

# BOOK REVIEW

**Ignatius Chukwumah, ed. *Joke-Performance in Africa: Media, Mode and Meaning*.** London: Routledge Contemporary Africa, 2018. xi + 290 pp. Illustrations. £120.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-138-06064-7.

Greater political freedom and the availability of multiple outlets for expressing opposition to dominant political views have combined to provide a wider and more penetrative platform for jokes in Africa. The proliferation of media technologies has given African humor new twists, despite the sometimes grim attendant social and political conditions. Consequently, jokes that have punctuated the African social landscape often for centuries are now reimagined in new oral, literary, and visual memes. New narratives are created based on jokes that harken back to ancestral memories. The literary memes themselves reflect an evolutionary development of African orature which sees jokes that are purely verbal becoming scripts for music, graphics, and video skits.

*Joke-Performance in Africa: Media, Mode and Meaning*, edited by Ignatius Chukwumah, is the latest addition to the documentation of the dynamics of humor in Africa and its transmission through multiple media. Dominated by writers from Nigeria (four), Kenya (four), and Egypt (three), with others from Malawi, Morocco, and Zambia, thus covering most African cultures, the book provides a fascinating look at the evolution and transformation of jokes in modern Africa. It is clear that visual depictions of humor in Africa are more potent than theatrical or textual offerings; this is reflected in the variety of media used to express such jokes in the book. Of the fourteen chapters in the book, five deal with visual depictions of humor in one form or another. Street/youth theaters are addressed in three chapters, while stand-up and textual analysis of invective comedy are assigned a chapter each. Only one chapter deals with multiple modes of presentation of humor through various media, from oral to written, including puppetry.

Contributions by Peter Omoko and Godwin Aondofa Ikyer present the more traditional street theater that combines mimesis, jokes, and stand-up comedy in Urhobo and Tiv societies, respectively. Other contributions address a mixed-mode documentation of humor. This is reflected in Sebastian Gadomski's chapter, which shows the evolution of Ancient Egyptian

literary tradition, rooted in folk culture and traced to the Middle Kingdom, which provides a base for the contemporary development of Egyptian humor in the form of satires, leading to mixed media packaging of jokes and sitcoms. This provides a link in a collective memory process that enables recording and re-interpretation of humor through the ages. This does not mean that African humor is always steeped in ancestral memories. In Kenya, urban youth jokes are based on taunts in which both the audience and the performers participate; this indicates the acceptability of new forms of jest, even if the performance involves insulting audience members.

While satires, jokes, and humor in whatever context are attributed to spontaneous and gifted performers, there are cases where such performers are academically trained to perfect their art. This is reflected in the study of Egyptian *Halah* (Condition) and *Outa Hamra* (Red Tomato) troupes by Heba Sharobeem. The spontaneity of their performances in the public spaces—illustrated in the chapter with photo stills—emphasizes the vibrancy of youth theater in Africa.

The online medium as a repository for jokes is presented very well by Felix Orina and Fred Simiyu in their analysis of sexist jokes, which are often misogynic and told from male viewpoints.

In Zambia, Dorika's performances, as recorded by Cheela Chilala, involve a fascinating cross-linguistic borrowing when a Nigerian Nollywood video film drama character, Ukwa, became a metaphor for a non-serious or comical person, an appellation that was used to satirically refer to the late Zambian President Michael Sata (1937–2014). Ukwa was adopted by Bob Nkosa to create the Zambian popular TV comic character Dorika, which, like Ukwa, became an offensive term that the comedian uses gleefully in his skits.

Another fascinating crossover is the adaptation of the format of the British satirical puppet show *Spitting Image* in Kenya, as noted by Remmy Shiundu Barasa in the opening chapter. The Kenyan version, *The XYZ Show*, using the same invective and acerbic wit as the British original, lampoons the political class in Kenya using a series of puppet caricatures. Indeed, due to the power of the visual medium, humor dealing with politics and politicians, broadcast either via TV stations or online gain more attention from researchers, perhaps due to the potential of wider audiences via satellite and social media networks that can re-broadcast them.

Of the few emerging books on the comedic genre, none has so far come close to this volume in its focused empirical and scholastic study of the area. Its most significant contribution is the documentation of how new media form a vital component of the preservation and propagation of humor in Africa, particularly for Generation Z African audiences.

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**For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Drewal, Margaret Thompson. 1991. "The State of Research on Performance in Africa." *African Studies Review* 34 (3): 1–64. doi: [10.2307/524119](https://doi.org/10.2307/524119).
- Hernann, Andrew. 2016. "Joking Through Hardship: Humor and Truth-Telling among Displaced Timbuktiens." *African Studies Review* 59 (1): 57–76. doi: [10.1017/asr.2016.4](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2016.4).
- Siegel, Brian. 2008. "Chipimpi, Vulgar Clans, and Lala-Lamba Ethnohistory." *History in Africa* 35: 439–53. doi: [10.1353/hia.0.0003](https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.0.0003).