

REFLECTIONS ON HUMOR AND HIERARCHY IN SAMOA

• HARRI SIIKALA •

In this paper I offer a brief glimpse into the comedic sensibility of Samoans. The study of humor is not central to my interests, but it is among topics one unavoidably—and often pleasantly—encounters during field research. Thus my aim is to utilize this forum in the same way a stand-up comedian might use an open mic night, to present rough ideas and unfinished material, and I hope the readers will indulge me though my paper is heavy on setup and light on punchlines. My material will consist of snippets of field anecdotes—the anthropological equivalent of observational comedy—and a lengthier look at a humorous sketch by a well-known comedy duo performing in New Zealand.

Is that supposed to be funny?

I approach my topic with trepidation for there is something slippery about humor. As is often observed it has been conspicuously absent from the ranks of major anthropological subjects. Some time ago Epeli Hau'ofa (1975: 286), himself a brilliant satirist of Pacific cultures, remarked that despite the wealth of research on Melanesian social institutions 'we cannot tell from our ethnographic writings whether [Melanesians] have a sense of humour'. A casual perusal of almost any monograph on the Pacific will attest that things have not changed dramatically since then. Like art, humor seems to have a self-contained, intuitive, or immediate quality that makes it particularly hard to talk about and analyze. Jokes are often ephemerally contextual, semiotically ambiguous, and highly subjective. Sense of humor, it could be argued, is one of the more intangible aspects of a cultural sensibility. You either 'get' a joke or don't, and anthropologists are of course centrally concerned with 'getting it'. As Mary Douglas (1968, 362) put it in her discussion of humor in Africa 'when people throw excrement at one another whenever they meet, either verbally or actually, can this be interpreted as a case of wit, or merely written down as a case of throwing excrement? This is the central problem of all interpretation'. Yet anthropologists have tackled subjects as notoriously ambiguous, visceral, and polysemic as ritual symbolism with great gusto; surely jokes shouldn't be that daunting. Formal analysis of comedic genres or the structural aspects of joke telling represent one way to tackle the problem, albeit often a dry one and it can leave out the more phenomenological aspects of humor. Alfred Gell (1992) has suggested that to attain the appropriate analytic distance to the mystifying power of art anthropologists should take up the role of methodological philistines. Should we then surmise that to study humor they have to be methodologically humorless?

Perhaps another reason for the marginalization is that next to the gravity of topics like myth, politics, economy, kinship, or globalization humor appears relatively trivial. Accordingly much of Western social thought has attempted to take humor seriously by taking the fun out of it: Thomas Hobbes attached it to sudden glory that resulted from one's supremacy over others; Freud saw humor as an eruption of psychic energy

resulting from the expression of the forbidden and repressed; and more recently some philosophers have turned humor into ethics by suggesting that the dry wit of postmodern irony provides the needed skeptical perspective to expose the arbitrariness of all given beliefs. Anthropologists too have often tried to rescue humor from being a mere frivolity by seeing it as a tool to negotiate social identity, to establish exclusion or inclusion, to address political tensions, to resist hegemony, to reaffirm the status quo, or to mediate social change. These approaches often fall into the common functionalist trap of reducing the subject to some more fundamental social effect which lies outside the expression or experience of humor.¹ Of course such functionalism is not entirely wrong, things do have such social effects, and sometimes informants boldly proffer their own functionalist interpretations (see Ialenti in this issue). Ilana Gershon 'gently parodies' this dilemma while discussing Samoans in New Zealand:

Other anthropologists recently have compared their interlocutors in the field to Heidegger, Bakhtin or Agamben. Alas, ethnographers cannot always find people who ventriloquize the most contemporaneous or popular of theorists. In my fieldwork, I encountered people who saw the world through the currently unfashionable idiom of British structural functionalism. (Gershon 2009, 398)

Even if the idea of humor as fostering solidarity or working as a pressure valve might appear theoretically hackneyed in some contexts, it does not stop people from making such assertions, and anthropologists must take the native exegesis into account as another social fact shaping people's lives.

Lying, teasing, and joking in Samoa

Joking in Samoa is not an entirely neglected topic. In fact the difficulty of interpreting let alone recognizing Samoan humor is at the centre of one of the more famous rows in anthropology: the Mead-Freeman controversy. Derek Freeman famously claimed that Margaret Mead was duped into believing that Samoan sexual mores pertaining to the behavior of adolescent girls were lax by her informants, specifically two young unmarried women who teasingly lied about their amorous escapades. Whether Mead was truly that naive and whether the exchanges contributed significantly to her conclusions is debatable (see Shankman 2009), though in retrospect it has become evident that both Mead and Freeman had too simplistic takes on Samoan sexuality. It is also true that Samoans greatly relish what Tim O'Meara has referred to as recreational lying, including pulling the leg of unsuspecting anthropologists, and ribald banter. Concerning the latter O'Meara (1990: 94–95) recalls an episode where he and a friend were accompanying a group of women on a clam gathering expedition and quickly became the butts of sexual joking.

'The cruder the jokes the wilder the laughter (...) We had learned however that in this situation the *only* defence is a good offense, and the more offensive the better (...) Our own quick and vulgar replies sent the women rolling hysterically on the ground' (ibid. emphasis in original)

Such informality stands in stark contrast to the typically strict demands of respectful Samoan etiquette. Still, these kinds of experiences are not uncommon, and I found

myself in a similar situation after passing an open guest house and being invited to join a group of women weaving pandanus mats. After courtesies and a few moments of giggling and whispering one of the older women, well into her seventies, asked me if I wore underwear under my Samoan *lavalava*, the cloth wrapped around my waist. Taking a page from O'Meara's book I retorted, to the great amusement of the audience, that if she wanted to find out she should come swimming with me. As O'Meara has noted Samoans find such banter 'hysterically funny precisely because it is so improbable' (ibid.). On the other hand sexual banter was also used during certain ceremonial contexts to subvert the respectful hierarchy and sexual avoidance between groups of men and women (Mageo 1998: 90), which implies that it did not only affirm boundaries but enabled people to cross them.

The Samoan penchant for telling amusing fibs proved even more perplexing as I settled into my field site on the island of Savai'i. Samoa is a hierarchical society where heads of extended families hold chiefly titles and jointly preside over village affairs. Much emphasis is placed on chiefly etiquette, yet in certain contexts relationships marked by deference can become more informal. My first insight into just how gullible I was came from Fiso, my host and adopted father. Fiso, a large and imposing man with dignified bearing, was a one of the leading chiefs of our village and held an office which combined the political power of an orator with the sacred status of a high chief. At first he appeared to me as authoritative and gruff, but I soon found out he had a warm personality and a mischievous sense of humor he would employ with immaculate deadpan. During my first month in the village he told me I had to participate in a church fundraising dance as a representative of the family. When I replied that I would try, but didn't know any Samoan dances, his already stern face darkened. 'That is very bad. You must not bring shame to the family. You need to listen to the radio and practice day and night.' Not until the next day did I realize he was teasing me, and though I did dance my fear of shaming the family had dissipated. Later I noticed how Samoans were constantly telling me not to trust such and such person for they were lying (*pepelo*), and often responded to my own stories with amused incredulity. For an anthropologist this uncertainty is particularly problematic when trying to ascertain whether an origin myth was commonly accepted or a 'revisionist' version meant to mock a particular chief or his lineage. Most proper names in Samoa are compound words and Samoans delighted in punning and finding lewd or disrespectful interpretations of their origin. Since origin myths often contain scatological or other potentially embarrassing elements it can become impossible to differentiate between myths and mockery. Indeed Malama Meleisea (1987, 1999) has emphasized that Samoans are uniquely sensitive to the biased and perspectival nature of such narratives, and that they are ready to recognize the coexistence of mutually contradictory truths.

Many of Fiso's jokes seemed to be gentle versions of teasing or mock shaming which parents employ to direct the conduct of their children (see Ochs 1988: 153–155). Yet there was an inherent ambiguity in our relationships. On one hand I was an adopted son, but on the other I was a foreign guest relying on the hospitality of the family. The latter role limited the complete authority over me that the first role entailed. Many times our jokes related to the ambivalence of asymmetrical relationships. Fiso was fond of jovially boasting about his authority and importance, yet the emphasis on status was ironically undercut by the fact that such boasting violated the central chiefly virtue of humbleness.

After I had conducted interviews with other chiefs Fiso would often jocularly ask if they claimed to have the most prestigious pedigree in the village. In Samoa to be a *fia sili*, status seeker, is frowned upon and ridiculed. Undeniably such levity comments on the status rivalry within the local hierarchy. Fiso was also fond of bringing up enormous fines that I would have to pay to the village's chiefly council for the slightest misconduct. These fines would be frequently evoked when I ventured outside the house into the village. Soon *luasefulu aumatua* (twenty sows), became a farewell catchphrase between us, as in 'Remember, twenty sows.' 'Yes, yes, I remember. Twenty sows.' As I started to get the joke Fiso would happily chuckle, for he knew that I knew the absurdity of our interaction, but we both pretended that I didn't. Yet the interaction was not entirely absurd, it also reminded me to observe proper social protocol and to know my place in the social hierarchy. So did the stern warning hide a joke mocking the strictures of social expectations or did the joke hide a reminder of these strictures?

Bradd Shore has argued that Samoan ethos is marked by irony which 'expresses itself in teasing, mockery, and what is often quite sophisticated political satire' (Shore 1996: 292, see also Shore 2004). As with the impromptu joking I described, Samoan ceremonies are often marked by complex heteroglossia, where the dignified expressions of the ancient and immutable hierarchical order are accompanied by a backstage voice that parodies the proceedings (*ibid.*). This is especially true of *fale aitu*, house of spirits, a traditional form of entertainment that involves humorous skits parodying figures of authority. Vilsoni Hereniko comments on such clowning in the comparative context of Polynesia:

Within the larger social context, clowning, rehearsed or improvised, was an avenue through which society inspected itself and commented on its rules and regulations, and the ways in which the imposition of structure and hierarchy constrained and stifled creativity and individual expression. Through role-reversal and inversion of societal norms, an alternative worldview was explored within the frame of play. The message 'this is play' masked the seriousness of important messages that were disguised in laughter but nonetheless experienced and felt. Ambiguity reigned, and individuals who were lampooned through a comic sketch were chastised in a manner that allowed for the saving of face, since humour deflected attention to the entertainment aspect of clowning performances. (Hereniko 1994: 1)

For Shore Samoan irony and humorous status degradation expresses the ambiguity and the psychological tension between two internalized contradictory cultural models, one hierarchical, or following George Marcus (1989) 'kingly', and the other egalitarian or 'populist'. Samoans see children as inherently willful and cheeky (*tautalaititi*) and this inner willfulness must be conditioned by good behavior or social propriety.² At the same time cheeky bad behavior can be turned into humor where clownish self-mockery is actually mockery of one's superiors (Mageo 1998). Yet I'd argue that though humor in Samoa opens up a space to reflect on cultural values, joking does not merely offer a resentful counter-discourse against the inequalities of a prevailing hierarchical order, or simply result from the structural instability of such order. The unresolved nature of jokes, such as my back and forth with Fiso about possible fines, enables them to be uniquely open for interpretation as they constitute a cultural metadiscourse with a distinct 'semiotic ideology' (Keane 2003; Stasch 2011).

Satirizing family obligations

I will finish by looking at an example of professional sketch comedy, in some ways an updated version of *fale aitua*. Performed by the comedy duo Laughing Samoans, the Samoan New Zealanders Eteuati Ete and Tofiga Fepulea'i, it depicts the conflicting expectations of Samoans living in New Zealand and their relatives back home.³ Tofiga Fepulea'i, a hefty man sporting a goatee, is dressed in drag to play Tala. He speaks in a high-pitched voice and giggles constantly. Indeed 'affectations of transvestism have long been among Samoan male comics' most reliable jokes' (Mageo 2008: 63, see also Shore 2004).⁴ At the beginning of the sketch giggling Tala answers the phone thinking the caller might be a boy, but a phone operator informs her that she has a collect call from her uncle in Samoa. At first Tala tries to wriggle out of the conversation: 'Sorry I can't answer your call at the moment, but if you can leave your name and a short detailed message after I hang up...' The uncle scolds her for pretending to be an answering machine again and asks how she has been. Tala answers cheekily: 'I was a lot better before you called'. It turns out the uncle is calling because of a wedding. But who is getting married?

Uncle: It's your grandmother's half-sister's daughter's step-daughter.

Tala: Uncle, you don't even know who's getting married, eh?

Uncle: Well, her name is on the invitation.

Tala: (exasperatedly) Uncle, are you ringing me up here to give you money to someone's wedding you don't even know.

Uncle: Yes.

The uncle, the straight man to Tala's clowning, represents an authority figure in this sketch and the family obligation he evokes is all too familiar to Samoans living abroad. Migrants are expected to maintain their relationship to the extended kin group and to serve (*tautua*) their senior non-migrant relatives by contributing to family affairs. Remittances that are redistributed during ceremonies are still a major economic factor, and Samoans often frustratedly joke about the burden they impose. As a slogan on a popular t-shirt states, 'no money, too many ceremonies'.

Tala tells her uncle that the little money she makes she gives to sponsor a child in a World Vision program. 'At least when I give her money I know her name, I know how old she is, what family she comes from, what school she goes to. And if I don't have enough money for the automatic payment at least I give her hope.' Tala then cheekily mocks various moral platitudes her uncle tries to appeal to.

Uncle: It is better to give than to receive.

Tala: Then why don't you give me a break so I can receive some of my own money.

Here the sketch cleverly juxtaposes two forms of giving with different cultural logics. Tala participates, at least so she claims, in completely voluntarist charity in the context of an individualistic society, while her uncle in Samoa wants to impose on her the obligatory commitments of a holistic ideology.⁵ In a funny twist the impersonal voluntary relationship forms the bases of a close personal bond, or at least so we are made to believe for comic effect, while the traditional relationships that are supposed to be based on love (*alofa*) and respect (*fa'aaloalo*) are abstract and anonymous. Western values and the

relationships these enable are critically juxtaposed to customary Samoan ones, which casts Tala in the dubious role of *fia papalagi*. ‘To say of someone’s action or personality that they are *fuaPapalagi* (“European-like”), or worse yet, *fiaPapalagi* (“deliberately wanting to mimic the Europeans”) was and still is a grave insult, a cause for resentment and conflict. To tell someone that he has forgotten the *fuaSamoa*, the rules of custom, is just as serious’ (Tcherkezoff 2005: 264). The fact that Tala’s tale of charity is fairly obviously a lie adds another facet of selfishness to the comedy. Her disobedience gets even cheekier as she mocks her uncle’s banal proverbs. Like many comedic figures she is *fia poto*, a smart-ass, one who arrogantly presumes to know more than their station permits.

Finally, after suggesting that Tala might be having some money problems (‘My money does not have problems. The problem is you ringing up for my money.’), the uncle changes tack and asks her to send fine mats instead. Fine mats (*ie toga*) are the most valued exchange good in Samoan ceremonies, and were first brought to anthropological prominence by Marcel Mauss in his seminal essay on the gift. Symbolizing kinship ties, fine mats cannot be substituted for anything else in ceremonies. With no use value they are appreciated for their aesthetic quality, of which there are many grades, and possible pedigree. Tala pretends to be stunned by her uncle’s suggestion.

Tala: (in mock disbelief) Uncle, you are ringing me here in New Zealand for fine mats. And you are calling from Samoa. That’s like if I was in trouble in New Zealand, uncle, and I was ringing you up and said: Uncle, uncle, can you please help me, can you send me over a sheep.

Here we have a second ironic reversal of roles between Samoa and New Zealand. Though Samoan ‘ceremonial economy’ has long been international as vast numbers of mats are regularly shipped across oceans (Schoeffel 1999: 137), mats are woven in Samoa and typically flow from there to communities abroad even as remittances flow the other way. Thus Tala’s sarcasm seems justified. Though the mats have entered the commodity sphere (*ibid.*), I rarely heard anybody in rural Savai’i buying mats for exchanges—indeed finer grade mats would be prohibitively expensive for many—and though families hold reserves of mats for future needs, searching for fine mats, borrowing them from friends and relatives, was a commonplace theme. Once disheartened that a branch of the family had demanded a particularly high amount of mats for a funeral, Fiso glumly joked that he will walk into the ocean and never be heard from again.

The uncle changes tack again.

Uncle: Okay, okay, okay Tala. Look, I hear what you are saying. Don’t worry about the fine mats then. Why don’t you just send over the money.

Tala: The money?

Uncle: Yes, just send over the money.

Tala: (demurely after a slight pause) Uh, how many fine mats do you want?

So what can we learn from the denouement? It is crucial that Tala ends up giving in to her uncle’s insistent demands, though she quickly opts to send fine mats instead of money. Does this mean she values money over the mats? Perhaps. It also implies that despite her Westernized airs she is embedded in social networks that make the fine mats easier to acquire than money. If mats were for her mere commodities that she had to buy, why wouldn’t she send the money instead? Thus despite their demands real abundance can

still be found in holistic relations, while individualism is the domain of capitalist scarcity. The constant switching between perspectives makes it impossible to interpret the sketch as merely a critique and rejection of traditional obligations.

Conclusion

I have tried to stress in my paper that despite the apparent social functions humor can have, we should avoid reductionist interpretations. It is an anthropological truism that joking reflects the social relationship within which it is expressed. Thus we can easily read humor in a hierarchical society as a kind of weapon of the weak or a strategic tool of status degradation, but this entails a particular take on hierarchy as stratification based on power relations (for a critique of this view see Tcherkezoff 2008). As a mode of expression with a distinct semiotic ideology humor is more than just an epiphenomenon of other social processes. What seems specific to humor is the comedic force by which it sustains certain indeterminacy. Humor could then provide a perspective into what Louis Dumont called the residue (Dumont 1980: 37–38): those things which do not find clear symbolic articulation within an ideology.⁶ If ritual should make the hierarchical relations between values apparent by most clearly articulating the encompassing paramount value, humor creates a reflexive space where such relations are arranged differently. The claim that humor simply constitutes an inferior context that allows for value inversions, though often true, probably does not exhaust the complexity of the issue. Humor frequently involves the complex intertwining of different kinds of contexts, and the discursive ambiguity this creates is not reducible to indirection, veiled speech, and conflict management (e.g. Watson-Gegeo & White 1990). I would suggest that the perspectival shifting in humor could provide valuable insights into ‘value pluralism’ (see Robbins 2013), insights that could complicate the notion of value encompassment as well as conflict models anthropologists often rely on.

NOTES

¹ Discussing the classic anthropological topic of ‘joking relations’ Robert Parkin (1993: 262) observed that traditionally the study of joking hasn’t generated a specific theory, but ‘has been used to illustrate theoretical approaches that had already been developed for other reasons’. Joking, a form of ritual, is relegated to a supporting ‘epiphenomenon of the social structure’ (ibid.).

² Samoans commonly interpret their child’s first word to be *tae*, an abbreviation of ‘*ai tae* or eat shit (Ochs 1988: 159, 184).

³ The sketch titled Collect Call is available on the 2008 DVD *The Laughing Samoans in Crack Me Off*.

⁴ It should be noted here that to use the term transvestite to refer to the Samoan *fa’afafine*, biological males who in various ways and to various degrees express feminine gender characteristics, is problematic for several reasons, though that discussion is well beyond my topic.

⁵ I follow here Louis Dumont (1980) who distinguished between holistic and individualistic cultures. For recent discussion and critiques of holism see Otto & Bubandt 2010.

⁶ Though the Dumontian residue is sometimes taken to be non-conscious, it is clearly distinct from the Freudian notion of the unconscious that is often used to evoke subversive aspects of humour (eg. Mageo 2008: 73). For a discussion of different interpretations of residue see Parkin 2002: 158–183.

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COSMOLOGIES OF COMEDIC POWER: A LITTLE INVENTION GOES A LONG WAY

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Introduction

In the open-ended and experimental spirit of *Suomen Antropologi*'s Forum section, I will develop here a comparative analysis of two very different scenes of comedic performance: a bit of clowning by two *Chapayeka* clowns from the Yaqui Easter ritual in Sonora, Mexico in 2007 (See Keisalo-Galvan 2011) and a bit from Louis C.K.'s stand-up comedy show *Word: Live at Carnegie Hall* (2012).

My theoretical starting point is Roy Wagner's (1981) model of culture as a dynamic combination of *convention*—that is, the established and known cultural elements—and *invention*: the different, innovative, possibly unique extensions of these elements into new forms. I will demonstrate how the two comedic performances I juxtapose in this article put the two semiotic modes of convention and invention, as frames of both expression and interpretation, into a dialectic relation with one another. In this process, contextually relevant conventions and inventions are mutually defined and mediated, allowing contradictions to be engaged without the contradictory objects losing their defining characteristics. Put differently, comedic performers can create, call attention to, and cross various boundaries while still keeping the boundaries intact. In developing this analysis, I also draw from Rupert Stasch's (2011: 160) notion of 'ritual as poetically dense figuration of macrocosmic order in microcosmic action'.

Attention to these particular aspects of comedic performance, I suggest, can foster the development of more rigorous, anthropologically informed analysis of the semiotics of humor, broadly construed. To this end, I ask: what are the specific boundaries being drawn and crossed—mediated—in these instances and what effects can this have? What can an analysis of the respective patterns of invention and convention in these performances reveal about the comedic power they may have in their respective cultural contexts?

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