Book Review

Chukwimah, Ignatius. Ed. 2022. *Sexual Humour in Africa: Gender, Jokes, and Societal Change*. Routledge (Routledge Contemporary Africa Series).

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It is always good to read academic texts about Africa written by scholars from the continent. *Sexual Humour in Africa* showcases sexual humour as it occurs in jokes, literature, social media, songs, films, images and advertising and allows the reader to engage with critical humour theories, or just with the humour itself – as shocking, surprising, hilarious, sexist and sometimes even as *unfunny* as it is. The impression I was left with was that humour in Africa is alive and well and kicking, but those who are offended by it, or highly critical of parts of it, are starting to have a voice that itself is often couched in comedy. Sometimes this comes in the form of exasperation at how erotically inept men can be: "My brother, learn how to romance your woman and stop twitching her nipple as if ur searching for radio station" (in Nwagboso and Okafor's chapter "Good for the goose, better for the gander" in *Sexual Humour in Africa*, 2022:271). On the same topic of sex manners for men, I particularly enjoyed Patrick Lumasia's inclusion of the sex advice given by Pastor Mary Kamadi, a Kenyan couples counsellor and comedian who "disrobes sex of all its euphemism" and calls it by its Logooli (the language of the Maragoli) name: "kukundana (fucking each other)" (33). Lumasia reveals his own embarrassment at Kamadi's explicit language by saying (and the reader almost feels the heat of his blush), "She gets so vulgar, it is hard to reproduce her porn-like language here. In short, the language that characterises Kamadi's clips, some of which she punctuates with hearty laughter, is taboo-breaching through and through." (34).

In his introduction to *Sexual Humour in Africa* Ignatius Chukwumah underlines the fact that both sexes have a "vivid" presence in this volume and that the humour also has "varied ends to which it is (in)deliberately deployed" (xxvi). He is right: Pastor Kamadi's humour seems deliberately aimed at getting men and women to speak openly about sex in order to "improve sex in the bedroom" (35), while at the opposite end of the scale are rape jokes, which are criticised as "normalising" sexual abuse and "stifling resistance" (247).

Sexual Humour in Africa is divided into six parts. In Part I "Sex joke", Sebastian Gadomski concludes his chapter, "Egyptian sex jokes", with the observation that "Egyptian sex jokes do not bring us knowledge of the real relations among Egyptians, but show them in a crooked mirror of satire and wit" (21), as is evident in this

exchange that Gadomski terms a "dual Egyptian sex joke" because of the two questions: "Saidi heard his wife scream. So he asked: what is happening? His wife replied: I was raped by a thief. Saidi asked: Why didn't you call earlier? His wife replied: It was dark so I thought it was you, but when he did it the second and then the third time, I was sure it must be some damned thief." (12–13).

How men perceive women's sexual responses and see them as a source of humour is also evident in Lumasia's admission that he once said to a fellow presenter at a conference, after her "tedious and boring" presentation, that she had "left him feeling like a woman whose mate had come rather too soon" (23). The mixed reaction of women to this remark left the author musing that perhaps what had gone wrong was that his remark, "far from exciting amusement, was analogous to a provocation to a candid debate concerning the presentation" (24). Apart from including the humour of Pastor Kamadi, as mentioned above, Lumasia also discusses the traditional sex humour of the Maragoli of Kenya, who, he argues, revel in it at special cultural occasions, such as the graduation ceremony of initiants, which include songs and speeches which are "full of sex allegory" and "sex humour" (26–27). In "The theatre of jokers", Cheela Chilala and Humphrey M. Kapau investigate *chimbuya*, the joking relationship between the Tonga and Lozi of Zambia, which is said to have emerged as a way of keeping relations cordial between these two groups, who used to fight each other. The authors remind us that joking relationships were also always part of the way in which Zambians used to conduct themselves with clan members and likens *chimbuya* to "acting out roles of jokers on stage" (46).

In Part II "African language, folk music, and rhetorical strategies", Joseph Brookman Amissah-Arthur's chapter, "Pudendic cult and public discourse: Pornogrammar as a rhetorical strategy in Ghana's public spaces", notes how the pudendic cult of the Akan of Ghana "set up the female genitalia for veneration" (67), but concludes that in spite of this honour (which stimulates sexual humour) "the culture seems to define the successful woman only in terms of her pudendic value". The cult has also inspired sexually suggestive Akan town names that have meanings like "Testicles are Miserable" and "Vagina is Wise (77)."

Fred Simiyu and Felix Orina, in "The dynamics of humour in coital imagery", focus on sexual humour in the Bukusu Embalu ritual in western Kenya. Just before the initiate is circumcised the song "Maweyo Omwana" is sung, which includes lines like (in translation) "Buy a razor, mother of the initiate/Hair on his private parts can entrap a bird/Even underwear can't contain them" (95). The authors point out that this humour is used to reduce the anxiety the initiate might be feeling. Sexual humour in contemporary popular music is also discussed, with one song giving voice to a jilted lover who describes the vanity of his former girlfriend, who lacks personal hygiene: "Your sweaty armpits smell like a market toilet/That is

I looked at you but couldn't finish/But you know how to post pictures and pose for them" (99).

Opening Part III "Sex joke and the written word", Barasa Remmy Shiundu's chapter, "Validating the subversive", focuses on Okot p'Bitek's long poem *Song of Malaya*, which, he argues, uses humour and jokes to "unveil taboos" around sex, thus enabling the poet to send "power to the periphery" (121).

Vincent Odhiambo Oduor's "Through the lens of gender" looks at sex jokes in Mwangi Gicheru's novel *Across the Bridge* and Okot p'Bitek's epic poem *Song of Lawino*. An example of the kind of humour in these texts is the discussion of reincarnation (in *Across the Bridge*), in which a man who dies of sexual exhaustion comes back as a worn-out looking dog (133). Oduor concludes his chapter with the observation that "through sexual humour the hypocrisy of society is bared" (135).

Part IV is entitled "(Cis)gender, ideology, and discourse" and includes Eddie Ombagi's chapter "I beg to differ", which focuses on Kenyan editorial cartoons. A cartoon drawn by Patrick Gathara after President Oboma met President Uhuru Kenyatta, who insisted that same-sex debates were "a non-issue", depicts a headless Kenyatta trampling on a body that is screaming, "I beg to differ!" (146) This cartoon, Ombagi argues, not only calls for engagement on the matter but also serves to ridicule the leader.

Benedicta Adokarley Lomotey and Grace Diabah's chapter, "Sex jokes and ideology", includes a Ghanaian comedian's Valentine's Day advice that if a guy has been pestering them, women should suddenly appear very keen on sex with him. The comedian's logic is that this behaviour will cause confusion and prompt the man to ask, "You dey craze huh? Are you a witch? You are possessed, huh?" and will precipitate his hasty exit (166). The authors argue that the inversion of gender roles "triggers an unexpected or surprised shift … which provokes humour and laughter" (167).

In "Reinforcing gendered scripts", Ignatius Chukwumah explores "gendering" in the performances of famous Nigerian comedian Helen Paul. He refers to Paul's hilarious riff on how women use all their powers to attract men in church so that "They must react!" (192) but adds that men do not escape her comedic eye, which homes in below the belt, on the way they clutch their groins to indicate heaviness and thus potency and sexual pleasure (193). Chukwumah concludes that ironically Paul reinforces gender stereotypes and thus ends up "substantially frustrating the woman's quest, if any, for uniqueness" (194).

Part V "Bodies and representations" has as its first chapter Ibukun Filani and Adeoti Oluwatomi's discourse analysis on the representations of women in selected Nigerian online skits, quirkily entitled "*Ooin, freaky freaky*, you are doing well". The authors note that the woman in one of the skits starts speaking English, but then switches to Nigerian Pidgin, and argue that "such linguistic coding in the comicast

generates interdiscursive links with two distinct social personas" (207–208). English indexes a cultural, educated and "middle-class individual" while Nigerian Pidgin stylises her as "uncouth, uneducated and low-class" (208). It is the authors' view that the comicasts "invite the recipient to enjoy the negative framing of women" (212).

The other chapter in Part V is Hannah Woode Amissah-Arthur's "The humour of erotica", in which she examines the representation of women in Ghanaian social media and the way in which her body becomes the "other" (237). The images in this chapter are predictably of young women in figure-hugging clothes with slyly sexist captions like "if only our wives know how many ladies (temptation) we avoid every day because of them! They will increase the meat in our meal …" (221). The author concludes that the images expose women as "playthings" (237).

Part VI "Resistance and responses" opens with Martin Okwoli Ogba's "Bizarre masculinity – female response to rape jokes on social media in Nigeria". The author takes a joke made by a famous Nigerian comedian who compared the ease of negotiating sex with a white woman with the battle (including fast food, shopping and new phones) to secure the same with a black woman. The punchline for the black date is: "8th date: attempted sex but failed/9th date: RAPE!!!!" (244). Apart from ascertaining that the majority of women were appalled by the joke, the author also suggests that this "weird masculinity" has "possibly been the remote accelerator of the growing rape cases in Nigeria" (255).

The final chapter in the book, "Good for the goose, better for the gander" by Sandra Nnabuife Nwagboso and Adachukwu Amalachukwu Okafor, focuses on female sex jokes that resist cultural convention in social media chats. Jokes like "Your wife will be naked, she won't look sexy to you, but ordinary bra of a strange girl, u will be shouting Wow, Wow, like ambulance" (267) mock the childishness of men who appear to have no self-control and an over-supply of arrogance, as does another joke that goes, "So bcus is raining, you are busy telling someones daughter to enter your room. My brother, Are you Noah?" (273). The authors conclude that "female-derived jokes strongly counter-balance" the attitudes prevalent in male-derived ones and "mark an expression of freedom" (279).

The book provides unintended humour in the form of some outrageously bad proof-reading and faulty transcription. One can chuckle about a phrase being "used in chest" (100) and a "blood-cuddling question" (102), and mentally substitute the intended words without too much difficulty, but some passages are flawed to the point of unintelligibility. These errors should not, however, detract from the important contribution this volume makes to humour studies in Africa: it will be a useful resource for many scholars in diverse fields including anthropology, language and gender studies.