, big no-no!” And with that she can hail herself as the prototype of all call center agents where perhaps it is not the fake accent that matters as much as the blind and unquestioning loyalty to a country, a culture and business ethics not different, perhaps, from Magno Rubio, “*Filipino boy. In love with a girl he had never seen. Girl twice his size sideward and upward?*”

While one may agree with theatre reviews of this interactive comedy as “an amusing and light-hearted look at people who work in the financially rewarding but rather cyclic world of call centers.” deeming it “heart-rending and rip-roaringly funny” (see for example, <http://kerns.multiply.com/reviews/item/8>) one does wonder what it is in the end that gets members of the audience, many of whom are young professionals who themselves might be aspiring towards call center jobs rolling in fits of laughter. While not “rip-roaringly funny” “*The Romance of Magno Rubio*” is also a heart-rending tale. Both of these stories, as Ma. Rhodora Ancheta observes in her paper on *Welcome to InuStar* can be used as a foray into how “the humour used by Philippine literary texts, which are heavily marked...by a palpable social realism that seems to present difficulties in Philippine life, and ultimately revolve around an almost modernist query of how daily life unmoors the individual by setting them against the implacable uncertainties and mutabilities of unsympathetic institutions, thus rendering the Filipino a fractured entity, by way of his history and his everyday life.

In this ‘fractured entity,’ the Filipino psyche is at once given to easy humor and comic wit, on one hand, and a rather brooding predisposition prevalent in the maudlin telenovelas and tearjerker, overly sentimental movies that abound in the realm of popular culture, on the other. It is not uncommon for the visitor to the culture to observe how in the midst of abject poverty the Filipino is almost always given to laughter and the languid gaiety of the barrio fiesta, depicted starkly in the laughable if not poignant vignettes of refugees or victims of massive flooding stranded on rooftops with a guitar in tow, singing while waiting for elusive rescue. Magno Rubio’s obsessive amorous pursuits for an illusive woman he desperately yearns for is roundly hilarious if not for the sad absurdity of the lengths by which he takes to woo her in a language and style oppressively alien to him. Martinez’ characters of a ‘bifurcated Filipino’ of today’s call center milieu with fake accents and sleep patterns turned upside down (sustained, albeit pretentiously, by a steady stream of Stateside Starbucks coffee) make for rib-tickling funny portraits, if not for the rude truth that speaks to the literal dislocating of identity of the differently-colonized 21st century Filipino youth. The merciless adjustment to time zones at the opposite side of the globe, transporting oneself to another time and space - pretend-that-you-are-not-in-the-Philippines when taking calls, answering clients as if they themselves were physically located in America – and denying an existential reality of being Filipino by having to force oneself to traverse great lengths to “speak like an American” with clipped noses and faux accents and even take on what passes as American-sounding appellations, makes for ridiculous, amusing fodder for plays like *Welcome to InuStar*, but it reflects nonetheless a pained, lingering pathos of learned helplessness, if not imminent nervous breakdown. In Baguio City, built by the American colonial government in the highlands of the Cordilleras in the early 20th century as a summer capital, Cordilleran youth, heirs to a proud indigenous civilization which carved the awe-inspiring world-famous heritage site of the Banaue Rice Terraces, and who now

work in several call centers in the city, reportedly go berserk after weeks of being ‘fractured entities,’ alienated from family and uprooted from local cultural anchors.

Humor and pathos are two sides to the same coin of the human experience, alternating in ways that speak of enduring tragedy and turmoil yet interminable light-heartedness and optimism. In the Diaspora of the Filipino, in the drama of his itinerant, peripatetic, colonized, alienated, globalized self, his ‘tragic suffering’ gives way to a coping, soothing mode of easy, ready humor, the better to bear with ‘comic suffering’ the travails of having split, bifurcated, dichotomized and altogether ambivalent, dislocated identities. But it is perhaps in that raucous laughter that finds mirth in the absurd and the bizarre, or in the awkward yet resilient humor that flows from the banality of muted suffering, repressed anger or prolonged pain and longing, that the OFW(Overseas Filipino Worker), the struggling Filipino Everyman – the hardy souls like Bulosan’s Magno Rubio or Martinez’ Starbucks-bearing, American twang-obsessed, never-say-die Chelsea – finds some solace and clear mooring, however enfeebled, yes, but resolutely, defiantly hopeful no less. In their creation of these characters and their pathetic situation these writers are not content simply to be comical or satirical, to return to Pirandello, “...reflection can reveal to the comic and the satirical as well as the humorous writer this concept of illusions. The comic only laughs at it, being pleased to blow away this metaphor of himself created by a spontaneous illusion. The satirical writer will be upset by it. But not the humourist: through the ridiculous side of this perception he will see the serious and grievous side of it. He will analyze the illusion, but not with the intention of laughing at it. Instead of feeling disdain, he will, rather, in his laughter, feel commiseration.” (48)

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What Ignites Humour in ASEAN?

Yong Mun Cheong*

Abstract

What do people in the ASEAN region find humorous? What ignites their humour? What is the ‘funny bone’ that tickles them?

I teach a course on humour to a small group of freshmen. Currently, this course is in its second year running. The focus is Asian rather than ASEAN, but the difference is not so critical. With the help of students, I tried to throw light on the sources of humour in Asia. This paper is a report of our findings.

- Is there such a phenomenon as humour within a territorial confine? Is it possible to identify such humour and unpack it for analysis?
- What would be the components of humour in ASEAN? What would be the out-of-bound markers?
- How does the humour expressed in ASEAN correlate with the theories of humour developed in the serious literature on humour?

Tentative Conclusion: Humour, like trade, culture and religion, flows through ASEAN and influences its jokes and anecdotes. At face value, humour in ASEAN probably has universally recognized structures. The autonomous aspects remain un-researched.

An anecdote will best serve as an introduction to the kind of humour discussed here:

In 2008, the news broke that a terrorist leader by the name of Mas Selamat Kastari had escaped from a detention centre in Singapore. Selamat was detained for questioning about his plans to hijack an airplane and crash it at Changi International Airport. Earlier, he was imprisoned in Indonesia for immigration offences and subsequently transferred to Singapore for further investigation. Selamat managed to evade his captors for more than a year. It turned out that he had swum his way to the southern Malaysian state of Johore. During his freedom run, many accounts were recorded where he could be hiding. These accounts were really quite humorous. Some thought he was sitting in a high rise apartment bedroom watching TV. Others thought they saw him walking the streets and there were in fact Selamat look-alikes that attracted quite a few stares.

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The more plausible explanations of his whereabouts speculated that he caught a boat to one of the Indonesian islands that dotted the seascape around Singapore. Batam island was one possibility. Batam was a tourist attraction and industrial zone for Singapore businesspeople. Visitors from Singapore could board a ferry at Singapore's Harbour Front and after 45 minutes, the ferry would arrive at Batam Ferry Terminal, where a large signboard bore the words 'SELAMAT DATANG' or 'welcome' in Bahasa Indonesia. Individually, the two words meant 'Arrive Safely'. Batam residents are quick to point out that the words meant 'Selamat has arrived' or 'Selamat is here'.

This anecdote about Mas Selamat Kastari shows the kind of humour discussed in this paper. Some relevant observations can be made:

- The welcome sign is not a kind of put-down humour. The element of scorn and ridicule is missing. After all, ASEAN prisons had always experienced break-outs at various times.
- It is a kind of bonding humour because the welcome sign makes an announcement that sort of conveys a message like this: 'Never mind, don't take it too seriously. We all make mistakes! Anyway, welcome to the club'. This is not the kind of humour that serious official ASEAN would like to endorse.
- To a large extent, the sign makes a healthy observation about a state of affairs. What it says is that a detainee has escaped and then naughtily suggests that he has arrived in Batam. It is humorous because Singapore visitors on vacation do not need to be told that Selamat is in Batam, although his presence is not impossible.

It is perhaps this type of observational humour that best describes the creature that is ASEAN humour discussed here. It is about light teasing at its best; it is about gentle ribbing with a bit of wit thrown in. In the ASEAN context, it can be called observation humour to borrow a term from the standard literature. It is humour

observed within the horizon of grass roots people who are not cognizant of the high stakes involved (as in the case of the escape by Mas Selamat) but they have heard about the escape and may be a little curious about how it happened.

It is useful to establish some parameters.

What does humour include? Humour includes sarcasm, mockery, cynicism, deprecation – self and of others, wordplay, anecdotes and of course jokes.

The kinds of humour that are excluded

Jokes about ASEAN itself

Regional and international organizations are often parodied. Observers do not hesitate to mock their work and their effectiveness. Their initials are taken to reflect a name that is different though retaining the same alphabets but the meanings are changed.

Thus APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) stands for Asia Pacific Economic Conversations

What about ASEAN? What do the initials stand for in terms of humour?
 ASEAN = All smiles, engagement and neighbourliness

ASEAN = Assortment of Southeast Asian Nuts (source: redbeanforum.com – postings on ASEAN founding fathers turning in their graves, posted 26 April 2008, ‘Asean, The Clowns, The Knaves, and the Naives’. Why ‘nuts’? The context was the attempt by ASEAN members to remain in the driver’s seat even while engaging external parties.

Jokes about ASEAN personalities that are not disseminated by nationals

There are standard jokes about specific ASEAN neighbours that are at best crude, forthright, direct and even impolite.

- A visitor to hell finds Hitler up to his neck in brimstone. Stalin is buried to his head
- But the brimstone reaches only to Mr Marcos’ knees
- When the visitor asks why Mr Marcos was receiving such easy treatment, the devil replies.
- ‘See, he’s standing on Imelda’s shoulders’
- Mr and Mrs Marcos are flying in a helicopter over a crowd in Mrs Marcos’ home province of Leyte. Their son, Ferdinand Jr is accompanying them.
- Ferdinand Jr is about to throw one 100-peso bill to ‘make one person happy’
- Mrs Marcos stopped him and offers him two 50-peso bills to ‘make two people happy’
- Mr Marcos stops them both and offers ten 10-peso bills to make 10 people happy
- Ferdinand Jr was exasperated and exclaims: ‘Why don’t I just drop the two of you and make the entire population of the Philippines happy?’

The 2 ASEANS

There are 2 ASEANS mentioned in this paper – official and shadow. The ASEAN governments disseminate lots of information on respective ASEAN countries. In this paper, such information shall be designated as ‘official ASEAN’. But there is also a ‘shadow’ ASEAN in which information is disseminated by people not part of the official group. This non-official group can include the mis-informed grassroots, the general community, or ordinary people who did not pay attention to the official ASEAN information.

The dissemination in the shadow ASEAN is uncontrolled, uncontrollable and mostly unrecorded. The information that is purveyed in the process of dissemination probably surfaces in various forms – anecdotes, conversations, satire, or jokes (that is, all aspects of humour). It is the humour within the environment of this shadow ASEAN that is the focus.

The humour collected for this paper

The humour that have been collected or chosen for mention in this paper should preferably meet some pre-requisites.

- Provenance should be available wherever possible
- Self-deprecation or self-mockery is preferred to insult or superciliousness by external parties. Therefore the Marcos jokes do not meet these pre-requisites
- Humour in this shadow ASEAN does not necessarily lead to laughter; such humour is not always funny and could in fact be tragic

Acknowledgement of help by students

Two years ago, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the NUS approved a module on humour. The focus was humour in Asia, not just ASEAN. The students set about collecting and dissecting humour that was encountered in Asian print, media and cyberspace. They ranged over China, India, Japan and Southeast Asia. They asked questions about humour in Islam. They dissected personal humorous encounters.

Discussion

When discussing humour about ASEAN, there are two main categories:

- Humour about ASEAN neighbours consists of gentle ribbing and soft teasing. It can be witty. Such humour brings a smile to the face but the effect is usually not the guffaw-type during which an audience bursts out in loud laughter. Because of the need to maintain polite discourse, it is not usually the norm to apply ridicule or scorn. Nor is it correct political behaviour to laugh at others’ dilemmas. Therefore the subjects of humour must necessarily be chosen carefully. It is this first category of humour about ASEAN that is the focus of this paper.
- All constraints that limit humour about ASEAN can be lifted if delivered by ASEAN’s own nationals about their respective societies or nations. Here it can be a case of no-holds barred. The constraints are only necessarily those of self-

censorship by the individual jokester. This is not the category of concern in this paper.

If humour is to be polite, gentle and light, then how is such humour captured and analysed? One approach to study such humour avoids the classical theories of humour (superiority, and relief). Instead, humour can be studied from the perspective of the horizon of the individual jokester, that is, how and what the jokester sees as relevant and significant for him / her. It should be stated at the outset that the jokester probably did not start out with an intention to joke or laugh. That it turned out to be funny, amusing or entertaining was unexpected. By analysing humour at the level of horizon, it is possible to move down to the grass roots in order to understand how an individual perceives a range of experience. Humour, after all, reveals more about a person than many other methods of study. Why we laugh at certain phenomena tells a lot about a person's character or interests. The concept of horizon humour brings into focus the kinds of information that the accidental jokester seeks to process.

The next step is to identify some examples of these kinds of information that become appropriate materials to enter the horizons of individuals in ASEAN. Because of the constraints of data collection, the attention here is drawn largely to the horizons of Singapore residents towards ASEAN neighbours

Water and sanitation or 'Watsan'

Within the horizon of Singapore residents (please note that the category of 'residents' is used, not 'citizens', because water is not only a national concern in Singapore but one that hits all and sundry), the scarcity, shortage and preciousness of water is very real. In the recent past of Singapore's history (the 1950s for example), water rationing was a very common exercise each time a drought occurred. Singapore then depended on rain to sustain its water supply and it still does. Singapore also depended on the supply of raw water drawn from rivers in Johore state in southern Malaysia, and still does. Water, its lack or its availability, therefore arguably enters into the horizons of every Singapore resident consciously or unconsciously. The situation has improved considerably. Recognizing that dependence on the weather or Malaysia for water reveals the vulnerability of Singapore, strong measures were taken to exploit new sources of water, and control the usage.

Because Singapore is extensively urbanized that is also densely populated with people living right next to each other, it is important for public health to ensure that water is potable and places are kept clean. 'Watsan', that is water and sanitation, figures very prominently in the horizons. Singapore residents are exposed to campaigns to keep toilets clean. To facilitate consciousness about clean toilets, Singapore residents are even encouraged to participate in World Toilet Day (19 November). During the first World Toilet Day, if not wrong, a big squat was organized to demonstrate the importance of toilets. Other measures to control usage include re-designing toilet cisterns to conserve water discharge, the installation of automatic urinal flushes for a specified amount of water, the introduction of water-free toilet systems, the use of sensors for public water dispensers and so on. On new sources of water, re-cycling used water is big business in Singapore. The Singapore Minister of the Environment was once quoted as reporting that every human who arrives in Singapore and discharges fluids will find that fluid captured within a system and recycled for use.

Within the horizon of individual ASEAN neighbours, this concern about water has caused some amusement. A male Filipino journalist visiting Singapore commented that even urinals in Singapore were so regulated that they flush automatically after each use. All it takes is for the male user to stand before the urinal, pee, and then walk away. (This was a reference to the tight regulated society that was Singapore.) Presumably, the same would apply for female toilet cisterns. When water recycling first began in Singapore, there were many sniggering jokes that residents in Singapore drank sewage water. From Malaysia, there were comments that tourists should not drink coffee at street stalls because of the water used. Also, Malaysia should sell its sewage to Singapore for processing. The yuck factor was and remains very strong.

Within Singapore, the horizon that residents used to gaze at their ASEAN neighbours was how the sanitation problem was addressed. Here the images are quite vivid and graphic. Residents used to the privacy of Singapore toilets speak about the doors in public toilets that cannot be locked. (A valuable travel advisory was to bring your own umbrellas.) They are amazed by the open toilets along river banks. I'm told that females concerned about their modesty try to hold their bowels till nightfall when in the dark they can go to the fields to defecate. They of course risk snakes and other dangers. (In India – not ASEAN – people doing their toilet along the roads had to keep moving to avoid on-coming vehicles with their headlights. The discomfort is not difficult to imagine.) Now there are even Singapore philanthropic organizations that attempt to build toilets in rural Cambodia that use ash, not water because water is not readily available.

If ASEAN wants to promote better understanding, one sure remedy is to throw light on toilet habits instead of letting grass roots horizons focus on specific practices that tend to blow out of proportion and only the gross aspects are exaggerated.

Food

Along with water and sanitation, comes food. The whole of ASEAN is a food paradise partly due to the open-ness of the region that allows for all kinds of culinary traditions to enter. The food culture in that region is indeed very strong. Any tourist will testify that it is an adventure to eat street food. Singapore is no exception. It is definitely within the horizon of residents in ASEAN to patronise street food when visiting one another. One major bugbear of eating street food is of course hygiene. Though the aromas are tempting and the food looks delectable, there is the possibility of food poisoning, diarrhoea and various stomach upsets. Even within Singapore, despite the enforcement of regulations to safeguard public hygiene, there are occasional outbreaks of mass food poisoning, sometimes resulting in deaths.

The Singapore health authorities have devised a system of accreditation for cleanliness that has caught the notice (that is, entered the horizon-al consciousness) of ASEAN and other visitors. Cooked food hawkers are graded A, B, C, or D by inspectors who visit the stalls to examine how their food is prepared. Thus demerit points are assigned if hawkers do not use plastic gloves and replace them as often as possible. Hawkers are not permitted to prepare food on the ground, for example, they are not permitted to chop or cut on the floor. Chopping boards and knives must be washed after each use. Raw food must be stored in refrigerators that must not be crowded or excessively full. Shelves must be cleaned. Utensils must be stacked

neatly. Even the personal hygiene of the cooks and stall assistants is taken into consideration. A food hawker who meets these stringent conditions can be graded 'A' or 'B'. The 'C' grade is given to those considered satisfactory. The 'D' grader will face suspension. It is mandatory for the food hawker to display the grade prominently for all patrons to see. Of course the grades are valid only till the next inspection. Typically, international fast food chains that use modern kitchen equipment proudly display 'A' grades.

It will not be long before ASEAN and other visitors learn that the best tasting food is sold by those street hawkers with a 'C' grade and not those boasting 'A' or 'B' grades. How is that the case? It turned out that 'C' graders have no time to be keep clean because their customer queues are so long while those with 'A' and 'B' grades have too much spare time on their hands.

It will not be long, if it has not happened yet, that on the internet, the grades (for tastiness) have been changed to reflect alternative / different descriptions:

- A = Avoid (because the food tastes bad)
- B = Be careful (because the food can taste bad)
- C = Clean or Can lah! (Singlish meaning OK to eat)
- D = Distinction or Delicious (reserved for the most tasty)

On the horizon of food, mention must be made about a recent newspaper report (2010) that has caught considerable attention. Interestingly, the Malaysian minister for tourism has claimed ownership of certain types of food preparations. Thus she has urged Malaysians to claim that the original versions were found in Malaysia. These original versions included popular foods shared within Malaysia, Singapore and even Indonesia, such as *laksa* (rice vermicelli cooked in sauce), *bak kut teh* (pork bones broth), *nasi lemak* (coconut rice with side dishes), and maybe even *satey* (skewered meats). The claim excited some small talk with interesting side comments about how difficult it is to patent food preparations. For sure this claim will spawn internet jokes if it has not already happened. It is all within the horizon of ASEAN neighbours to poke fun of each other, and rib and tease.

Nation-building

However, this claim about food heritage is dangerously close to the precipice of national pride. Before the food claims surfaced, Malaysia and Indonesia were already engaged in a debate that was not humorous about the origins of the Malaysian anthem and certain forms of dance. And even earlier, Malaysia and Indonesia were engaged in a territorial dispute off the coast of eastern Sabah. Perhaps the national anthem and cultural dance forms were not exactly visible within the horizons of the average ASEAN citizen and therefore less accessible for mass humour purposes. Instead, it would have been more prudent to leave matters of such significance to official ASEAN. Ordinary mortals should devote their attention to more mundane day-to-day matters.

Although nation-building seems to be an official initiative, there were collateral spin-offs that figured in the grass roots horizons of individuals. It is not unexpected that ASEAN societies each manage their own nation-building projects, and one of these projects is the record of achievements that ordinary people do to

make their nation proud. This has spawned the books of records not different from the Guinness Books series.

An interesting example is the Malaysian variety.

During the early 1990s, Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad coined the slogan ‘Malaysia Boleh’ or “‘Malaysia can’ (a can-do spirit) to assure Malaysians that they are just as good as the rest of the world

- Former Information Minister, Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, conceived the brainchild of a book capturing in print the attempts by Malaysians to be the greatest, smallest, tallest, shortest, richest, rarest, highest, oldest, youngest, fattest, lightest, heaviest, longest (<http://www.malaysiarecords.com.my/>)
- Mr Dastagir Hussinee stayed in a cage with 100 poisonous snakes for 20 days
- Mr Ali Khan spent 21 days in a cubicle the size of a portable toilet, with 5000 deadly scorpions
- 9-year old Tay Chong Wui (Sarawak) climbed an 11-storey building with his toes folded under the balls of his feet (the Highest Stair Climb on Clenched Toes) in September 2000
- Predictable entries include the longest Malaysian flag, the longest *satay* grill, the biggest moon cake (a Chinese delicacy) and the longest sandwich
- Admirable include first team to conquer Mount Everest, first Malaysian team to free fall in the North Pole, first Malaysian to sail solo around the world and the first Malaysian to reach the South Pole
- Laughable include the largest gathering of older persons in a circus

(More than 1000 senior citizens with walking sticks in hand made their way up rickety steps to their benches at the Imperial Russian Circus and Fun Fair in Penang, watched closely by medical staff on standby. Halfway through the show, a power failure hit and the lights went out. Many of the participants felt their way down the aisles and left)

- Laughable: the most frequent best man
- (Mr Ting Ming Siang, Sibu Sarawak, stood beside a bridegroom on 1,069 occasions between 1975 and 1996)
- Laughable include the longest *teh tarik* poured from several storeys down into a mug placed below
- (Many wondered what the beverage collected in its downward flight into the mug)
- Other laughable: first person to go dog-sledding; longest-seated Santa Claus; the biggest *vade* (Indian pastry); the longest string of *beehoon* (vermicelli); the largest blob of *cendol* (sweet ice desert)

Infrastructure

Relative to its ASEAN neighbours, one of the best transport infrastructures can be found in Singapore (the mass rapid system, the buses that connect different points, the highways, flyovers, the electronic apparatus to control traffic flow and so on). It is often wondered how the ASEAN grassroots neighbours regard this infrastructure – with admiration, envy or whatever. Definitely, at the official level, the importance of infrastructure needs no defence. In Indonesia, for example, Trade

Minister Mari Pangestu was asked recently (*Straits Times*, 31 March 2010, A2) what were her government's priorities to step up economic development. She replied without hesitation: 'infrastructure, infrastructure and infrastructure.' Indeed, any visitor to Indonesia would have experienced at a personal horizon-al level the logistical bottlenecks and patchy traffic flows that turn Jakarta into an all-day traffic jam. The problems were tough to crack. Government revenue is insufficient. Land clearance disputes impeded road development.

At the grassroots horizon level, Singapore is not a paradise either, even with its advanced transport infrastructure. In a Malaysian website that circulates poems, a blogger has shared an amusing piece written by poetess Wendy Cope that describes very well the bus system in Singapore but this poem connects the bus problems to a more personal horizon-al level. This poem should resonate very well with a female audience. It is appropriately entitled 'Bloody Men'

Bloody men are like bloody buses -
You wait for about a year
And as soon as one approaches your stop
Two or three others appear.

You look at them flashing their indicators,
Offering you a ride.
You're trying to read the destinations,
You haven't much time to decide.

If you make a mistake, there is no turning back.
Jump off, and you'll stand there and gaze
While the cars and the taxis and lorries go by
And the minutes, the hours, the days.

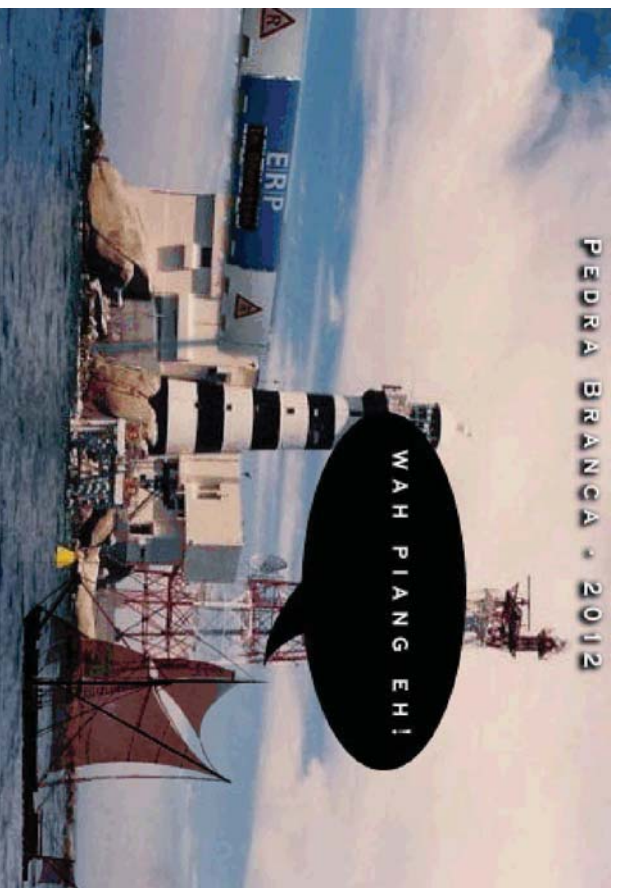
The irony is that more difficult problems than buses have been adequately addressed within Singapore, but not bus transport. Bus transport is certainly within the horizon-al screen of a grass roots resident.

Typically, one tool to address any problem in Singapore is to find a solution within a system of cash payments (the Pay-and-Pay or the fine-city syndrome). It would not be illogical or unexpected if ASEAN neighbours must have viewed these cash payments with amusement. They would certainly be forgiven if they are grateful that their own authorities have not followed the Singapore example. One method to address the bus system is to control traffic congestion, traffic flows especially during peak hours, put more buses on the roads, and promote their use by persuading drivers not to use their cars. The control tools can consist of bus lanes and road tolls.

Road tolls in Singapore deserve special mention because they are collected by the so-called Electronic Road Pricing ERP system instead of gate barriers that lift after payment. The ERP allows road users to drive through without stopping or slowing down, thus there are no bottle-necks or congestions when collecting payments.

For those who are not aware, the ERP has become a source of ribbing amongst the Singapore residents, and it will not be surprising in ASEAN as well. Since the ERP gantries can be erected anywhere, jokes abound that ERP gantries will soon be

set up outside homes so that any pedestrian who wants to venture out has to pay for road usage first. Abroad, when Singapore Day is organized, visitors are made to walk through imitation ERP gantries upon entry to the fair grounds. In 2009, a territorial dispute between Singapore and Malaysia was decided by the International Court of Justice. The decision was taken to award jurisdiction of the island of Pedra Branca (Pulau Batu Putih) to Singapore. One of the best jokes about the ERP was a cartoon showing an ERP gantry built across the waters from Singapore island to Pedra Branca.



Population

Of all the ASEAN neighbours, Singapore stands out as one with the lowest birth rate. The population is simply not reproducing itself. The population decline, together with the aging trend, will have serious impact on Singapore's economy very shortly. These population problems contrast with the rapid growth in population in other ASEAN societies. Everywhere, ASEAN capitals teem with people, and especially young people. In Singapore too, the streets teem with young people, but that may be because the old people stay at home. Why has Singapore a population problem? Couples marry late; children cost money to educate instead of contributing to family income; women do not procreate till long after time.

Earlier, it was mentioned that ERP gantries could be erected outside the homes of residents in Singapore to make pedestrians pay for road usage upon venturing out. The Singapore humorists think that the ERP gantries are intended to keep people at home and since there is nothing to do,

Philandering

Have you nothing to do? Bored? Do you want a flutter? There's always Batam. Using the earlier reference to Batam island as platform, one horizon-al perception that emerges in Singapore is the association of Batam with philandering. It is a well known fact that men in Singapore keep second families in Batam for their

week-end flings. (There is no corresponding information how the women folk keep busy during week-days)

Lately (2010), philandering was big news in Singapore. Coming shortly after the Tiger Woods revelation, it was revealed that one of Singapore's most famous movie director and producer was caught philandering with a young starlet. The entire media attention was transfixed on this event. This event also served as a launch pad to explore the practice of philandering in other neighbouring societies. The obvious target of attention was not ASEAN but China. Along the Fukien coasts, there were townships that housed the mistresses of Taiwan businessmen. It was reported that philandering was ok in China as long as the problem was not brought home or reported. What about the ASEAN neighbours? The gaze shifted to Bangkok where angry and jealous spouses resorted to severing the male organ of philandering husbands or partners. Reportedly, these male organs were then thrown away or tied to hot air balloons and floated away. Why did the Thai women resort to such extreme measures such as the severance of the male organ? In humour, it was suggested that the Thais were good works and their womenfolk were experts at using the knife. And the lesson for all wannabe philanders? Whenever on a philandering expedition, bring a thermos flask filled with ice cubes just in case it is necessary to store a severed male organ until it can be stitched back. And of course, keep the business card of a qualified surgeon to call in case of need.

Conclusion: The curiosity factor

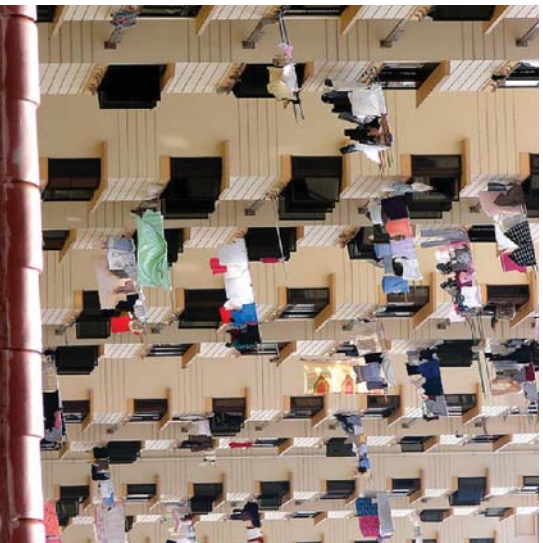
The above deals with the objects of a grass roots gaze into the horizon. What requires explanation is why the grass roots person wants to scan his / her horizon? Why bother? What does he or she choose to see as objects in the horizon? This is about what satisfies the curiosity of the gazer - to each his / her own. The satisfaction that is derived can vary from person to person but the curiosity is probably uniform.

I derive this curiosity factor from an underlying belief that there is a simple reason to explain why people in ASEAN and elsewhere are interested in each other's situation and dilemmas

The overriding explanation what ignites humour about ASEAN is the curiosity of the people in this region about each other. This curiosity must not be misconstrued. It is probably not only about the government institutions of each country. It is not only about the literature and cultural traditions. Of course those aspects of civilization and society are important, and official ASEAN will continue to promote their knowledge. At the grass roots horizon level, the situation takes a turn. As an individual gazes outward, priorities change. Matters that were not assigned important by an official ASEAN suddenly loom large because the inward range of experience and perception dictates. Simple day-to-day, informal matters become objects of curiosity that need satisfaction. Often what attract the grass roots attention are mundane matters that do not enter the radar screen of official ASEAN, which, of course, has its own horizon. A few examples are picked by way of conclusion. They all relate to living conditions and life-style. They are very ordinary issues that affect grass roots people.

How do neighbours manage their laundry? Many people, especially in Singapore but also elsewhere in ASEAN, live in high-rise apartment blocks. How do resident dry their clean laundry? They hang them on bamboo poles sticking out of the

apartment facade. The result is often a colourful if untidy assortment of laundry items fluttering in the wind. This is a most economical and environmentally-friendly method to dry washed laundry.



There are trade-offs, though. From the high floors, wet laundry drips water down to the dry laundry of lower floors. Birds also stain laundry with droppings. Inconsiderate residents on upper floors also dry their floor mops and floor rags above the clean laundry of the lower floor residents. These domestic situations have created much resentment among residents but they have also spawned much good-natured humour. How do ASEAN neighbours dry their laundry?

How do other societies in ASEAN manage the problem of urination in elevators within apartment blocks? In Singapore, most residents live in high-rise ‘flats’ with elevator access. A perennial problem faced by many residents is the bad social practice of uncooperative people using the elevators as their toilet to pee. The result is a stench and puddles of unsightly fluids. This had always been a serious matter but it also has an amusing angle that such anti-social acts are still performed in an ultra-modern setting. How do ASEAN neighbours address this problem? The humour aspect is the application of technology to nab the inconsiderate users. Elevators in Singapore now come installed with high tech sensors that detect the presence of urine. Presumably, the gadgets are so sophisticated that they can differentiate between urine and other fluids, e.g. sugary syrups. Once activated, the elevator jams, and the culprit has no choice but to wait for rescue. The amusing problem is that the culprits were often pet dogs or children who could not wait any longer.

What does it take to live in an Islamic state? Will gambling be frowned upon? What about night clubbing? What about dressing that is revealing? Can couples show their affection in public? Can women apply cosmetics? The nearest Islamic state from Singapore is Kelantan. Attention is often directed at the state laws governing cinema watching, about couples getting caught in close proximity, and how female beauty is an issue for the state government.

The following speech to state employees was allegedly delivered by the Chief Minister of Kelantan:

- There are far too many pretty women in the government offices at the moment, distracting male workers and lowering business efficiency ... We

must be ever watchful for possible immoral activities and it is well-known that pretty women cause unhealthy activities that lead to insanity, blindness, sickness and....

- That is why from now on thorough ugliness must be considered a deciding factor at all job interviews.
- That is why from now on thorough ugliness must be considered a deciding factor at all job interviews.
- Since the prettier candidate has already been blessed by God, it is only right that we should hire the uglier one.
- After all, if we do not choose the ugly candidates, who will?

Curiosity will continue to drive humour. New discoveries leading to new knowledge or new awareness will produce humorous situations, especially in a context like ASEAN where officials want to help people learn more about their neighbours, where neighbours want to learn more about each other.

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The Bright and Dark Sides of Humor

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between humor and politeness theory. It is widely held that humor is a positive politeness strategy employed for oiling the wheels of interpersonal relationships and redressing threats to face. In contrast to Brown and Levinson's (1987) assumption, I propose that humor also has a negative side to communication, as it can be a face-threatening act to both the speaker and hearer if humor is 'misrepresented' and 'misunderstood'. For instance, the use of dry humor and telling jokes in inappropriate situations put a threat to the speaker's own face, whereas utterances intended to tease could be risky to the hearer's face. In conclusion, when humor is used in different contexts, it can serve more functions than what pragmatic theory has generally suggested.

1. Introduction

Recent studies in pragmatics have shown a growing interest in humor. A classic focus of humor research is an investigation of the relationship between humor and politeness theory since humorous communication breaks various social norms of politeness. (Kotthoff, 1996) Brown and Levinson (1987) consider joking as one of the positive politeness strategies used to maintain both speaker's and hearer's positive face, and minimize the threat to one's positive face. Joking generates feelings of friendship between speaker and hearer with shared background knowledge and attitudes. It shows how humor can contribute to the preservation of one's positive face. Positive politeness realizations are ways of minimizing social distance. However humor can violate both the positive and negative face of hearer or speaker's own face if it is 'misrepresented' and 'misunderstood' in case when dry humor and jokes are used in inappropriate situations. Humor also can be used for techniques which deliberately attack the hearer's face. Since humor can serve more functions than what politeness theory has generally suggested, it is interesting to further investigate the relation between humor and im/politeness. In this paper I will start by exploring humor perspectives and the notion of im/politeness; I will then move on to analyze humor as strategies of politeness and impoliteness, including the relationship between humor and impoliteness. I will conclude my discussion by concentrating on the different perspectives on im/politeness in humorous communication.

2. The agreement on humor perspectives

In this section I will define the key term "humor", which will be used throughout this article. Humor is represented in differences along several dimensions such as the target of humor (teasing, self-denigrating, and joke about absent others),

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the type of discourse (narrative joke and conversational joke), the form of humor (joke, anecdote, wordplay, irony, comic, riddle, quip and so on). There are many words involving 'humor'. I do not distinguish these words because there is no a clear-cut differentiation in practice. Attardo (1994: 295-296) proposes that humor is perceived broadly in two different aspects: 'humorous utterance' (or canned jokes) and humor interaction (or conversational jokes). First, humorous utterance focuses on humor which is found in books, collections of jokes, like, puns; and its text does not depend on contextual factors. Humor interaction is humor improvised during a conversation. However humorous utterance and humor interaction in everyday usage may not be completely separated. I consider humor as a speech activity which contains various speech acts. Thus humor used in this article defines as interactional processes, not limited to only humorous utterances. What's more humorous conversation in this article, mostly collected from Thai situation comedies, is viewed from the speaker perspective. It can provoke laughter either interlocutors or other participants in joking activity.

3. The Concept of Politeness and Impoliteness

Before discussing humor as a politeness or impoliteness, I will begin exploring definitions of 'politeness' and 'impoliteness' from the scholars summarized here:

Spencer-Oatey (2005: 97) defines im/politeness as "the subjunctive judgments people make about the social appropriateness of verbal and non-verbal behavior".

Löcherer and Watts (2008: 10) see politeness as "a discursive concept arising out of interactants' perceptions and judgment of their own and others' verbal behavior.

Kienpointner (1997: 259; 2008) explains rudeness is a kind of prototypically non-cooperative or competitive communicative behavior which destabilizes the personal relationships of the interacting individuals [...] creates all maintains an emotional atmosphere of mutual reverence and antipathy, which primarily serves egocentric interests [...].

Culpeper et al (2003: 1546) said that [...] impoliteness communication strategies designed to attack face, thereby cause social conflict and disharmony [...].

Bousfield (2008: 72) defines impoliteness constitutes the communication of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts (FTAs) which are purposefully delivered: (1) unmitigated, in contexts where mitigation is required, and/or, (2) with deliberate aggression, that is, with the face threat exacerbated, 'boosted', or maximized in some way to heighten the face damage inflicted.

The definitions of politeness and impoliteness can be grouped into three views to consider im/politeness: the social norm, the conversational maxim and the face management. The 'social norm' view is the conceptual understanding of politeness and impoliteness as a 'etiquette' within certain culture. Being tactful, generous, modest, consideration for other's feeling etc. may be viewed as appropriateness and politeness. Interrupting, pointing, ignoring or so can be considered as rudeness and impoliteness. The concept of im/politeness varies according to cultures. The 'conversation maxim' view is formulated by Lakoff (1973) and developed by Leech (1983, 2005). Participants follow the six politeness maxims to establish politeness in a social interaction. Brown and Levinson's (1987) face management view is the most academically popular of all the approaches to politeness; and later Culpeper (1996, 2005) articulates impoliteness framework based on face. The impoliteness framework of Culpeper (1996, 2005) and the politeness framework of Brown and Levinson (1987) have a parallel structure. For this reason, although Brown and Levinson's view

on politeness is much criticized, I have adopted Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on politeness strategies and Culpeper's (1996, 2005) work on impoliteness strategies in this analysis.

3.1 Face and Politeness

The notion of face is at the core of Brown and Levinson (1987) approach to illustrate their politeness framework. Brown and Levinson (1987: 61), using Goffman's concept of 'face' as a starting point, define 'face' as the public self-image that every member wants. Face can be subdivided into 'positive face' and 'negative face'. The positive face is the desire for appreciation and approval and the negative face is the desire for freedom from imposition. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) members of a given society treat 'face' as basic wants which every member of a society knows every other member desires. The recognition of one's face can be a way employed to express 'politeness'. Within an interaction, nonetheless, there is a threat to face, describing as a face threatening act, such as asking to borrow a pen or giving advice. Thus politeness strategies in language are utilized to lessen the threat and to satisfy one's face as follow:

- Bald-on-record with or without redressive action involves doing the face-threatening act in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible in circumstances where interlocutors agree that the relevance of face demands may be ignored in the interests of urgency or efficiency; where the danger to hearer's face is very small as in offers, request, suggestions; or where speaker is superior in power to hearer (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69). For example the speaker might shout "Help me!" while s/he is drowning. Normally the direct imperative is face-threatening act; however, face demand in such great urgency may be suspended.
- Positive politeness is the use of strategies designed to satisfy the addressee's positive face; for example, speaker says "Help me, buddy." The word "buddy" claims the friendship. Such address form with imperative is used to soften the face-threatening act.
- Negative politeness is the use of strategies designed to redress the addressee's negative face. For instance, the expression "I was wondering if you could help me" is conventional indirectness used to request. Such indirectness provides an opportunity for the hearer in order to avoid the imposition.
- Off record is performed in such a way that "there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent". (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69) such as the phrase "I forgot my purse at the dorm." The phrase is not clear what exactly means. It could be a request or a stating. Actually the speaker may be intended to borrow the hearer's money. The ambiguous utterance is used for politeness reason.
- Withhold the FTA. The speaker says nothing in this strategy, but s/he searches obviously in bag. (Yule, 1996: 62) This action may imply that the speaker is making a request for a pen.

3.2 Face and Impoliteness

Goffman (1967: 14) suggests that there are three types of action which may lead to face damage. First, "intentional threats to face" (Bousfield, 2008: 67) refers to a malicious and spiteful offence, with the intention of causing an open insult. For

example, the interchange between a traffic warden (S1) and a car owner (S2) who has received a parking penalty contains an offence.

Example 1

- S1: I'm afraid I have sir =
 S2: you have no authority to put a ticket on a disabled err car = why didn't you
- S1: I'd. what do you mean I did do it before
 S2: do it before then I've parked here every day because I have a
- S1: yes sir I never really
 S2: prescription from the chemist you don't put any tickets on my car and then and
- S1: I'm not I'm not always down here sir
 S2: then you just come in and out of the blue and put one on oh fuck off

The above sequence of event refers to an offence which targets at attacking the positive face of the traffic warden (S1). The term “fuck off” in the final turn shows a clear intention to be rude.

Second, “incidental threats to face” (Bousfield, 2008: 68) is an offensive consequence of action the speaker performs. It is an unplanned (but sometimes anticipated) result of the action. The speaker is not intended to offend the hearer. (Goffman, 1967: 14) For instance, this conversation is extracted from event of appeal. An adjudicator for London's Southwark council (S1) hears and decides on appeals concerning all types of parking offences. The husband and wife (S2 and S3 respectively) are appealing against a ticket which they have received.

Example 2

- S1: well look I must draw this to a close. *I've listened to you very carefully and I'm do understand entirely what your point is but I can't allow your appeal I'm afraid* =
 S2: = Oh why
 S3:
- S1: erm erm *I can't say that the ticket has been incorrectly issued because it's been*
 S2: not I I
 S3:
- S1: *correctly issued not incorrectly issued*
 S2: we're not we're not arguing that I
 S3: but it hasn't been correctly issued
- S1: well in my opinion it has
 S2: what happens if a sign changes overnight
 S3: but

In example (2) the adjudicator denies an appeal of the husband and wife. The adjudicator is not intended to cause face damage to the vehicle's owners. However face damage is an offensive result of denying. In other words, this kind of by-product offence is captured within politeness theory.

Third, “accidental threats to face” (Bousfield, 2008: 70) is defined as the offence acted innocently, unintentionally and unwittingly. (Goffman, 1967: 14) The following actual conversation occurs between a high ranking member of Lancaster University's senate (S1) and a member of the academic staff (S2).

Example 3

S1: <*sincerely*> *when is it due?*
 S2: ... I'm not pregnant

The senate selects the phrase “when is it due?” which unwittingly makes people think that the member of the academic staff looks overweight. The action may be construed as face threatening act within a Western cultural setting. (Culpeper et al, 2003: 1551)

Goffman (1967)'s categorization above is a speaker-based account of impoliteness. As a result, ‘impoliteness’ is classified into three aspects: fully intended impoliteness, incidental impoliteness and unintended impoliteness. Although Goffman's viewpoint is helpful, Culpeper et al (2003) argue unintended impoliteness as the miscommunication of politeness such as too little or too much politeness work in a particular context, not communication of impoliteness. Culpeper (2005: 38) considers impoliteness as an intention-based account. In other words, impoliteness comes about when (1) the speaker express face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceive behavior as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2). Culpeper (1996, 2005) and Culpeper et al (2003) develop an impoliteness framework from Brown and Levinson (1987). Impoliteness strategies for Culpeper are ‘opposite’ in terms of orientation to face i.e. instead of maintaining or enhancing face, they are designed to attack face by paralleling of Brown and Levinson's politeness framework.

- Bald-on-record impoliteness is the face threat performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in situations where face is not immaterial or minimized. This impolite strategy is distinct from Brown and Levinson's bald on record strategy which is employed for polite purposes in given circumstances where face redress is little necessary in case of urgency, with no intention of damaging the hearer's face. In contrast, bald-on-record impoliteness is typically exploited in deliberate attack to the face of the hearer. The excerpt in (4) is representative example. There has been confrontational conversation between parents (S1, S2 and S3) and the school's headmistress (S4) about the tickets for parking cars in the wrong place.

Example 4

S1: we'll start with you madam <to S4> I work for T F M parking okay
 S2: has made no attempt to respond
 S3: excuse me excuse me you are
 S4:
 S1: I did the first time I met you okay where's your car
 S2:
 S3: a parking attendant alright act like one okay *shut up and act like a parking attendant*
 S4:

The phrase “shut up and act like a parking attendant” is two imperative commands that serve as a bald-on-record face threat to the headmistress.

- Positive impoliteness is action designed to damage the addressee's positive face. The strategies of positive impoliteness include failing to attend to hearer's needs, ignoring, snubbing the other, excluding the other from the activity, disassociating from the other, disinterest, unconcern, being unsympathetic, using

inappropriate identity markers, using obscure or secretive language, seeking disagreement, using taboo words, calling the other names, making the other feel uncomfortable (e.g. do not avoid silence, joke, or use small talk). The following interaction involves a clumper (S1) and a car owner (S2). The car owner challenges the clumper to clump his van. The clumper attempts to explain that there is nothing ‘personal’ in his action.

Example 5

S1: I can take your notes on board but there’s nothing I personally can do I simply work do my job for

S2: just do your job

S1: the council I do my job for the coun if you want me to explain then if you

S2: *I don’t care what you do*

S1: want be like that then I can walk away I don’t have to talk to you if I don’t want to if

S2:

S1: you’re going to be rude to me yeah I that’s fine then sir I

S2: *I don’t really want to talk to you you’re not going to do anything*

S1:

S2: *about it are you*

In example (5) the clumper tries to explain that he does his duty. He puts a clump on the wheels of the van because of illegal parking. Clearly, the car owner fails to attend to the clumper’s need to exonerate himself.

- Negative impoliteness is the face-threatening strategies intended to violate the addressee’s negative face wants. The linguistic output strategies include frighten, condescend, scorn, or ridicule, invade the other’s space, explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect, put the other’s indebtedness on record, hinder or block the other—physically or linguistically, etc. The following is an extract from a conversation between the adjudicator (S1) and the spouses (S2 and S3). The husband and wife have arguing with the adjudicator over a parking ticket. They have refused to listen to his reason; nevertheless, the adjudicator attempts to explain why he will not allow their appeal. The adjudicator tries to close the conversation and makes the spouses leave his office.

Example 6

S1: I I’ve finished Mr Culp . will you will you please leave the room . I’m not

S2: say in this situation

S3:

S1: answering any further questions . do you want me to press the buzzer

S2:

S3: *well that’s being*

S1: will you please leave the room

S2:

S3: *babyish isn’t it*

The sequence of event in example (6) shows the attempt of the adjudicator to make the spouses leave his office. The spouses react by using the term 'babyish' to express scorn for the adjudicator's action.

- Sarcasm or mock politeness is the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realizations. Sarcasm is the activity of speaking which is clearly the opposite of banter. Sarcasm is mock politeness for social conflict; conversely, banter is mock impoliteness for social harmony. (Culpeper et al, 2003) Example (7) shows sarcasm or mock politeness. A van driver (S2) is fighting with a clamping official (S1) about clamping his vehicle. After a confrontational conversation, the angry driver snatches the penalty ticket and other details away from the official and tells him to 'go away'. As the official returns his own vehicle to leave from the office, the driver issues the following utterance:

Example 7

S1: I will do

S2:.. (sarcastically) have a good day

In example (7) the driver is likely to express an insincere polite wish because there is a perceived incongruity between the utterances and its context. A non-literal meaning intended by the driver is the impolite wish – have a bad day.

- Withhold politeness involves keeping silent or failing to act where politeness work is expected. Culpeper, J, et al (2003: 1559) present an example of “withhold politeness”. Here an adjudicator (S1) has just refused a car owner’s (S2) appeal against a parking ticket.

Example 8

SI: well thank you very much for coming

S2:

ng good day
I don't thank you at all

In example (8) a car owner, explicitly, fails to reciprocate the adjudicator's thanks in the situation where politeness is expected.

3. Humor as a strategy of politeness

3.1 Humor as a bald-on-record with or without redressive action

Bald-on-record with or without redressive action involves saying utterance in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 74) in a specific context where the face threat is very small and minimal politeness work is required. Superficially, humor may be a bald-on-record strategy, but there is a fundamental difference i.e. humor can be used in unlimited situation. Whenever the face attack occur, humor may minimize the face threat, in that it can dismiss the previous face-threatening utterances as simply joking with saying: 'I'm just kidding/joking.' (cf. Zaidman, 1995) However, the later a speaker reveals what is said is not serious, the more a hearer feels the face loss. (Kane et al, 1977: 15) Example (9) illustrates the case of humor as a bald-on-record strategy of politeness mentioned above.

Example 9 The boss (S1) asks her maid (S2) about the rumors of the maid's wedding plans.

S1: Can I ask you a question?

S2: Give me one hundred baht for the answer. (pause) I'm just kidding.

The action to request for S1's money is regarded as a negative face-threatening act. Suddenly, bald-on-record politeness occurs when S2 says "I'm just kidding." The previous aggressive utterance becomes nonsense.

3.2 *Humor as a positive politeness*

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), positive politeness can be expressed by satisfying 'positive face' need in two ways: indicating similarities amongst interactants, or expressing an appreciation of the interlocutor's face. Humor is regarded as one of positive politeness techniques, i.e. as a strategy used to maintain both speaker's and hearer's positive face by claiming common attitudes, point of view, opinions, empathy, and background knowledge between speaker and hearer. Humor may serve this function to foster feelings of familiarity and friendship and are ways of minimizing social distance. (Hay, 1995; Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Holmes and Maura, 2002; Norrick, 2003) Another function as positive politeness strategy, humorous expressions is used to minimize the threat to one's positive face as in Norrick and Spitz's (2008) study on using humor to mitigate conflict in interaction.

The selected instances of humor serve to create solidarity within the group or between particular members of the group and to minimize the social distance in example (10) and (11) respectively.

Example 10 A mother (S2) is dancing alone in the living room. Immediately her sons (S1 and S3) come into the room.

S1: Mom, you are good at dancing.

S2: I was a dancing queen when I was young.

S3: Wow!

S1: Look out! The floor is catching fire because of your dancing. (S1, S2 and S3 laugh)

In example (10) the sons tease their mother about the high ability in dancing. Humor may enhance rapport indirectly, since reaction demonstrates shared background knowledge about dancing of three interlocutors. The next sequence, from Thai situation comedy data, is an example of using humor to lessen face-threatening action.

Example 11 The workers suggest that their boss hires more employees because of lots of works.

S1: Boss, why don't you hire someone to help with our increasing work?

S2: You all are so hard-working. A new employee may have nothing to do, if I accept your suggestion. (smile)

In example (11) the boss would like to refuse the worker's suggestion. The action may attack their positive face. Thus the boss uses joke to minimize a face-threatening act of refusing.

3.3 *Humor as a negative politeness*

Negative politeness strategies are used in order to emphasize the hearer's right to freedom of action. Intuitively speaking, humor is closer to the positive politeness techniques which oil the wheels of interpersonal relationship than to the negative politeness of non-imposition embodied in the rules of formal etiquette. (Zajdman, 1995) Humor, nevertheless, can be used as a strategy for maintaining the hearer's negative face. The only example in my data which can qualify humor as a negative politeness is the one in (12).

Example 12 A woman asks her boyfriend which is free from work to send these cakes to her customers.

S1: Laziness may cause a mental retard. You should do something, like, sending these cakes for me.
S2: (laugh)

In example (12) the woman requests her boyfriend to send these cakes to her customers. She uses humor to keep the hearer's right to freedom of imposition. Her action redresses the negative face attack of her boyfriend.

3.4 *Humor as an off-record*

The prescription for an off-record is 'Be indirect'; this strategy involves hinting, presupposing, understating, overstating, tautology, irony, metaphors, ambiguities, contradictions, rhetorical questions, vagueness and incompleteness, overgeneralization, and the use of ellipsis. In short, an off-record communicative act is done in a way that it is not one clear communicative intention to the act. Humor as an off record seems to be a case in which a speaker uses "funny expression" to try to avoid a face-threatening act. The exchange immediately follows the one in (13).

Example 13 A father (S1) and his brother (S2) go to the graveyard to a daughter who is getting lost; suddenly they heard a savage howl.

S2: Is that a howl?
S1: Do you think that sound is a thunder?

In example (13) A father and his brother are looking for a daughter who is getting lost in the graveyard. Immediately they hear a howl quite plainly. His brother wonders whether that sound heard is a howl. The father complains it is a silly question. To avoid threatening his brother's face, he uses humor, like the utterance "Do you think that sound is a thunder?", for indirect complaining.

4. **Humor as a strategy of impoliteness**

I want to propose that humor can intentionally perform impoliteness by violating the negative face or the positive face. In impoliteness communication, humor serves as "a camouflage" for the intention to hurt the hearer. There are three possible strategies which can be used to threaten the hearer's face: humor as a positive impoliteness, as a negative impoliteness and as a sarcasm or mock politeness discussed below.

4.1 *Humor as a positive impoliteness*

As I mentioned earlier, positive impoliteness refers to actions that are intended to damage positive face of the hearer such as failing to attend to hearer's need, excluding the other from the activity, using taboo words, making the other feel uncomfortable, etc. Cupeper et al (2003: 1555) state that joke is a way to make the participants feel awkward, but they do not discuss this point in detail. I will briefly present an example from my study that illustrates this point:

Example 14 A female boss (S3) and her secretary (S2) come to visit a sick male worker (S1) at his house. When the female boss sees pockmarks on his skin, she moves back with repulsion.

S1: Are you disgusted with me?

S2: You know, she isn't disgusted with you, but she doesn't want to come near you. (laugh)

S3: (laugh)

In example (14), the female boss visits the male worker which has been sick with chicken box. Due to her reaction, the worker with pockmarks questions whether the boss disgusts him. The secretary uses humor to express unfriendliness.

4.2 *Humor as a negative impoliteness*

Negative impoliteness is strategies for violating the hearer's negative face. The strategies include frighten, condescend, scorn or ridicule. Humor is used as a strategy to ridicule the hearer as shown in example (15).

Example 15 The two professional detectives is trying to use a high technology machine to investigate a missing person. However, the detective's investigations have come to a stand still because of a technical problem.

S1: Why doesn't the machine work?

S2: I've forgotten to plug it in.

S3: I get it. The two professional detectives forget to put the plug into the socket. (laugh)

In example (15) A girl (S3) uses humor to hide aggression. S3 is intended to attack their negative face with forming clearly aggressive in attacking an error of the detectives.

4.3 *Humor as a sarcasm or mock politeness*

A sarcasm or mock politeness is surface politeness. The speaker may use humor to conceal insincere, and sarcasm intention. The following conversation occurs between the lovers.

Example 16 The lovers (S1 and S2) have a fight.

S1: Why do you not appreciate me? I would condescend to be one of your girlfriends.

S2: (sarcasm) You are a member of high society! A glamour female model! (giggle)

In example (16) S2 expresses impoliteness intentionally. The incongruity between his utterances and its context reveals non-literal meaning, that is, S1 is an ordinary person. She isn't high society membership and is not glamour model.

5. Humor and impoliteness

In section 3 and 4 I explore humor as 'strategies' of speaker to express both politeness and impoliteness. In the following section, I will investigate humor that is risky to speaker's own face and hearer's face in different contexts.

5.1 speaker

Humor may pose a potential face-threatening act to speaker in that it contains the risk of failed humor. Usually the humor expression is under conditions of uncertainty. This humor may fall flat when there is a disagreement in humor appreciation between speaker and hearer. This disagreement may result from misunderstanding of hearer. Many reasons may cause hearer's failure to construe as a joke mainly concerning two factors: (1) contextual factor, say, message plausibility, group size, etc. and (2) cognitive humor appraisal (Wimer and Beins, 2008) such as personality structures, a cognitive deficiency, temporary mood, psychological resistance towards speaker and so on (Zajdman, 1995). What may be perceived as humorous to one person may be considered inappropriate or offensive by another (Smeltzer and Leap, 1988). Consider the exchange in (16), taken from Thai situation comedy. The scene describes Paeng (S1) and Dian (S2) are close friends. Dian comes over to visit Paeng on the way back home.

Example 17 Dian comes and visits Paeng, her close friend, at home. Dian teases Paeng about 's boyfriend.

S1: Paeng, I am dying because you have stolen my heart. Could I borrow your heart forever?

S2: (Paeng stares at Dian angrily; suddenly Dian changes the topic.)

S1: Usually your boyfriend teases you like this. Do you like it? Anyway I've come to give you a free photograph coupon from a wedding studio around here.

In example (17) Dian teases Paeng in order to provoke laughter. With non-humor mood, Paeng doesn't feel amusement. This situation may be called 'failed humor' because interlocutors don't share the same feeling.

Another kind of face-threatening act to speaker arising from humor is when speaker practices self-denigrating humor - a humorous activity that makes the speaker the center of the verbal playing. Self-denigrating humor seems that the phenomenon of humor directed against one's own self damage face. A speaker making self-mockery reveals his or her own weaknesses; thus the speaker may have a negative personal image to a hearer's eye. Paradoxically, self-denigrating humor is a strategy for constructing friendly relationship with others. (Norrick, 1993; Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Kothoff, 2000) It is possible that self-denigrating humor reflects the similar flaws among interlocutors, or the speaker who enjoys humiliating him/herself in front of the others suggests an intimacy between them in that s/he is not afraid to uncover his/herself own embarrassing stories. I will briefly present an example from my study that illustrates this point:

Example 18 A group of female friends (S1, S2, S3 and S4) take the lift down to the ground floor. S4, the fattest woman in the group, steps into the lift. Immediately the lift makes an overloaded-warning sound.

S4: I *really* hate that fat woman. (laugh)
 S1: (laugh)
 S2: (laugh)
 S3: (laugh)

In example (18) a group of female friends take the lift down to the ground floor. S1, S2, and S3 have already gone into the lift. S4, an overweight woman, will go into the lift; suddenly an overloaded-warning sound is emitted. The plump woman pokes fun at herself about overweight. This action is classified as self-denigration. This action seems attack speaker's face, but it creates solidarity among interlocutors.

5.2 hearer

Humor produces a potential face-threatening act for hearer in that it risks becoming dry humor, namely, hearer doesn't see the humor in speaker's funny message. Humor challenges those cognitive dispositions of hearer which are so-called 'sense of humor' or the ability to perceive humor. The one's sense of humor is highly idiosyncratic and individualized; it is highly possible that the hearer can not work out the humorous force underlying in the speaker's utterance. As a result the hearer feels to be excluded from humorous activity. The role of size group is more significant to this situation. In the other words, the more participants are, the more the exclusion is obvious – that is, the hearer doesn't share the same amusement feeling.

Example 19 A group of friends (S1, S2 and S3) hang around outside. S1 makes a joke.

S1: What kinds of cat can not walk?
 S2: A catwalk. (laugh)
 S1: (laugh)
 S3: I don't understand how it is funny.

Explicitly, S3 can not see the humor in speaker's funny message. S3 feels 'out-group' from joking activity.

As illustrated in the previous paragraph, the third person in humorous conversation may be one of factors that encourage the face-threatening act to hearer. The humorous talk in two person conversation is very different from that to which the third person is added (Adler and Rodman, 2003). Although Wimer, D.J. and Beins's study (2008: 359) suggests humor appreciation of hearer are not affected by group size, the presence of a third person in the humorous activity can promote the potential threat to face for hearer in that one of interlocutors and the third person tease the rest. The hearer is likely to feel a sudden burst of irritation because the friendly relationship is destroyed by teasing. Additionally, Zajdman (1995) notices that the third person's presence seems a significant variable to intensify the risk of threat to face for speaker or hearer. For example, if disagreement on humor appreciation between speaker and hearer occurs, the third person might serve as a referee. Whatever the third person chooses to support the side or another, a face loss happens. It is possible that the third person may prefer to save face by faking amusement against his or her better judgment and allow the FTA to pass for humor rather than admit open offense. The excerpt in (20) is representative.

Example 20 Samorn (S2) calls Frank (S3) the worst name ‘Freak’ among his colleagues (S1, S4 and S5)

S2: Hi Freak, long time no see.
S1: Samorn, who is Mr. Freak?
S2: Here.

(Samorn points at Mr. Frank.)

S3: I am Frank, not Freak.
S2: You are Freak, not Frank.
S4: Mr. Freak
S5: Mr. Freak (laugh)
S3: Frank, not Freak. My name is Frank. Why don't you call me Frank? I am not Freak.

In example (20) Frank bumps into Samorn. Samorn calls Frank (S3) the worst name ‘Freak’ among his colleagues. After that the rest of interlocutors have fun by embarrassing him about his worst name. Frank doesn't feel in-group. This action is considered that it is impoliteness to Frank.

Apart from the third person as mentioned earlier, the relationship between participants in the humorous event should be realized. The “inside” or “outside” interlocutors are influential to humor appreciation of hearer. The factors of the third person and the relationship between participants may seem similar, but these two factors focus on different points. ‘The third person’ concentrates on the number of participants while ‘the relationship between participants’ focuses on the closeness of the speaker and participants. I will present an example from my study that illustrates this point:

Example 21: The customer (S1) complains why the shrimp fired rice is so expensive to a food shop owner (S2) among other customers. The customer's friend (S3) tries to tell him to be quiet.

S1: I order fired rice with shrimp. But where is shrimp?
S2: It is too expensive. It is too expensive.
S1: The shrimp price is expensive, or are you stingy?
S3: Calm down! The shop owner seems bad-tempered.
S1: It is none of my business. I don't care.
S3: Cool down! Don't be hasty. Hastiness may cause hair loss.
S1: Hey! Don't reveal my weakness in the presence of girls!

In example (21) the customer has a fight with the food shop owner, and his friend tries to stop him. His friend uses humor to mitigate conflict. He teases the customer about his hair loss; however, the humorous intention is not carried out. The humor appreciation of S1 fails because S3 reveals his weakness in the presence of the outsiders. It is possible that the outsider is one of barriers to humor appreciation of hearer. If the teasing occurs in in-group situation, it may provoke laughter.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

I have attempted here to present the different perspectives on in/politeness, based on the concept of face, in humor communication between speaker and hearer. From speaker perspective, politeness or impoliteness in humorous communication depends on intention (as in number 1). Conversely politeness or impoliteness in humorous communication depends on interpretation or perception from hearer perspective (as in number 2). The role of intention is fundamental to pragmatic theory, not except even Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and speech act

theory. In practice interlocutors do not wear their intentions on their sleeves (Culpeper et al, 2003: 1552), although, there is a request for indicating the speakers' their own intention in some kinds of talk; so the analysis of politeness and impoliteness in humorous conversation refers to 'plausible intention' by means of humorous clues.

Actually the role of interpretation looks more significant than that of intention in that it is the hearers' judgments rather than speakers' intentions that determine whether a communicative act is taken to be polite or impolite. (Lacher and Watts, 2005) Nonetheless, it is true that the interpretation is not stabilized. The hearer's interpretation of humor is affected by many reasons which divided into contextual factors and cognitive factors. Contextual factors, like relationship between interlocutors and group size, may determine whether the humor expression is funny in the hearer view. Cognitive factors rely on individualized; in other words, cognitive humor appraisal and temporary mood vary depending on a particular person.

Normally under the consideration on politeness and impoliteness in given situation, most linguists' view stands on the both ends of the linear structure – either the speaker-intended base or the hearer-interpreted base. I propose a bird's-eye view of the humorous communication. The high-position perspective as in the figure 1 helps the researchers understand why humor can be viewed as both politeness and impoliteness.

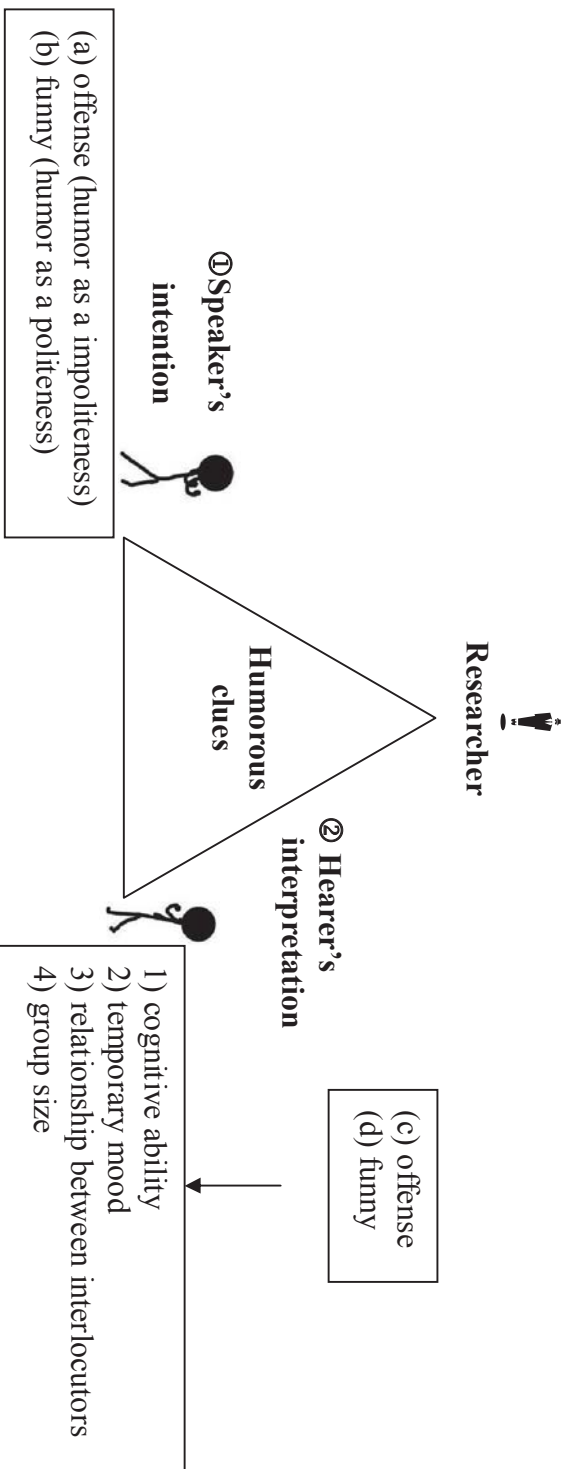


Figure 1: Humorous Communication

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Humour in Guided Tour Discourse

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of humour within the discourse of guided tours. The analysis will focus upon definitions of humour as well as humour's distinctive features in terms of function, context, structural organisation, the role of the participant, and response.

Humour can be viewed as a form of social bonding that assists in establishing a rapport between the discourse participants. However, it is helpful for the audience to have some awareness of the cultural, political, historical, and linguistic contexts from which the humour emerges. Generally, guided tour humour is organised through the various stages of delivery.

Although the main participants in a guided tour discourse are tour guide and tourists, whose roles are pre-assigned as provider and receiver, their social relationship can shift from formal to informal, especially when the tour guide successfully incorporates humour into the commentary.

Central to the analysis is the intercultural variation in the guided tour humour presented by Thai and British guides, which is evident not just within the form and overall themes of the humour but also joke butts and the use of ridicule. Taking into consideration this variation, the paper will conclude with a discussion of certain issues that help to develop a fuller understanding of the way British and Thai tour guides function within the intercultural environment of a guided tour.

1. Introduction

Humour helps to relay the personality of an individual. Humour is also a part of cultural expression; it can reflect certain national characteristics of tour guides from both Thailand and the United Kingdom. I would argue that the examination of guided tour humour serves to enhance our awareness of how social values, cultural differences, and goodwill are displayed by means of humour. Most importantly, humour may be helpful in establishing a better understanding of how professionals manage their institutional identity as well as their self identities.

In order to carry out this study, I collected data from English-speaking guided tour commentaries in both Thailand and the United Kingdom. The data was audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed qualitatively by means of discourse analysis. I have to stress here that the data transcription has been executed in such a way so as to retain as much accuracy with and closeness to the original speech as possible. However, to quote Carter and McCarthy (1997: 20), "transcription is an extremely difficult and imperfect art". For this reason, it is always possible that participants would not be fully represented because of inaudibility, misinterpretation or that, fundamentally, it can be difficult to transfer the tones and nuances of the spoken word onto the printed page.

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2. Relevant studies on humour

Humour is a subject of study in a number of areas, including psychology, sociology, anthropology (Grindsted 1997), linguistics, and cross-cultural communication. Honey (1988:86) defines humour as a device “for easing tensions and breaking the ice between people”. Thus, in order to utilise these functions, humour should be *situational*, *non-threatening*, *non-offensive*, and *spontaneous* (ibid). For example, situational humour may be amusing when the participants are able to establish a shared experience of a given circumstance at a particular time. When considered in the context of the guided tour, the common experience helps to ensure that both tour guides and tourists are able to relate to humorous situations. Humour is usually viewed as non-threatening when it is not aimed at any particular individual within the group other than, perhaps, the speaker himself. Subsequently, humorous discourse seems to be at its most effective when it is spontaneous and inoffensive. Grindsted (1997) concurs with Honey (1988) and maintains that spontaneity, intention and laughter are important elements for jokes to be viewed as humorous.

3. Features of humour in guided tour discourse

3.1 Functions of humour

Guided tour commentary is primarily task oriented since its overall aim is for tour guides to provide information about various attractions. However, the task in question seems to be overwhelmingly interactional, particularly when tour guides seek to fulfil social bonding and develop an interpersonal relationship with tourists. Consequently, these transactional and interpersonal goals seem to be intertwined (Carter 1997). Humour is helpful in easing transaction because it encourages rapport (Norrick 2003 and West and Turner 2009). In the form of ridicule, for example, humour can occur early in the talk and this generates an environment for an amicable transaction.¹

3.2 Contexts of humour

Overall, humour is culture-specific (Cheepen 2000, Davies 2003, and Grindsted 1997) and, in the context of guided tour discourse, how effective humour is depends largely upon the participants possessing an awareness of social values as well as cultural and behavioural meanings.² Consider the following examples, which illustrate the various contexts which are peculiar to guided tour humour. A British tour guide alludes to Downing Street and the Cabinet War Room from the 1940s:

¹ (Honey 1988) points out that teasing other persons usually follows when rapport has been developed by the speaker and the listeners alike.

² For cultural background contexts playing a significant role in how humour is received, see Davies 2003 and Grindsted 1997. Carter (2004) also alludes to how, in the context of the discourse, humour tends to be dependent upon the participants’ inferences and interpretation of intentions.

Cabinet War Room

Bill: Cabinet War Rooms ahead, as you= on the left hand side= now this is where Winston Churchill took the wartime Cabinet during air raids. *Westminster was very heavily bombed during the Second World War and so was Winston Churchill, I understand.* (lines 2-5)

Downing Street

Bill: We're passing Downing Street on the left hand side, the home and work place of both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Down there, the dark buildings on the right hand side.... Right, it's on the site of a former brewery, Downing Street, *which is quite handy for Winston Churchill, isn't it?* (lines 19-24)

Clearly, it is helpful to be familiar with certain historical events that occurred during World War II. Located in the Ministry of Defence, the Cabinet War Room was used by Sir Winston Churchill to conduct war time meetings. As Churchill was well-known for his drinking habits, the tour guide employs word play when mentioning that both Westminster Abbey and Churchill were 'heavily bombed'. This wordplay suggests both the effect of German air raids and the alcoholic state of the Prime Minister. Through linguistic codes, the joke seems to be understated and implies that Churchill was very drunk. The joke about Churchill was reiterated when the tour guide pointed out the location of the brewery near the Prime Minister's Downing Street residence.

In guided tours, the participants in the discourse are tour guides and tourists who are usually meeting for the first time. Indeed, what the guide's commentary should hope to achieve is an important factor in determining whether the setting is *formal* or *informal* (Cheepen 2000). For instance, when the purpose of the speech is to provide information, a discussion of British history on a tour coach can be just as formal as a description of rose windows in a cathedral or paintings in a museum. Thus, I would propose that the level of formality does not only depend on the location where the discourse takes place but also relates to the subject matter being discussed. Take, for example, the following humorous remarks in different situations by tour guides who are either talking about people and tourist sites or recounting anecdotes.

Situation: A tour guide is narrating an incident taking place in a cathedral.

Ken: Well, in 1141, the roof caught fire and they rebuilt it in stone and in 1185 the cathedral fell down. *But you're all right today* [laughter from tourists]. *We've got a net up.* (lines 3-5)

Situation: A tour bus was passing by the Westminster Abbey.

Jim: The buildings on the left hand side are= from part of Westminster school, that's where Prince Charles was educated, as was Andrew Lloyd Weber. It's where he learnt to write music. *And so did our driver Bob. He went to school here.* [tourists laughing] (lines 77-80)

It is evident that tour guides usually have control over the commentary, particularly the choice of topic. That is, the guides steer the direction of the guided tour discourse by creating humour within situations. For instance, a tour guide may wish to move

from one topic to another by drawing connections through people, places, or events thus making the talk more informative, interesting, and entertaining. This strategy is illustrated through the references to a net under the roof of a cathedral and the linking of Westminster School to Prince Charles.

3.3 Structural organisation

Structural organisation of humour is portrayed through various patterns. Grindstedt (1997) points out that the structural organisation of humorous exchanges in cross-cultural negotiation is formed by an adjacency pair of which the first part is the joke delivered by the speaker and the second part is the response of the listener. According to Norrick (2003), a joke routine usually proceeds through the four separate stages of joke preface, build-up, punch line, and evaluation. The *joke preface* refers to the beginning of the joke, which will later be developed by the speaker who presents anecdotal asides in what is termed a rapid *accumulation of information*—a process that serves to prolong the *building-up* stage. In this respect, the joke teller begins the joke by repeating or correcting himself in order to slow down the delivery of the *punch line*. That is, the joke teller organises his joke performance by employing a number of dilatory devices that include false starts, fillers, formulaicity, hesitation, backtracking, and restarting the story before swiftly moving to a significant point where he delivers the punch line. As a result, the teller can prepare listeners for the highlight of the performance while simultaneously enunciating the punch line. This punch line delivery further prompts an audience response such as laughter which helps to evaluate the worth or the effect of the joke.

Organisation of humour in guided tours appears to be somewhat similar to Norrick's (2003) observation of the four stages of joke routines which are, as previously mentioned, *joke preface*, *accumulation of information*, *building-up*, and *delivery of the punch line*. The following example typifies the structural organisation of guided tour humour.

Jim: He was put on trial in that building in sixteen oh six and most importantly of all, historically-wise, the= c= the exec= the ah trial of King Charles the First= is= he was put on trial in that building by Oliver Cromwell for treason against his own people and abuse of his kingly powers. He was found guilty and sentenced to execution. Charles the First, *the only king of England= t= ever to be executed, so far*. [tourists laughing] (lines 147-152)

This commentary displays how the information was introduced, accumulated and gradually built up to trigger a humorous response. The process begins with King Charles I, who was found guilty of treason and who was ordered to be put on trial by Oliver Cromwell. The punch line is finally introduced at the end of this account, with a slight pause to emphasise the phrase *so far*, which usually suggests that more executions could occur in the future. This effect is very amusing and arouses laughter from tourists. Humorous episodes such as these appear to be spontaneous when they are relevant to the topic under discussion. Consequently, humour aligns itself to a person, a place, or a particular time in history.

I would argue that coherent and fluent delivery of the punch line significantly contributes to effective joke performance—especially as far as humour in guided tours

is concerned. The following examples illustrate how punch lines are made to have the maximum impact. As the bus passes the London site of St. Stephen's Tower, Trafalgar Square, and the National Museum, the tour guide provides relevant information:

Jim: You see that right here you got a better view of St. Stephen's Tower or BIG BEN as we know it. Named after Sir Benjamin Hall, the chief engineer = the chief engineer of Parliament, Benjamin. The shortened version of the name Benjamin= you get the name BEN, hence we get BIG BEN. *So glad his name wasn't JAMES!* [tourists laughing] It took a while, but I think someone got it. Yeah? [tourists laughing] (lines 152-156)

Jim: Now, normally, if you died at sea, you would have been buried at sea because conditions were such that there was no way of keeping bodies preserved. And also it was just easier to save space and the spread of disease. They used to put the bodies in your hammock, sew up all your personal belongings in there, sew your body thing up, threw you overboard, but Nelson always insisted he didn't want to be buried at sea. He was the greatest naval captain of English history, his reason behind being= but= not being buried at sea= *he couldn't swim!* [tourists laughing] *And he got seasick!* (lines 195-201)

Jim: There're paintings inside the National Gallery by many famous artists, including Da Vinci, Van Gogh or Van Go. Doesn't really matter how you pronounce that. *He wouldn't have heard you anyway.* (lines 215-218)

Quite clearly, these punch lines are delivered skilfully by the tour guide whose sense of timing prompts a humorous response from the tourists. What is apparent here is a structural organisation within conversation called *scaffolding* (Davies 2003). The scaffolding is usually built on a number of features, including question-posing (Davies 2003 and Norrick 2003) by joke tellers (such as *Have you heard...?*), repeating key words by either the joke tellers or the listeners, commenting on amusing episodes, and extending or building on jokes by listeners who make use of certain expressions from the original joke. I would argue, however, that the scaffolding pattern of guided tour humour is somewhat indistinctive and applies to the recipients who neither repeat key expressions in the jokes nor expand upon the humour initiated by the guide. In a small tour group of approximately 5-10 tourists, I would propose that some tourists may want to respond to the humour generated by tour guides. The following instance illustrates this point:

Situation: A Thai tour guide is describing a Buddha image at a temple.

Group size: 8 tourists

Nitti: The golden Buddha, we have 9 pieces, not one piece, 9 pieces together: head, separate arms, arms, the body, the white that 3 pieces and leg, crossed leg, 3 pieces, total 9 pieces together. And all that time on the back of Golden Buddha, we have key, the key can separate. And now cannot separate everybody [indistinct] that key. *You know who keep it? Me! I keep it!*

Male tourist: *I don't believe it!* [laughing] (lines 84-89)

As a group size of 8 tourists is relatively small, it is possible for some tourists to ask questions during the tour or respond to the humour in a joking manner. However, most tour groups tend to be larger in size, ranging from approximately 20-50 tourists. With such a large group size, the tourists' responses to humour are most likely to be seen in their laughter and smiles. Nevertheless, although some tourists are more inclined to merely listen to tour guides, there are others who may respond to humour by extending the joke. This type of reaction is most evident with those tourists who sit at the front part of the coach or those who stand near tour guides on walking tours. In the following example, a British guide is describing the itinerary of the tour. While discussing the trip to see the changing of the guards in front of Buckingham Palace, he mentions Queen Elizabeth II. What ensues is a short response from a tourist who is sitting at the front part of the tour coach.

Albert: On the coach, ready to roll so that we can go to the soldiers in the Buckingham Palace. *The Queen is expecting us* [tourists laughing]. *She is making sandwiches + [Tourists: Ooh. Cucumber!] + and tea! You have to drink tea royal style with your little finger in the air. You can't do that, can you?* [tourists laughing] *Camilla can't do it either* [tourists laughing]. *She will never be Queen* [tourists laughing]. (lines 167-171)

The tourist's response is brief but spontaneous and does affirm the rapport that already exists. Also, the response suggests that tourists feel at ease with their guide and, in one case at least, are able to interact, albeit very briefly, on an equal level.

According to Norrick (2003), successful joke telling depends on various factors, including the joke teller's ability to interact with his/her audience:

The overall tempo of the performance, the ebb and flow of the given and new information highlighted by rhythms of hesitation, repetition, and fluent passages, all co-determine timing (Ibid: 1352-1353).

It is important to note that timing is crucial for tour guides while moving from one spot to another because it enables the telling of the joke to be concise and to the point. As flow and continuity is integral to the success of joke telling, problems that arise from false starts, fillers, hesitation, and backtracking are not evident in guided tour humour.

3.4 Participant roles in humour interaction

As already discussed, participants engaging in interaction are not always strangers to each other (Cheepen 2000). In the guided tour, I would argue that it is extremely unlikely that the participants would be known to each other before the process begins. In this respect, it is reasonable to suppose that the asymmetrical roles (Cameron 2001) occupied by the participants are pre-assigned. To briefly reiterate, the tour guide's principal role is to provide tourists with travel service and information about tourist attractions. Tourists, on the contrary, are customers who receive the service. At times, the tour guide's role appears to extend beyond these basic requirements and includes humorous asides in the commentary that can prove to be quite entertaining. This style of commentary in which the guide combines humour with information is more common with the British than it is with the Thai tour guides.

3.5 Humour response

Successful humorous discourse is indicated by laughter which not only demonstrates that the audience understands the humour but also gauges the joke teller's performance (Norrick 2003). To define laughter response is to understand that it is stimulated by a "series of moves" (Jefferson et al 1987: 166). That is, the *invitation* to laugh is offered by the joke teller, while the *laughter* itself is the hearers' acceptance of the invitation. In guided tours, rather than providing comments upon the completion of the joke or responding with their own humorous anecdotes, tourists are likely to smile or laugh "as a recognition of solidarity" (Norrick 2003: 1344). In these situations, it is the tour guide who is more likely to add further comments. Laughter indicates that the audience understands the guide's humour (Attardo 2003 and Davies 2003). It is important to note here that, despite the fact that laughter is a reaction to humour (Grindsted 1997), laughter can also result from the participants' seeing each other laughing. Consequently, humour may not always be followed by laughter or smiles since "there exists both laughter without humor and humor without laughter" (Attardo 2003: 1288).

Ultimately, the tourists' appreciation and understanding of a specific joke can be measured by their laughter. In this respect, humour can enliven guided tours and prompt tourists to liaise more closely with the guide. In contrast, when jokes hit 'stony ground'--when humorous comments fail to get the desired response--then the joke can have a negative effect which means that the tour can often become 'flat' or uninteresting.

4. Intercultural variation in guided tour humour

In this section, I want to speculate on how cultural variations in guided tour humour reflected by Thai and British tour guides can be analysed. Within this analysis, I will concentrate predominantly on forms of humour, overall themes, joke butts, and the use of ridicule.

4.1 Forms of humour

Although guided tours are service-oriented, they can provide a rich source of humour in which interpersonal dimensions are enhanced. Different forms of humour are prevalent in guided tour commentary and can be classified into five groups: jokes, banters, wordplay, mockery, and sarcasm.³ In my view, humour in the form of arguments between tourist and tour guides is virtually nonexistent as hospitality and friendliness are desirable in any service encounter and this would include the travel industry. Hence, tour guides would generally avoid any form of direct verbal confrontation with individual tourists.

³ Cheepen (2000: 289) notes that there are different forms of social bonding in a discourse, ranging from jokes, banters, and arguments. Norrick (2003) expands on these basic notions and discusses various forms of humour, ranging from mutual revelation (e.g. joke telling) to various types of wordplay such as *punning* (playing on words), *hyperbole* (exaggeration), *allusion* (indirect reference), *mockery* (making fun of someone), and *sarcasm* (insulting someone by saying something to mean the opposite).

4.1.1 Thai guided tour humour

In contrast to their British counterparts, Thai guides usually restrict their humour to gentle banter and light-hearted jokes. These restrictions have much to do with the Thai reluctance to court controversy. It is virtually unheard of for Thais to utter any defamatory remarks against the King. This reverential manner is echoed in other aspects of social behaviour which means that Thai guided tour humour is usually only relevant to certain problems people experience and that in no way would cause offence. Thai humour can, however, be self-deprecating and often reflects Thai life and society. For example, Thai religion is at the centre of the following comment:

Santi: You know they say that anyone who, who has long and big ears will have a long life. Like a Buddha. He would die at twenty-eighty. Ah and you can notice a long life person will have a big and long ears all the time. So we should pull our ear down every day. [looking at a male tourist's ears] *Yeah you have a long ear.*

Male tourist: *No!* [laughing]

Female tourist: Pull down, yeah.

Santi: You have a long ear so you'll outlive the century.

Male tourist: No men in our family lives more than seventy-two years.

Santi: Maybe you are only fifty? [the whole group laughing] Forty? Okay thirty. Good guess ha. (lines 120-129)

A prominent physical characteristic of most images of the Buddha is having long ears, which, for Thai people, signifies longevity. Thus, Santi's remark is a comment that exudes goodwill by suggesting that the tourist will live a long life. (Conversely, the remark causes the tourist to laugh and enables him to make a rather dark joke about his family.) In addition to this allusion to the Buddha, Thai guides employ other aspects of their culture as an input to humour. I would consider the following guided tour banter as 'classroom humour' which, although a common practice in Thailand, appears to be especially prevalent in a wider cultural context:

Prang: All right. Any questions? Every questions free from now. You have another hour. After 12:30, ten baht a question. (lines 504-505)

To elaborate on this example, it is common to hear this type of banter employed by teachers in classrooms all over Thailand. Cultural mores dictate that many Thai students can lack confidence in group environments. One way for some teachers to encourage questions from their students is to make an amusing remark such as not charging them if they ask questions at that particular moment but perhaps charge them an amount of money for later questions. Consequently, for non-Thais to fully understand the underlying message of this joke, they should be aware of the cultural and religious contexts in which Thai humour operates.

4.1.2 British guided tour humour

While Thai guided tour humour tends to be light-hearted and inoffensive, British tour guides tend to be more controversial and acerbic in their approach which

does include, as previously mentioned, jokes, wordplay, mockery, sarcasm, and even some satirical comment.

Jokes

Jokes or amusing stories are frequently told by British guides. The following extract pokes satirical fun at both a British institution, British Airways (BA), while, at the same time, alluding to the ‘historical enemy’, the French.

Jim: Two hundred and forty foot high, thirty-two capsules, the British Airways London Eye. *The only way British Air- the British Airways are making any money these days.* [indistinct] *one mile an hour, takes just over half an hour for one complete revolution, which is much quicker than the French managed their revolution.* (lines 117-121)

The main purpose of the joke about the London Eye is obviously to entertain and amuse tourists, although there is mild sarcasm targeted at the French and the suggestion of a critique aimed at British Airways. The employment of wordplay and, indeed, some sarcasm, emphasises the much broader scope of humour in which British tour guides are able to engage. Compared to Thai guides who are constrained by both linguistic deficiencies and cultural practices, British guides do not, under virtually any circumstances, encounter the same level of ‘taboo’ topics.

Banter and word play

In guided tours, banter occurs when tour guides tease tourists in an amusing manner. Banter can encompass wordplay or vice versa and wordplay is intriguing because it serves to demonstrate that a linguistic context exists within guided tour humour. To reiterate, word play in this study varies from punning and hyperbole to allusion. In the following extracts, the **punning** or playing on words occur as the tour guide explains the materials which were used to build London Bridge. What is particularly noticeable from a linguistic perspective is the employment of the terms *up* and *down* and how they lend a rhythmic pattern to the guide’s speech and, in turn, assist in enhancing the pun.

Bill: This is *London Bridge*, and the stop along the bridge is for the monument. This is the one, as the song said, is forever falling down. There have been six or seven bridges spanning the Thames at this point, the first one built by the Romans. *They’ve been made of wood, stone, combinations of wood and stone. They’ve been burnt down, pulled down, blown up.* (lines 272-276)

As well as *up* and *down*, the repetitive word play of *wood* and *stone* effectively creates a sense of linguistic humour while simultaneously helping to establish the interpersonal level of communication. Other linguistic ‘trickery’ can be detected in the use of **Cockney rhyming slang**, explained here by a guide in London.

Jim: Coming up on your right hand side we have the Adam and Eve Pub. Absolutely nothing at all to do with the Bible. It refers to an old London language known as Cockney rhyming slang. In

Cockney Rhyming slang. Adam and Eve means to believe, so you may well say something along the lines of, oh, I don't *Adam and Eve* it. I left my *dog and bone*... [indistinct]... *trouble and strife*... [indistinct]...some *tea leaf* must have *half inched* it. Maybe it's in my *sky rocket* of my new *whistle and flute*. Or did I give it to my *jammy dodger*? (lines 53-59)

Some forms of wordplay, in my view, can be very difficult to follow, particularly for non-native speakers, and Cockney rhyming slang is one of them. Although it could be argued that it is not necessary for the listeners to understand Cockney in order to comprehend the humour, arguably the joke would be more amusing if the audience were able to appreciate more fully the clever use of words or grasp the true essence of rhyming slang⁴ which is uniquely English and could never be replicated by a Thai guide. Due to the fact that Thai guides need to deliver their commentary in a foreign language, they cannot convey, with the same effect, cultural and linguistic anomalies that may exist in local Thai vernacular.

Mockery and sarcasm

If exercised the wrong way, mockery too can go beyond what is acceptable. Public figures and, as the extract below indicates, institutions are usually the target for **mockery** and as long as this is the case, the guide remains on safe ground:

Bill: Now when I say that's the headquarters of a newspaper, the Daily and the Sunday Express, I use that in the broadest sense of the term, of newspaper. It's more of a *fish wrapper*. It's not a company policy--*it's just the driver's point of view*. (lines 173-175)

The *Daily Express* and *Sunday Express* have a reputation of being very conservative 'middle England' newspapers. Traditionally, newspapers are used as wrappers for fresh fish or fish and chips. There is a double edge to the guide's comment which conveys a point of view that newspapers are of use only on the day they are issued. The general 'conservative' or old fashioned image of the Express papers would suggest that they are disposable from the day of publication.

Mockery, in this sense, can overlap with **sarcasm** which is often referred to as 'the lowest form of wit' and can be both hurtful and very funny. In the excerpt below, the tour guide seems to put sarcasm to good use by aiming it at what he views as unpopular or 'ridiculous' measures taken by, in this case, the Mayor of London, who was at that time Ken Livingston.

Albert: A new mayor of London. He's in charge of traffic, and transport, and police, and getting rid of pigeons. *The pigeon zapper*. [tourists laughing].... *He has got SWATs team standing by to exterminate the pigeons*. [tourists laughing] (lines 64-67)

Albert clearly finds the campaign against a veritable London institution--the Trafalgar Square pigeons--to be highly objectionable. Albert resorts to sarcasm and exaggerates the pettiness of the Mayor with the following disparaging remarks. Albert draws

⁴ For example, *Adam and Eve* is believe, *dog and bone* is telephone, *trouble and strife* is wife, *tea leaf* is thief, *sky rocket* is pocket and *whistle and flute* is suit.

together the relatively harmless presence of the pigeons with wry comments that evoke very different urban problems:

Albert: *The Mayor is the pigeon zapper. His sole purpose in life is to zap pigeons. He has the pigeon emergency phone line. Every time we see a pigeon in London, we have to phone the Mayor. We sack the birdseed sellers. He employs men with sparrow hogs to pry the birds away. So when you feed the pigeon, you will be fined on the spot. They really really mean business. SWAT teams at his headquarters, helicopters gun ships. Machine gun crews. All to deal with the poor old pigeons.... Trafalgar Square never looks the same without them. (lines 272-278)*

These subtle but often biting forms of humour do take slight risks because they can involve individuals or contemporary issues. I believe also that this type of humour is culture specific and needs to be comprehended for it to be helpful in cementing the bond between the guide and the tourists. Equally, though, the guide is allowed to develop a persona which can reduce the social distance between him/herself and the group. In this respect, humour should, in its many guises, function to not only entertain but also to establish a shared background knowledge that did not exist beforehand. Such a knowledge, in turn, will reflect certain social and cultural attitudes which, if conveyed in a manner that is sensitive to the fact that not all tourists are essentially native speakers, can effectuate a social climate that is inclusive to all.

4.2 Overall themes of guided tour humour

Thai guides do not engage themselves in themes that might be considered ‘controversial’. Even without the obvious language limitations, behavioural patterns in Thailand impose certain restrictions on what guides can or cannot allude to. Thai guides do not have the same amount of access to discussable topics because their country’s social and political climate does not lend itself to the same freedom of expression that is evident in the United Kingdom.

Political comment is uncommon and derogatory remarks about the monarchy are taboo, but also it is inappropriate for Thais to publicly discredit well known figures. Thai tour guides tend not to enter into an area of humour that may be deemed controversial. Instead, their humour is in the form of mild banter and centres on less sensitive topics such as traffic congestion.

Humorous remarks produced by British tour guides, on the other hand, are more inclined to be witty and playful or, at times, critical and sarcastic. Certainly, jokes about famous people are commonplace in guided tour humour since celebrities are known to both the guide and the tourists. Popular locations are also frequently mentioned. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that, as the contents of guided tour humour revolve mainly around well-known places and famous people, the subject matter does require a shared contextual background--be it political, social, religious, cultural, or linguistic--relevant to that which the joke is targeted. Obviously, the themes of Thai and British guided tour humour do differ markedly and such diversity,

in my view, could stem from certain factors which involve individual identity, linguistic resource, and cultural differences.⁵

4.3 Joke butts and types of ridicule

The targeting of a subject or object is integral to virtually any joke or humorous remark. According to Grindsted (1997: 164), humour involves different kinds of ridicule: *self-ridicule*, *other-ridicule*, and *shared ridicule*. For example, when joke tellers are self deprecating, they are engaged in *self-ridicule*. Conversely, if the joke is aimed at another person who is not a discourse participant, then the joke is of *other-ridicule*. Finally, in *shared ridicule*, the joke tellers make fun of both themselves and the participants who are present in the interaction.

4.3.1 Self-ridicule

Humour that involves ‘self-ridicule’ is, as I have commented, a situation in which tour guides make fun of themselves. This kind of humour is generated by Thai and British tour guides and the following example show how the Thai guide makes herself the target of her own joke.

Apiradee: *Today you’re with the most beautiful tour guide in Thailand, you know. [tourists laughing] Please don’t forget me. If you can’t remember me, no lunch, no bus back to Bangkok, yes. Ah I have two small eyes, one small flat nose, okay. My name is Apiradee, Apiradee the Beauty.* (lines 1-4)

Humour arises when Apiradee targets herself by “underplaying” (Grindsted 1997: 173) her physical appearance and portraying herself as humble and unattractive. However, she then contradicts her statement, but only in an ironic sense, and claims to be the most beautiful tour guide in Thailand. By alluding to her facial features of small eyes and flat nose, she is actually describing her characteristics which, in Thailand, are not usually associated with perceptions of beauty. In fact, it is big eyes and an average nose ridge and not “small eyes” and “one small flat nose” which are viewed as attractive facial features by most Thai people. Thus, by contradicting the Thai perception of beauty, the tour guide generates humour of self-ridicule.

The self deprecating style of humour is also apparent in British guided tours. While telling a joke about the British Museum, a British tour guide deliberately makes fun of not just himself but also his country by delivering a double edged comment on British imperialism. In Thailand it would be extremely unlikely to criticise, no matter how jokingly, the country in this way:

Bill: And it’s in Bloomsbury that you’ll find the British Museum and in the British Museum you’ll find our largest collection of stolen goods. [tourists laughing] That’s where we keep it. We’ve been north, south, east, west, you name it. We’ve nicked it and=and we keep it in the British Museum. *Honesty is the best policy, my mum said. And then she said Bill, I hate you, and you’re adopted. She was a funny woman.* [indistinct] *Was she? Eh?* (lines 116-121)

⁵ For further discussion of individual identity, linguistic resources, and cultural differences, see Section 5.2: *Factors influencing the difference in Thai and British guided tour humour*.

Thai guides are restricted by the social codes of their country and the sense of ‘knowing one’s place’ is much more apparent. Thus, compared to Bill’s layered comments on class and empire which suggest an element of dissent, Apradee’s humour has to operate within a far narrower channel of expression. In these contexts of differing behavioural codes, Apradee faces restrictions that are cultural as well as linguistic.

4.3.2 Participant-ridicule

Humour that veers toward ‘participant-ridicule’ contains joke butts which are primarily aimed at the tourists. A good example is the following extract in which the guide employs an audacious British style of humour when discussing the amenities at Buckingham Palace. Again, the guide’s delivery is full of thinly disguised references to class and privilege which would not be found in Thai commentary.

Albert: Now, when we go to the Palace, folks, our coach stays here by the way. When we go to the Palace, there are no toilet facilities. *The Queen does not let us use her toilets.* [tourists laughing] *So what you have to think before you come back to the bus, you have to think bathroom.* So I’m gonna show you where the nearest bathrooms are.... *If you look down on the road, well, at the end of the road there is a tree.* [tourists laughing] *It’s a free tree.* [tourists laughing] *Ladies on one side, gentlemen the other.* [tourists laughing] *It is absolutely true.* (lines 155-161)

Clearly, Albert is teasing the tourists about a basic human function and, similarly, this type of audience-ridicule banter is evident in the next example that takes place at the beginning of a guided tour of a cathedral.

Ken: Now, you’re gonna be all caught out here.... *I always carry this (torch) to keep you under control on the way there, okay?* [laughter from tourists] (lines 1-3)

In this instance, Ken’s banter with the tourists immediately serves to generate an easy atmosphere for future interaction. Goffman (1959) stressed the importance of this type of liaison and concludes that

when the interaction that is initiated by ‘first impressions’ is itself merely the initial interaction in an extend series of interactions involving the same participants, we speak of ‘getting off on the right foot’ and feel that it crucial that we do so. (Ibid: 22-23)

Although Ken may want to indicate some degree of friendliness by directing good-humoured aggression at the tourists, his informality can be described as “a sign of self-affirmative behaviour” to show that he might want to “disturb the sanctities” (Grindsted 1997: 171) of the tourists’ private sphere. In other words, Ken surprises the audience by his somewhat unexpected approach to humour. Norrick (2003) supports this view when he emphasises that the flouting of polite conventions can help to establish solidarity between speaker and audience.

4.3.3 Other-ridicule

The guided tour humour which can be referred to as ‘other-ridicule’ is normally aimed at those who are not participants in guided tour discourse and would include, for instance, politicians, celebrities, and members of the royal family. As these people are known to the public at large, they are more liable to be targeted and how much aggression is contained within this type of ridicule varies in accordance with the individual concerned. Consider, for example, this comment which is aimed at both Tony Blair and George W. Bush.

Jim: He doesn't live at Number Ten Downing Street. He lives at Number Eleven Downing Street. Reason being he's got four children. Number Ten's too small, so he moved next door. *That's what he's telling us, but everyone knows the real reason he moved next door is because George Bush told him to.* (lines 172-175)

The underlying reason of the tour guide's derisive remarks about Mr. Blair and Mr. Bush reflects the general dissatisfaction with the British government's involvement with America over Iraq. By using humour in this almost satirical way, the guide, while taking a risk by being controversial, is able to express his point of view and speak for other people who share a similar view. This, in turn, helps to release tension and demonstrate the fact that the guide has an ‘attitude’. However, to allude to politics or politicians could have a negative or divisive effect. How, for instance, would some American tourists who support Bush perceive the comments about their president and their country?

With politicians, there is a serious underlying tone to the guide's humour, celebrities, however, seem to be the subject of less caustic derision. In contrast to the politicians, the guide is on safer ground with celebrities and it is likely that many tourists in the group share a similar attitude toward the subject matter. Whereas a shared animosity toward rich celebrities helps to improve rapport, criticism of politicians could be divisive. Humorous remarks in guided tours can also be directed at members of the royal family who are, it would seem, frequently subjected to ridicule. The following instance demonstrates how humour of other-ridicule is targeted at Queen Elizabeth I.

Bill: On your left is the Church of St. Dunstan-in-the-West, and in the gap, there's a little alcove in the front there, there's a statue of Queen Elizabeth the First. It's the oldest statue in existence. It was carved during her lifetime, *but it's a bit of a makeover, really, because she was known to have been entirely bald at the age of thirty, and had black teeth.*

Tourists: [laughing]

Bill: She used to boast that she bathed once every three months, whether she needed to or not. *She was known as Good Queen Bess, because she stank like a horse.*

Tourists: [laughing] (lines 158-164)

Casting derisory remarks about a queen who lived 500 years ago is not likely to cause offence. It is noticeable, however, that the current royal family is treated with little respect, which again mirrors public opinion and suggests how, in contrast to Thailand

where people have deep respect for the King, the British Monarchy is no longer held in reverence by the public at large:

Albert: [Prince] Charles had his London apartment in St. James's Palace.... When his grandmother died, he decided move from St. James's Palace into Clarence House.... He had it re-decorated before moving in. *Who pays for that?*

Tourists: *You*

Albert: *Mel! It's also got accommodation for--what's her name?*

Tourists: [laughing] *Camilla*

Albert: *Camilla!*

Tourists: *Camilla.*

Albert: *And who pays for that?*

Tourists: *You!*

Albert: *Not me! Not me! Now the Queen pays for it herself. She knew it was very controversial so she decided not to risk any embarrassment. So she pays for it herself.... Good old Queenie!* [laughing] (lines 383-396)

It could be argued that, depending upon the situation or the individual, such humorous remarks from tour guides' stem from a subconscious urge to assert their position. In other words, through the humour of other-ridicule, tour guides align themselves with the tourists. Certainly, for tour guides to use outsiders such as celebrities or public figures as the target of their humour tends to be less risky than aiming jokes at the tourists themselves. Since this other ridicule humour is non-threatening to tourists, they may feel more relaxed and find it entertaining to listen to humorous asides told by tour guides. As Norrick (2003: 1342) puts it: "Joking works to establish and enhance group cohesion, and serves as a control on what sort of talk and behaviour are acceptable to participants in the interaction."

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of guided tour humour

Although humour in guided tours appears to be spontaneous there is no doubt that it is culture-bound. This type of essentialism is more prominent in the British tours and means that a shared background is desirable if this type of humour is to be understood. In my view, some forms of humour, particularly wordplay in the forms of, for example, punning, cockney rhyming slang, and allusion, can be difficult for non-native speakers of English to follow. Humour, in this sense, can erect as well as breakdown cultural barriers because humour tends to be linguistically and/or culturally coded and conveys certain indirect references or innuendos which are culture bound and hence esoteric.

5.2 Factors influencing the difference in Thai and British guided tour humour

Despite the many differences, humour in guided tours conducted by Thai tour guides does display some similarity to that of their British counterparts. The similarities lie in the goal of humour which, in both Thailand and the United

Kingdom, helps to establish solidarity and interpersonal relationship between tour guides and tourists. However, to consider humour on a more intercultural level, frequent occurrences of humour during guided tours, in addition to the choice of topics and the type of humour evoked, differ markedly between Thai and British. In my view, three major factors which are likely to account for the differences are *individual identity*, *linguistic resources*, and *cultural differences*.

5.2.1 Individual identity

It is crucial to be aware that individual tour guides, although sharing institutional identity, may differ considerably in the way they construct their self image. With this in mind, I would argue that identity plays two vital roles for tour guides. Firstly, it functions to establish the tour guide's institutional self as being knowledgeable, especially during the transactional task of conveying information to tourists. Secondly, identity serves to reinforce a person's individuality. In other words, the tour guides' assert themselves as who they are and how they want to be perceived by tourists. Grindsted (1997: 161) proposes that an individual may want to satisfy two needs: the basic need for "affiliation" (being accepted as a group member) and the need for "autonomy" (being perceived as an individual in a group or having personal freedom as an individual). In the case of the tour guide, the need for affiliation is fulfilled by being an individual member who represents a travel organisation. Equally, the need for personal autonomy is realised by having the freedom that the tour allows to develop a profile which is satisfying to the self and to others. To quote Tracy and Naughton (2000: 80), "Talk is fundamentally, not just occasionally or incidentally, the place in which people establish and challenge who they are as individuals and as groups".

Given this concept of individual identity, humour may be a matter of personal preference. Norrick (2003:1344) cautions that some people enjoy telling jokes whereas others show great reluctance. In guided tours, not all tour guides are deemed to be humorous. Rather, some of the Thai and British tour guides appear to be more focussed on the transactional goal of giving information while others are inclined to shift intermittently from the transactional to the interpersonal goal. This shift is described by Davies (2003: 1367) as "a movement from the world of the ordinary conversation into a world of play or *non-seriousness*." Hence, transferring from the transactional to the interpersonal contributes to the enhancement of emotional involvement and social affiliation.

5.2.2 Linguistic resources

As my data testifies, humour features more prominently in tours conducted by British guides than those carried out by their Thai counterparts. The reason is because the British guides' linguistic proficiency as native speakers is a vital factor which facilitates their communicative skills, both transactionally and interpersonally. For Thai tour guides, perhaps their main concern is to ensure that their English is competent enough to provide coherent information. In this respect, it could be highly challenging for them to produce humorous statements while performing the content-oriented discourse of the guided tour. Although some of the Thai guides may have sufficiently adequate command of the language to conduct guided tours in English, they may not be fully equipped with the kind of linguistic proficiency that allows

them to be adept at performing humour in the same way as the native English speaker. Humour performance requires Thai tour guides “not only to acquire the appropriate socio-cultural knowledge, but also to achieve an appropriate level of interpretative and productive expertise” (Davies 2003: 1364). Thus, the low level of humour produced by Thai tour guides does suggest that they may need to master a significantly high interactive level of linguistic resource that exists far beyond the ability to merely provide information.

5.2.3 Cultural differences

In addition to the linguistic constraints I just referred to, there are equally important cultural factors that are helpful in explaining why the humour level of Thai guides is considerably lower than their British equivalents. In Thailand, I would propose, the choice of topic is limited and confined to social areas such as the traffic, physical appearance, and classroom jokes. In addition, social constraints help to determine that Thai guides tend to be reduced to self ridicule and rarely do they venture into those spheres of humour common with British guides--participant ridicule and other ridicule. Davies (2003) supports this view when she states that contents of humour are influenced by culture. That is to say, the type of humour employed in guided tours denotes the culture of the tour guides.

It should, then, be taken into consideration that what is appropriate in one culture may be inappropriate in the other and this is no more exemplified than when it comes to targeting the monarchy. Unlike the Thai royal family, the British monarchy is subject to both ridicule and criticism. They are likely to be challenged and portrayed in an unflattering manner. I would argue that awareness of these cultural differences is, particularly as far as humour is concerned, crucially important to successful intercultural communication in guided tour discourse.

5.3 To be or not to be humorous?

The analysis of the data in guided tours conducted in Thailand and the United Kingdom suggests that humour plays an important role in guided tours and features prominently in guided tour discourse, particularly by tour guides who are native speakers of English. This integration of humour into guided tour talk is, it would appear, an essential tool for not only enhancing unity and rapport between the guide and the tourists, but also for creating a degree of enjoyment through social communication.

As a professional discourse which is goal-oriented, guided tour commentary is not at all purely conversational. Features of humour are prevalent in the social communication that exists between the guide and the tourists. I would argue that effective and successful guided tour commentary could not be accomplished by simply ‘getting things done’ during the transactional encounter. Successful intercultural communication in guided tours requires that tour guides realise two goals which are in operation during the encounter: the transactional task of information provision and the interpersonal goal of rapport and social bonding. One way to attain this social affiliation is through humour. In this respect, appropriate humorous interludes, when added to guided tour discourse, enrich the experience of interactional bonding among the tour members.

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Are We or Are We not Amused?

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This paper is an attempt to look at the underlying logic of humour[†]. Initially it will focus on an implicit debate on the characteristics of humour by two eminent Thai scholars, Nidhi Eawsriwong and Chetana Nagavachara. Probably not being aware of each other's opinions, they have expressed opposite views on 'what makes us laugh'. After an examination of these two positions, the paper will venture into ideas about humour discussed by a profound humourist whose nation likes to claim to have invented humour! Several stories (and folktales), indigenous and modified jokes, including studies on humour, will be assessed in light of conceptions of 'what makes us laugh'. Subsequently from the standpoint of the Thai context, the paper will try to make some remarks about the nature of humor in general and of jokes in particular.

(1)

In line with what anthropologists may possibly call 'particularism', Nidhi, a noted historian, is of the opinion that humour is culturally specific. He illustrates this point by examples of jokes in Northern Thailand. These jokes would not be funny unless one understands the Northern dialect and the context from which they arise. The importance of the language of the audience is, of course, obvious. He, however, does not mean language per se, but rather its subtlety, its use of puns, its implied meanings, etc. As jokes, generally speaking, need to leave some crucial points unsaid, a fairly good command of the language is essential. This is due to a common characteristic of jokes, which is that the audience is required to fill the "gap" in the punch lines. An art in joke telling is that the funny parts are to be only partially expressed. It is the listener's job to make them whole. Only a competent person in the language would be able to work out what is to be completed. Otherwise the joke would go flat.

In addition to language, the context is equally important, if not more so. It is the context that mainly renders the meaning of a joke. This point can be substantiated by my own experience. At a recent meeting of academics from Southeast Asia, upon friends' request I told a joke as follows:

At a teashop, in the midst of a half-serious half-jolly conversation, a person made a point to his companions that all the Thai generals, and most of all, the supreme

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[†] In addition to the references at the end, the author wishes to specially acknowledge five joke books in the course of writing. (1) C. Bane and Alan Dundes, *You Call This Living?*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1990; (2) Steven Lukes and Itzhak Galnoor, *No Laughing Matter*, Penguin Books, 1987; (3) David Pickering, *Pocket Jokes*, Penguin Books, 2009; (4) Herbert V Prochnow and Herbert V Prochnow, Jr., *Jokes, Quotes and Liners*, Thorsons, London, 1992; (4) Winfried Ulrich, *English Jokes and Puns*, Philipp Reclam jun, Stuttgart, 2006.

commander, are stupid. He was immediately arrested by a plain cloth policeman nearby. Eventually he was taken to court and got a very severe long-term imprisonment. Why? Not for defamation, for that charge is punished by imposing only a small fine. The charge was that the person was guilty of disclosing a top state secret!

The joke went absolutely flat. The reason was that those who hold the military in high esteem did not find it funny. Contrary to our perception of the military in Thailand, the military in other countries in the region have shown skills, prowess, and patriotism. The ‘joke’, therefore, is seen as being in bad taste particularly in the eyes of the Vietnamese participants and perhaps also the Cambodians.

The question of the context can well explain why a story can be hilarious for some, and distasteful for others.

True to his historian’s vocation, Nidhi regards ‘linguistic communication’ and ‘context’ as indispensable in understanding jokes. In other words the two are *a priori* components in humour.

Another example is a joke from Romania.

- Did you hear Ionescu was found dead at the wheel?
- What happened? A car crash?
- No, there was no car crash. The autopsy didn’t reveal any contusion either. All they found were some traces of yogurt in his stomach.

This joke is beyond non-Rumanians’ understanding. Paraphrasing the original source, the explanation goes like this: With respect to Romanian salaries a car cost a huge fortune. Car buyers had to scrimp on everything. But since they could not lessen any other expenses but food, they had to eat only yogurt which was one of the cheapest foods available. The yogurt diet had to be constantly continued after the purchase of cars, because the cost of petrol was also exorbitant. And owing to the low quality of car-making, cars often broke down. The spare parts, which could be found only on the black market, were also very expensive. The car-buyers had to go on economizing; consequently the cost of yogurt diet was death.

This particularist view is unarguably plausible in many cases. Its limitation, however, is that it does not always square with cross-cultural humour. Charlie Chaplin’s show is a case in point. Even in the case of verbal joke, Nidhi’s theory does not hold water. Once the linguistic barrier broken and the context grasped, the jokes can be understood without much difficulty by people of different cultural backgrounds. That is why the translation of jokes is very common. Jokes have always been “plagiarized” across cultures and time. There must be some kinds of commonality of what are regarded as ‘funny’. Chetana¹ goes a long way with this line of thinking. Utilizing unspecified psychological studies, he has outlined five features of humour as follows:

- i. 'far-flung out of norm' action;
- ii. mechanical action;
- iii. non-acidic emotion, and keeping comical phenomena at bay from one's own involvement;
- iv. 'laugh at' implies a 'superior' position of those who find the action, phenomena, expressions, etc. funny
- v. an enticing device transforming illusion into reality.

Examples of these items are <i> wearing an overcoat in a hot country; <ii> mechanical behaviour to a predictable extent. An example is a character in one of Molière's plays who as the messenger walks repetitively from one end of the stage to the other; <iii> a light-hearted reaction to another's mild misfortune; (for example somebody tripping over a banana peel); <iv> an ironic situation in a stage play where the audience knows the situation while some characters are still ignorant about it; <v> revealing something in an entirely different light from the way it is usually perceived, as is often the case in political satires/jokes/cartoons.

Of course, these are far from being exhaustive, and each item is relative. They are here cited merely to illustrate the possibility of, in lieu of a better term, the "general" traits in humour.

Both positions, "the particularist" and "the generalist", can substantiate their respective arguments with endless cases. Since their convergence can occasionally occur, one perspective is not always at one opposite end of the other. The overlapping of both positions offers a strong possibility of a 'third position'. This position usually sees either of the two positions being extreme and one-sided. This view likes to see itself standing on a higher moral ground, and those adhering it correspondingly earn themselves the label of 'the neutralist'. In their view, this third position is regarded to be more objective, even broad minded. For the 'neutralist' (including their fellow-traveler: the liberal) it is even seen as the way of the 'middle path', a self-congratulating designation.

(II)

Viewing these positions against a tantalizing number of funny stories/actions prompts a basic question: Are they adequate to help us conceptualize 'what makes us laugh'? Frank Muir¹¹ has gone a step further suggesting varieties of what is funny. There are apparently marked differences among "comedy", 'wit', 'buffoonery' and 'humour'. These divisions can be equally found in both the positions, although either one position might bear characteristics of one category more than others.

According to Muir, to paraphrase his expositions very liberally, "comedy was light-hearted and filthy and dealt with the goings-on of everyday folk like corrupt religious leaders, golden-hearted prostitutes, venal slaves, and bent magistrates. Aristotle summed it up as 'an imitation of men who are inferior but not altogether vicious.' Tragedy was about heroes, gods, and unhappy endings. Comedy was about ordinary citizens and happy endings." (p. xxvi)

Wit is the aristocratic aspect of comedy. The original meaning was sharp intelligence, wisdom. It was essentially aristocratic because it was an intellectual sport played between gentlemen using ideas as shuttlecocks. The language of wit was rich in poetic references and paradoxes and puns which only expensively educated minds could bandy. It was also so much in use in upper social circles as an offensive weapon that Aristotle defined wit as ‘educated insult’. But wit was not there to be laughed at. It was to be admired with a lift of an eyebrow or a half-smile or a nod of appreciation but not so much more than that. (p. xxvii)

The Eiffel Tower is the Empire State Building after taxes. The particularist perspective could well add this line into its arsenal. This line is probably bitingly funny for those working at Wall Street. But it is perhaps not really comprehensible to the Masai in Kenya. Buffoonery, on the other hand, is more commonly appreciated.

Buffoonery: overt comicality, popular fun, ...cheap and cheerful ... the sole purpose is to induce laughter. It makes use of things such as funny hats and red noses to help induce a comical mood and it can be a social weapon of attack ... telling jokes is the most widespread form of buffoonery, probably because a joke is self-contained and the easiest device with which to trigger off laughter. (p. xxviii)

Humour: lies in between wit and buffoonery. If wit belongs mainly to the well-educated classes and buffoonery to the lower-classes, humour is middle-class. For Muir “... humour is observational. Unlike wit and buffoonery, humour, like life and art, is quite useless and has no function to perform apart from being itself. And it is a contribution to culture which England has given the world; not Britain, not Scotland, Ireland, or Wales – but England. (xxix)

All these subdivisions are under the generic term ‘comedy’. For some, they do overlap one another. For many, they could be confusing; their meanings change over time and their usage is frequently even interchangeable. An American publisher gave advice to an authour “... not to mention ‘humor’ in describing your book to the book-trade. ‘Say it’s comedy,’ he pleaded, ‘say it’s wit, but don’t for God’s sake call it ‘humor’. In this country ‘humor’ means books about batty old ladies being silly in English villages.”

Muir’s classification, at best, helps to make distinctions among undefined terms. By so doing he tries to discover the basis of ‘what makes us laugh’. But, at worst, Muir’s classification is ‘Anglo-centric’. He even subscribes to Sir William Temple’s view that the English originated humour! His employment of class dimension as a classifying criterion calls for skepticism. Even if he uses ‘class’ in social rather than economic terms, the question remains how ‘class’ is such a paramount factor in humour. Shakespeare’s comedies in his days gained laughter from common folks in his town as well as from the Queen of England. If we were to follow the advice ‘not to argue with the English about Shakespeare’ (because they are greater than he!), we are left with the question of whether or not the ‘class’ criterion is relevant for the non-Anglo world?

Two examples in the Thai repertoire (one modern, the other traditional) of ‘what makes us laugh’ stand in contrast to Muir’s classification. One is *Talok Café*, the other is stories about a character named Sri Thanoncha. *Talok Café* is a kind of

popular entertainment played in nightclubs and similar establishments and sometimes on Thai TV. In *Talok Café* actions as well as verbal expressions tend to focus on “foolishness”, “child-like” play (two fat men pushing their bald heads against each other), ambiguity about sex and sometimes politics. Although *Talok Café* can initially and even easily become buffoonery, a closer look reveals its various artistic features. Acting, wits, costumes, stories, etc. magnify the funny effects.

Stories about *Sri Thanonchai* are found in different versions in different parts of mainland Southeast Asia. There are Thai, Laotian, Cambodian and Burmese tales about *Sri Thanonchai* whose name signify being witty, tricky, and serve as an epitome of folk wisdom (comparable to the well-known *The Good Soldier Švejk* in Czech literature). In addition to the presentation about *Sri Thanonchai*, a typical feature of the stories is how he uses puns, tricks, pretense, etc. to outwit the king. The following story may also be familiar to friends in our neighbouring countries.

“Can you induce me to go into the pond?” the king challenged Sri Thanonchai. “Let’s have a bet for a purse of gold coins. OK?” Sri Thanonchai nodded as the custom demands and exclaimed “Yes sir, Your Royal Highness”. After a pause he added “that is beyond me, your humble servant, sir. If the bet is the other way around, it would be fairer. That is once you are in the pond, I can persuade you to come out of it. Would Your Royal Highness accept the bet, sir?” The king responded positively. He then walked into the pond. Sri Thanonchai then exclaimed to the entire king’s entourage: “the purse of gold coins is now mine.”

Folk plays in central Thailand such as *lam tad* (ลำตัด), *likay* (ลิเก) offer ample anecdotes of a combination all those subdivisions. Although it is true that these plays are performed mainly in rural communities, it does not mean that the so-called “aristocratic” elements, e.g., wits, are absent in them. On the contrary wits are the ‘heart and soul’ of ‘*lam tad*’, albeit the content and expression may, of course, be ‘rustic’.

Even the Buddhist sermon is not always devoid of humour. The question-answer form (*pujcha-visatchana* ปุจฉา-วิสัชนา) of sermons displays the wit of prudent-minded monks. We have learned about this disappearing art form yesterday.

The majority of studies and comments on ‘what makes us laugh’ are generally presented from the standpoint of the ‘author’ and the ‘text’ standpoint at the expense of the ‘audience’ perspective. The findings of a thesis entitled “Sense of Humour among Nurses Providing Care for Psychiatric Patients”ⁱⁱⁱ give much food for thought. Markedly different from other nurses, the psychiatric nurses have significantly armed themselves with humour. Two factors account for the relative high degree their sense of humour. One is stress, the other work-period.

An observation about political and economic stress in Eastern Europe supports this thesis. A high output of jokes both in quality as well as quantity there occurred during the dictatorship period, and not so much under the thaw and in the 'liberal' time.

The stress factor, however, can be disputed on the ground that the nurses in emergency/operation rooms and in the wards for patients of terminal illness can be equally stressful, if not more so. But the stress experienced by psychiatric nurses is of a different kind. It is a stress caused by the human relationship environment, not a stress resulting from 'work-on-object's conditions. This kind of stress environment is amendable, and humour, among other things, can do the trick. It is recognized that Germany under the Nazi regime did not produce much humour of note. (However, one might impertinently ask whether this was due to the Germans or to the Nazis).

The time factor can accentuate the point. Leaving the personality predilection aside, the longer one works with psychiatric patients, the more humorous one becomes. The senior nurses therefore are more innovative at how to amuse themselves. And they have gained a higher degree of a sense of humour over time.

Is it tempting to say that, at the risk of oversimplification, the more stressful you are, the more humorous you become?

The 'stress' explanation is very telling, the latest marathon political rally in Bangkok is a case in point. A large number of devices had been employed to sustain the protesters' enthusiasm and fighting morale. Telling political jokes was among them. The following, for example, drew peals of laughter.

Abhisit and Korn (his finance minister) had wanted to do a rapid appraisal of rural poverty in the Northeast. To economize the whole operation, they went up to the sky with a pilot in a small plane. Looking down from above, Abhisit (misspelling not intended, but not corrected either!) was sorrowful to see how miserable the people's condition of living was. Taking out his wallet, he said to Korn: "since I can't help them with our party programme, let me throw a ฿1,000 banknote down there. At least I can make a person happy." Korn had a smarter idea: "Instead of that ฿1,000 we'd better throw ten 100 baht bills. Then we can make up to 10 persons happy." The pilot was a little impatient: "If both of you throw yourselves down there, that would make almost everybody in Thailand happy."

In contrast to other rallies in the past, this most recent rally was aimed at the ills of Thailand in general as much as at certain individuals. The society itself was the target. A critical look at our own selves differs markedly from the nationalist fervour. The following joke, which was perhaps not receptive before, has become possible.

Someone has served his time in heaven! It is his turn to be reborn again. God granted him three possibilities for his

next life. They are being Thai, being honest and being intelligent. But he must choose only two of these. Since he knows that Thailand is the happiest country on earth, naturally his first choice is to be a Thai. He must choose one more option. God said to him “you must choose between intelligence and honesty”. While the man was pondering over the alternatives, God tried to help him make the best pick. “Once you are Thai and intelligent, you cannot be honest. If you are Thai and honest, then you cannot be intelligent. But if you want to be both honest and intelligent, then you cannot be Thai.”

Is this story funny for the Thais? Certainly not for all the compatriots! But is it offensive to anyone in particular? Well,

“No individual could resent
Where thousands equally were meant.”

However some jokes may get at both a specific person and the whole nation. The joke below, somewhat modified from a soviet joke, can serve as a good example.

God granted three Southeast Asian Prime Ministers facing severe problems a meeting for consultation. First, the Cambodian asked: “When can we overcome the aftershock of the killing fields, and become a country of good Buddhists again? God pondered over the question and replied: “In one hundred years”. The Prime Minister sadly cried: “Oh, I won’t live that long”. Next was the Laotian Prime Minister. His question was: “When can we achieve full socialism after three decades of revolution?” God said: “In two hundred years”. The Prime Minister tearfully cried: “Oh, I won’t live that long”. Next was Abhisit’s turn. He said: “Since 1932 we have had 18 *coup d’ état*-s, when is Thailand going to reach democracy?” God took a long while to think and then burst into tears: “Oh, I won’t live long enough to see that happen”.

The dichotomy between the particularist and the generalist does not lay in the nature of jokes. But it does lay in the content. That is to say one must ask what is crucial is the point of the joke in question. Is it aimed at a specific object or something in general. The generalist perspective is apparent, if some kind of the predicament is a common experience.

Hence the poem and the line below could be widely appreciated.

O money, money, money,
I’ m not necessarily one of those who
Think thee holy.
But I often stop to wonder how thou canst go out so

Fast when
Thou comest so slowly.

Ogden Nash

The following words by Hubert Humphrey also point to a common experience. “Behind every successful man stands a surprised mother-in-law.”

(III)

Frank Muir, the renowned English humourist, has suggested some insights into jokes or ‘what makes us laugh’. It is true that he has immersed himself in the English sense of humour. Yet he has tried to see the general features of laughable things. But he has limited himself to the particularist stand of Englishness. At least his two collections of jokes^{1v} illustrate this point. Occasionally, however, regarding the underlying logic of ‘funny things’ he makes a highly perceptive pertaining to all jokes. He suggests that the discrepancies between ‘what is supposed to be’ and ‘what really is’ provide a fertile ground for humour. He has used the example of sex, but his point can be applicable to other areas as well, e.g., politics, human meanness, etc. He wrote:

“Lust is one of the Seven Deadly Sins and also part of one of the world’s greatest pleasures. As a result, attitudes to it are always a bit ambivalent and perhaps that is why it features so universally in humour. Stories of lust and its attempted gratification are part of comedy in all fields – from the sophistication of Restoration Comedy to its (the) bawdiness of dirty jokes.” (p.132)

Political jokes and jokes about the inhumanness of humankind subscribe to this logic. For example,

someone, in a very long and seemingly endless queue for a government’s handout, was angry with the immobility of the queue. He said to all those around: “This government is so inefficient and corrupt. They can’t do anything properly. I would like to go kick the prime minister.” “Yes, hurrah, hahó, you should do it, on our behalf too.” said the others in the queue. “We will keep your place here for you, don’t worry.” So the man went to kick the prime minister. After only a short while he returned looking very dejected. “Did you kick him.” asked the people in the queue. “No, he answered. I couldn’t do it, the queue to kick him is even longer than this one.”

The discrepancy between a situation that is already very bad and one that is even worse is very apparent. With a better and more insightful expression, Crichtley writes the first sentence in his book: “Jokes tear holes in our predictions about the empirical world. We might say that humour is produced by a disjunction between the

way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality. Humour defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves.” That is why the story is bitterly so funny.

Another joke is here presented for comparison.

Somewhere in Thailand there are two village headmen notoriously known for being stingy. One always wants to outdo the other. They even spy on one another to find out about the ways they can gain more and loose less. One day one of the village headmen came back from the field and asked his wife if anybody has brought any thing on that day. “Yes, my love”. She replied. The headman was excited and asked: “Who had brought it, and what.” “Oh the other village headman sent his wife to offer us a chicken”. “Jolly good” he responded obviously delighted. “Let’s have a look?”. But his wife said “No, it is not a real chicken. Have you forgotten their stingy ways? His wife just made a picture of a chicken in the air, and gave it to me. It is an imaginary chicken, you know.” Um!, the headman knit his brows, obviously disappointed. “Did you give anything to her in return?” “Yes, a watermelon. But of course I didn’t give her a real one either”. She then made a picture of a watermelon indicating with her arms the size of the watermelon. Her husband was very angry and slapped her hard. “Why did you make it so big, stupid cow? You should have made a smaller one. “One this small” and he made a gesture with his finger and thumb.

At first the joke may seem to be context-specific. But its particularism is deceptive. Would any village headman, let alone any Thai, be offended? Why? The target is not directed at the village headmen as such. They are just the means to make a point. The absurdity of extreme frugality in combination with wits is at the core of the joke. The characters can be changed into any personality type. Providing the sharp wits are there, it can be equally funny.

Likewise, the previous joke is obviously generalistic. The original version is about General Jaruzelski, the prime minister of Poland during the Solidarity period in the early 1980s. But the name can be changed to Abhisit or anyone else.

(IV)

Substantial contributions about the generalist traits of jokes have been made by various academic studies. In his book, *On Humour*^V, Simon Crichtley explains John Morreall’s three theories of Humour.

1. Superiority theory: This theory is akin to the notion of 'laughing at'. We put ourselves at a higher position in relation to what we find odd, strange and hence comical. In Critchley's words: "We laugh from feelings of superiority over other people."
2. Relief theory: "... laughter is explained as a release of pent-up nervous energy... where the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity."
3. Incongruity theory: "... Humour is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke, gag, jest or blague." (pp. 2-3)

Studies on humour in the archives of Thai Studies are meager. The same point, speculatively speaking, probably can be said of the situation in other ASEAN countries as well. They do not give us full confidence to validate (or invalidate) these theories. At the elementary level, however, there is a certain degree of correspondence between the Relief Theory and the study on the psychiatric nurses. A large number of jokes (e.g., the Thais making fun of the hill tribes, the Bangkokians mocking the "uncouth" country folk, the intellectuals getting at the politicians, etc.) do seem to support the Superiority theory, and the Incongruity theory. Nevertheless, critical scholarship must caution us against unexamined credibility and easy conclusions. The 'tourist' glance can at most serve only as a point of departure.

If, (a big IF at that), these theories were really sound, is the particularist school of thought then to be discarded altogether? If (an even bigger IF), they were validated by other theories and numerous cases all over the world, are we then at the end of the story?

Contrary to the naïve view and cynicism of many folk, jokes and humour are not merely trifling matters. Has Umberto Eco's famous novel, *The Name of the Rose*, shown that holy people could go as far as murdering others to wipe out laughter, and they did it in the name of holiness? Why did the Catholics condemn laughter in the early Middle Ages? And why is it rare for the dictators to laugh or even smile (in public at least). Why are Hitler, Stalin, Big Brothers/Fathers and many others so humourless? Why are the English so proud of and noted for their sense of humour. Why is the term 'English sense of humour' more commonly known than, say, 'German sense of humour'? Is there such a thing as an 'Israeli sense of humour'? Discussion about the significance of humour can be tiresome. Suffice to say: we know that jokes and humour can function in simple and complex ways that make a difference in how we think and how we live. They can express hurtful criticism of the powerful and the tyrannical, and even shake the foundation of the dictatorial and oppressive regimes.

Jokes and humour can be a vignette through which we can see culture and other aspects of society. The methodology to get into the underlying logic of humour varies in its sophistication, from a complex anthropological study to a daily-life observation. The former is, for example, Mary Douglas's ground-breaking study of 'Jokes and Rites' which can really be inspiring for us all. The latter example is a received idea that one cannot understand the English deeply unless one understands their humour.

Similarly the complexities of Thai and other Southeast Asian societies cannot be fully understood or appreciated, unless we can figure out what they laugh (and do not laugh) about. We need to study and learn if there are kinds of humour peculiar to us and simultaneously funny for people of other cultures as well. At least two objectives can be aimed at, namely,

- (1) to make contributions in theoretical terms to the human psyche/culture and different ways to self-understanding;
- (2) to create certain effective tools that can change our lives. The study of humour in ASEAN countries is now a seriously neglected field.

Let's hope that there will soon come a time when the study of 'what makes us laugh' becomes a promising subject of academic endeavor.

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- i Chetana Nagavatchara, *Basic Theory of Literature*, Textbook and Teaching Materials Project, Silpakorn University, Nakorn Pathom, 1977, pp. 41-48. (In Thai)
 - ii Frank Muir, *The Oxford Book of Humorous Prose*, Oxford University Press, 1992.
 - iii Wallapa Swangiang, Sense of Humor among Professional Nurses Proving Care for Psychiatric Patients, Master Thesis in MNS (Mental Health and Psychiatric Nursing), Graduate School, Chiang Mai University, 1999. (In Thai)
 - iv Frank Muir, *Frank Muir goes into ...*, W. H. Allen & CO., London, 1980.
 - v Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, Routledge, London, 2002.