# Humour et altérité: un jeu sur les incertitudes des catégories sociale

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## Short Abstract:

Dans cet article nous discutons de la relation entre les formes comiques et les repères sociaux de distinction sur deux moments historiques au Brésil: le cinéma burlesque des années 50 et les joutes de rhymes du freestyle des années 2000.

## Long Abstract:

L'altérité a de tout temps été un sujet privilégié en matière d'humour. Dans cet article, nous discutons de la relation entre les formes comiques et les repères sociaux de distinction. Les blagues, les films comiques et les tournois de jurons, sont des manifestations qui mettent en scène les tensions sociales gerées par les différences, telles que celles de genre, race, ethnie, nationalité et classe. L'humour manipule des categories sociales établies et les mettent en question: des stéreotypes sont tour à tour reproduits ou détruits. Le mécanisme de l'humour est justement celui de remettre en cause nos certitudes, en dévoilant l'aspect construit des classifications sociales. Les systèmes de classification, ainsi que l'humour étant pris dans leur contexte, nous nous concentrerons dans cet article sur deux moments et formes différentes du comique au Brésil: d'abord le cinéma burlesque des années 50, dans lequel des blagues sur les relations entre blancs et noirs, les differences sociales et les genres étaient autorisées. Ensuite, nous examinerons les joutes de rhymes du freestyle, qui ont lieu actuellement chez les jeunes issus des milieux populaires des grandes villes, dans lesquelles les plaisanteries sont soumises à un régime de réstrictions assez évident. À partir de la comparaison de chaque forme que prend le comique, nous essaierons de comprendre comment fonctionne la reproduction des stéréotypes, ainsi que la capacité qu'ont ces pratiques de mettre en question quelques a prioris sur des categories établies.

**Paper**: Humor and Otherness: a play about the uncertainty of the social categories
(Humour et altérité: un jeu sur les incertitudes des catégories sociale)

Difference and otherness have been privilege subjects for humor. While they have been used as ways to reinforce social differences, inequalities and hierarchies, they have also been wielded to reveal the uncertainty and the arbitrariness of social taxonomies. First of all, in this presentation, we are going to discuss the views of some anthropologists who have dedicated studies to humor, such as Marcel Mauss (1979), Radcliffe Brown (1940 e 1949), Mary Douglas (1975), Pierre Clastres (2003) and Els Lagrou (2006). Each of them brought different emphasis and perspectives on the importance of humor and laughter to social relations. Moreover, they cast important questions to think about the relations between otherness and humor.

Further, we are going to discuss three case studies: the first one is the production of slapstick humor in Brazilian cinema by a comic duo formed by the actors Grande Otelo and Oscarito – the first one is black and the second, white; the second case we would like to highlight is a freestyle battle where the main goal is to make the audience laugh at the expense of other players; finally, we are going to discuss the parodies of white people among the Kashinawa Indigenous group. Although, these examples are from a completely different context, they give us supplies to reflect upon the following question: in which contexts humor reinforces the social classifications, hierarchies and inequalities? On the contrary, in which contexts it acts as a device for deconstructing or at least revealing the uncertainty about social classifications? We acknowledge that humor is polyssemous and adaptable to any circumstances, which means that it does not carry a moral meaning in itself. Having that in mind, we are based in the following hypothesis: the reinforcement and deconstruction produced by jokes depends on the relation and the position between three elements: 1) the joker; 2) the audience; 3) the words, gestures and meanings that the joker is applying in the jest. Let's start by the authors that might support this idea.

Marcel Mauss (op. cit.) and Radcliffe Brown (op. cit.) discuss the well-known concept of *joking relationships*. Other anthropologists before and after them discussed this concept as Lowie, Pedler, Henri Labouret and Denise Paulme, etc. The main contributions of all these researchers for our question are: the assumption that jokes are

created through relationships depends on the position of each person in each given relation. In *Parentés à plaisanterie*, Marcel Mauss (1979) raise a series of questions and ways to analyze the *joking relationships*. For him, this kind of relation belongs to a much larger theory of what he calls as the system of gift. Jokes, as well as gifts, are exchanged and distributed in different amounts, depending on the level of the relationships. According to Mauss (idem), the jokes perform the social function of making certain situations easier, usually the ones that are entangled in social constraints. For him, for keeping its balance and stability, social structure demands the alternation between moments of coercion and relief. What he is trying to say in this sense is that humor is crucial for the maintenance of social structure. Considering that jokes usually make use of forbidden words, Mauss (idem) also points out the linguistic aspect of humor, which means that it is possible to analyze the word's values in a given culture through this social mechanism. In the end of his essay, the anthropologist also suggests that this kind of research could be developed as a genealogy of comedy and drama. All in all, Mauss suggests that *joking relationships* is a social institution that opens fields to analyze at least three social aspects: 1) the system of exchange between people; 2) the values of words in a social taxonomy; and 3) the development modes of social narratives. Radcliffe Brown (1940) pursues part of the suggestions made by Mauss. He mainly deepened the ideia that *joking relationships* are functionally important to the stability of a given society. In his point of view, a *Joking relationship* is:

> a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence. It is important to distinguish two main varieties. In one, the relation is symmetrical; each of the two persons teases or makes fun of the other. In the other variety the relation is asymmetrical; A jokes at the expense of B and B accepts as much as he pleases and B in return teases a only a little (RADCLIFFE-BROWN, p.195).

The *Joking relationship*, according to Radcliffe-Brown is compound of "friendliness and antagonism" produced by social readjustment that combines disjunction and conjunction. According to the author, it "implies divergence of interests and therefore the possibility of conflict and hostility" (idem, ibidem, p.197). His examples are about marriage interchange and alliances between clans and groups. In other words, for him the core function of a *joking relationship* is to generate stability to the latent conflict emerging from the marital interchange or the intergroup alliance. However, as Radcliffe-Brown points out, not only this relation is a social requirement, but also it follows social rules, usually the respect between generations and seniority in the group:

“The joking relatives are those of a person’s own generation; but very frequently a distinction of seniority within the generation is made; a wife’s older sister or brother may be respected while those younger will be teased”(idem, ibidem, p. 198).

As the British anthropologist concludes, in an asymmetrical relation, say between close generations such as father and son, respect is often required. It is different in the case of joyous relationships, that frequently involve either relatives of the same generation, or grandparents and grandchildren. In these two last situations, the joking relationship are symmetrical, either for the reason that people from same generation share equal social positions, or because there is disjunction between grandparents and grandchildren, meaning they are unified by kinship, but separated by age. But there is also a different kind of joking relationships found in patrilineal societies, in which one should respect all his father’s relatives, but is required to tease his mother’s relatives, especially his mother’s brothers. In this case, the relationship is asymmetrical: the nephew is permitted to disrespect his mother’s brother and the uncle has to accept it, teasing him in smaller proportions.

What is interesting in Radcliffe-Brown’s definition is that he analyses joking relationships through a set of rules based on social positions of symmetry and asymmetry. His structural-functionalism approach emphasizes stability and cohesion. In that sense, this specific kind of relationship serves to maintain the social structures and also social classifications.

On the contrary flow, Mary Douglas (1975) will insist in the subversive effect of jokes on the “dominant structure of ideas” (idem, ibidem, p.95). Differently from Mauss (op. cit.) and Radcliffe Brown (op. cit.), she emphasizes the meaning of jokes in the culture’s symbolic arrangement, much more than the relation between humor and social structure. It’s important to say that she is looking on the meaning of jokes in an overall perspective, rather than analyzing them in a specific set of so called “primitive societies” that have a common trait defined by the former anthropologists as *joking relationships*. By doing so, she conceptualizes jokes more by their form, than by their context. For Douglas, a joke “brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first” (DOUGLAS, 1975, p.96).

This definition carries an intrinsic idea that jokes, by juxtaposing heterogeneous elements, inquire accepted patterns, which means that humor brings uncertainty to social classification, instead of reinforcing a social structure, as argued by Radcliffe Brown (1940 e 1949) and Mauss (1979). In all her descriptions of the mechanism of jokes she is going to underline their subversive function: "The joke merely affords opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective. It is frivolous in that it produces no real alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general" (1975, p.96). By contrast with rite that "imposes order and harmony", for her a joke "disorganizes […] they connect widely differing fields, but the connection destroys hierarchy and order. They do not affirm the dominant values. But denigrate and devalue. Essentially a joke is an anti-rite" (idem, ibidem, p.102). Even though she highlights the disorganizing potentiality of jokes, in the end of her essay she recognizes that a joke "makes a little disturbance" and it requires a consensus to be understandable, meaning that it demands the maintenance of some social classification to be shared by the community. This argument becomes clearer when she contrasts jokes with abomination. The latter

> is an act or event which contradicts the basic categories of experience and in doing so threatens both the order of reason and the order of society. A joke does nothing of the sort. It represents a temporary suspension of the social structure or rather it makes a little disturbance in which the particular structuring of society becomes less relevant than another. But the strength of its attack is entirely restricted by the consensus on which it depends for recognition (idem, ibidem, p.107).

We think that the main contribution of Douglas' essay for our presentation is to define humor as a device that brings a "temporary suspension of the social structure" or even challenge the "accepted pattern". Moreover, it is possible to retain the idea that jokes work through a mechanism of juxtaposition of different elements either inquiring social classification, or reinforcing it – as we might add to her definition. Actually, it would be more precise if we defined jokes by doing both movements at the same time. We mean that, by combining different elements, jokes challenge some patterns through the reinforcement of others patterns. Although, the theories we have been dealing with so far highlight opposite functions of humor, all of them sustain their definitions through the idea of difference, seen either as a set of distinctions in social stratification, as Mauss (1979) and Radcliffe Brown (1940 e 1949) do, or disparities of elements that jokes combine, according to Mary Douglas (1975).

Both Pierre Clastres (2003) and Els Lagrou (2006) bring contributions to our debate by also considering humor as a kind of knowledge. Even though they do not follow Mauss, Radcliffe Brown and Douglas' theories, both of them conceptualize humor through ideas which are close to the ones we have been discussing: maintenance, disturbance and difference.

Pierre Clastres analyzes two myths of Chulupi group that lives in the south of Paraguay. One of them is about a shaman and the other about a jaguar. According to the anthropologist, these two myths, which provoke the members of this group to laugh, are what he calls burlesque narratives: far from dealing with comic characters, in fact they are playing with two of the most dangerous beings in the indigenous society: shamans and jaguar, that inspire sentiments of respect, fear and rage among that people. Clastres therefore concludes that there is a: "cathartic function […] in the myth: it allows through its narrative to indulge in one of the Chulupi's passions, a secret obsession to laugh at what is feared. The myth devalues at the language level what would be impossible in reality, and by revealing through laughter the equivalent of death, we learn that, among Chulupi, the ridiculous can kill" (CLASTRES, 2003, p.165). Moreover, as the French anthropologist points out, laughter is a kind of knowledge responsible for preserving culture: "pedagogic inattention emerges from the laughter provoked: while these myths amuse the ones who listen to them, the same myths convey and transmit the tribe's culture. They are Chulupi's *gay savoir*" (idem, ibidem, p.166).

Els Lagrou also comprehends humor as a sort of knowledge, precisely a relational knowledge. From her point of view, humor does more than just kill what we fear at the linguistic level, it creates a space for multiple interpretations about the relations among people and between them and the animated world. Through the analysis of Cashinawa's myths and pantomimes, she concludes that:

> to laugh at the myths and narratives, therefore, operates the nuances of the delicate relational balance which presides the carnal commerce and the affective relations. The humor, thus, belongs to the category of relational knowledge, providing the basis for all knowledge about agency and the construction of the world, as it makes it possible to deal with sensitive issues without offending anyone […]. (LAGROU, 2006, p. 68)

According to her, humor works through an iconic language, as Bateson defined, by "updating possible moods of being without embracing a denotative or accusatory tone. Laughter creates space for social imagination, where each one can decide by themselves the terms of the relations and possibilities of action and reaction conveyed by myths, performances and narratives" (idem, ibidem, p.68).

What is particularly interesting and new about her analysis is that humor creates a polyssemous space for social imagination, especially as she exemplifies in the end of her essay the parodies of the white people made by the Cashinawa in order to access otherness, without becoming white. Both Els Lagrou and Clastres, differently from Mauss, Radcliffe-Brown and Douglas, point out the ambiguous characteristics of jokes, that is: in one hand, humor creates a new space for imagination, or kills what is feared; on the other hand, it transmits and maintains the cultural knowledge. Using the terms adopted by this workshop, humor at the same time makes uncertainty and reproduces certainty.

This characteristic of humor has also been underlined by the studies dedicated specifically to the relations between humor and ethnicity, as John Lowe (1986) analyses by quoting Konrad Lorenz:

> "Laughter produces simultaneously a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders... Laughter forms a bond and simultaneously draws a line." Similarly, Christie Davies has maintained that ethnic jokes 'delineate the social, geographic and moral boundaries of a nation or ethnic group," simultaneously reducing ambiguities and clarifying boundaries (idem, ibidem, p. 440).

In contrast, John Lowe tries to emphasize the contrary function of ethnic jokes: this kind of joke "plays a doubly useful social function. Ethnic humor, so frequently used to maintain hegemony by the group in power, can, through inversion on the part of the oppressed, become a weapon of liberation. At times it can be used aggressively to serve the purpose of revolution, but it can also serve as a mode of communication and conciliation, thereby furthering 'peaceful' revolution" (idem, ibidem, p. 442).

All of these theories highlight something that is true about humor, emphasizing either the idea of humor as a form of social maintenance, or humor as a form of social disturbance, or even humor by its ambiguous function. The question that remains is: in which contexts and for whom it works either way? In the following examples, we will try to answer these questions through specific social situations.

The first example is the slapstick humor in Brazilian cinema of the 1940s and 1950s by a comic duo formed by the actors Grande Otelo and Oscarito. The comic duo made up of a white actor and a black actor reinforced the social markers of difference of each comedian: as race, gender, corporeal dimension. They explored in their films, through comedy: 1) plots about black people rising in the social hierarchy; 2) inversions of social status; 3) exchanges of roles; 4) nicknames that referred to Otelo's skin color; and 5) affective/sexual relationships between black and white people.

In films such as *Aviso aos navegantes* (1950), *Carnaval Atlântida* (1952), *Dupla do barulho* (1953), and *Matar ou correr* (1954), Grande Otelo plays characters that represent the working class, who climb the social hierarchy over the course of the story: from transatlantic janitor to hero of the crew; from movie studio cleaner to film actor; from circus assistant to main attraction of the show; from tramp to hero of the city. All of these characters achieve unexpected social ascension, thereby reinforcing the comic effect by transforming an apparently unskillful character into the hero of the film. Grande Otelo's skin color, his body proportions, and his child physiognomy were considered funny, because these attributes synthesized the opposite of that which is socially constructed as a hero: white, tall, and with an angular face, as with Gene Kelly in Hollywood or Anselmo Duarte in Brazilian cinema.

Moreover, in addition to these films, Otelo performed comic numbers that referred by contrast to his skin color; for example, the white clown type, a blonde bombshell, and the white Argentinean singer Carlos Gardel. The issue of interracial couples was developed as a taboo in films such as *Também somos irmãos* (1949) and *Dupla do Barulho* (1954). In those films, the black characters are punished because they fall in love with white women. Only in *Aviso aos navegantes* the character that Otelo plays ends the film with two white blond bombshells, dealing with this issue through a comic perspective.

We could interpret this comedic mechanism by what Mary Douglas identifies as a joke: something that "brings into relation disparate elements", such as black characters doing what whites characters usually do "in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first" (1975, p. 96). However, if it would be possible to analyze such comic films as ways of inquiring social categories of what is black and white, if we take a careful look at the

context it would be more accurate to interpret that this kind of humor reinforced the inequalities of the meaning that was attributed between black and whites.

In other words, even though the humor of the duo in a first glace was symmetric: each of the two comics teased or made fun of the other, if we analyze the context carefully we will notice that Grande Otelo was one of the only black actors to perform in films, at that time. Furthermore, his characters were limited by the stereotypes about black people. In this asymmetrical context, therefore, any character that he would perform would be connected to the social prejudices regarding black people. In contrast, any character that Oscarito played was connected by the idea that he was portraying the typical Brazilian people or even the Universal Man or "homo universallys". To put it simple, he was not portraying a white man doing jester, but a man. In contraposition, Grande Otelo was performing a black man doing jester. If all this analyses are correct, the kind of humor represented by this duo contributed to the maintenance of the racial prejudices against black, much more than questioned it.

Differently from the first example, the case of the freestyle battle is interesting, because all the players can be seen as representatives of the same race, and belong to a similar social class. As Ricardo Teperman's (2011) ethnography presents, teenagers from the outskirt neighborhoods meet every Saturday at Santa Cruz subway station to participate in freestyle battles. The main goal of the battle is to make the audience laugh by improvising verses at expense of other players. The player, or MC as they call themselves, who wins the contest, is the one who captures the audience's attention by using cleverer verses with the correct rhythm and flow. Almost everything is worthy in order to improvise a verse; the few explicit rules that they make clear at the beginning of the contest are the prohibition of themes that deal with pederasty or with other player's relatives. But, in fact if an MC uses metaphors or metonymies to imply these issues through different words and the audience likes it, the verse may be allowed.

Usually they joke with others players' appearance, mainly by making fun at the expense of body's dimension. The type of the clothes that each one wears and the way each one improvises are also a strong theme in battles. Players, who, by their clothes or by the place they live in, are considered richer than others have to deal with jokes that call them "playboys", thus not true MCs. Also, even though sometimes white players make fun of black players, it usually does not amuse the audience, because almost all

the audience is black or could be considered as if they were black, since in Brazil, black means poor and people from the outskirts of the city usually call themselves blacks, as a way to affirm their place as an imaginary group against the white upper classes. By affirming their sense of belonging to a specific social stratification and the outskirts of the city, they are challenging the widespread idea in our society that rich or middle class people, usually white dwellers of the central area are better than poor people. All this performance, in the end, works to make cohesion among the MC's group. The freestyle battle creates a structure of sense or imaginary community that reinforce the struggle of these people on daily life by making fun of the affluent and middle classes. It almost works as a catharsis, as defined by Pierre Clastres (2003)and mentioned before.

Nevertheless, even though they inquire accepted patterns of overall society, in their sense of community they also play jokes at the expenses of others minorities groups, using then majority's ideas to create their identity. The verses that most entertain the audience usually have a sexist and homophobic point of view. They often say it in a metaphorical way and regularly link class to sexuality and gender, for instance: the term playboy, in this context, frequently refer to someone feminine, by contrast less masculine and strong than the ideal MC should be. In a very interesting example of an MC girl presented in Teperman's Etnography (2011), it is astonishing to see that not only she has to deal with the recurrently jokes that fall upon women, but also that she has to construct the other male player as someone not as masculine to win the contest. To say it bluntly, she has to affirm sexism to win the match.

The sexism and heterocentrism are the main patterns that often win the battles. It seems that all the terms that are used in the verses work according to this main patterns. For example, a fat MC usually have to deal with the jokes that other slim MC makes on him, but he can make fun of a slim player by saying that he is not strong enough, which mean that his not masculine enough.

In a nutshell, the freestyle battle is an ambiguous kind of humor as it challenges some social classifications by reaffirming the ideals of these MC against the imaginary status quo, but at the same time it upholds other kinds of prejudices as sexism and heterocentrism. The last example is about the pantomime of Cashinawa group, and will help us to think about a different kind of humor that is more critical them the formers.

There are multiple kinds of Cashinawa's parodies of white people, and we are going to discuss two of them, using Els Lagrou's ethnography (2006) among this people: the first one is about a drunken rubber tapper (seringueiro), and the second one about the Indigenous Central Bank (referring to the National Bank of Brazil). Cashinawa people live on the Brazilian-Peruvian border in Western Amazonia, an area that has been used to rubber extraction. Because of that, part of the group was separated and some Cashinawa became rubber tappers. One way that they deal with this problem, as Lagrou interprets it, is to parody the drunken rubber tapper, what works as a form of laughing at powerful figures, but also as a kind of knowledge that informs a relational theory on the latent possibility of turning into the other. To say it simple, it deals with the latent possibility of becoming the rubber tapper, according to Lagrou.

This argument will become clearer through the second example. Other way of playing with white people, a practice that the Cashinawa call damian, is to set an open fair market using old money that has no value anymore. Whenever the women of the group return with extra-gatherings as fruits and maniocs, the men put them in the market, where they can buy the products. There are lots of interesting aspects in this play: 1) They use extra-gatherings, which means products they have in abundance and they do not need to share; 2) They write the message Indigenous Central Bank on the money; 3) They create a committee for the Bank, mocking the political parties which control the National Bank. As Lagrou notices, the mimesis is so similar that at first it astonishes the anthropologists, but after an accurate analysis, it reveals the idea of humor as a form of knowledge to access other people. According Els Lagrou:

> Otherness might be appropriated and transformed in multiples ways. As Benjamin and Taussig highlight, '*The capacity to mime, and mime well, in other words, is the capacity to Other*'. This alteration is a way to become I and not other, this is the lesson of Pano-Cashinawa. [The open fair market...] is an activity to experiment the other point of view and to embody this other inside oneself, without destructing him, nor becoming the other. Cashinawa are decidedly convinced that by playing they learn. Both the laugh provoked by the grotesque imitation of the other and the imagery mimetic that appropriates the other's image […] are ways not to neutralize the powerful other, but to share and to appropriate part of its agency, therefore, enlarging the joker's subjective. This is the secret power of humor that captures the other's modes of knowledge, by making and saying what in another way would be unspeakable, and through that appropriates other's modes of knowledge and agency, without turning into other.

Els Lagrou believes that humor for the Cashinawa is a way to capture other's agency and knowledge. Regarding the question that we raised in the beginning of this article

whether jokes challenge or reproduce social classifications, we would answer that it does both, but by inquiring two times the Western way of thinking: by reinforcing it on cultural classifications and by trying to capture the widespread knowledge, without turning into someone else.

Would it be possible to think that when MCs make fun at the expense of "playboys" they are doing the same thing as the Cashinawa? Or that Grande Otelo and Oscarito parodies could be considered equivalent to the Cashinawa's? These questions are complex. On one hand, certainly the MCs' and Grande Otelo and Oscarito's humor work to produce certain knowledge. On the other, the way we constructed this speech leads us to conclude that they operate a different kind of savoir. As we stated here, the capability of humor to raise uncertainties over social classifications, or to their maintenance depends on the interplay of forces in the context. The first example was about a kind of humor, which reinforced social asymmetries; this example shows a general tendency to maintain the status quo, even though sometimes the humor of the comic duo could bring flashes of uncertainties. It is not unnecessary to say that this is about films that have an exterior audience and even didactic intentions, not about a game between friends. In the second example, we approached humor made by a group, to which laughter is a way of confronting, in an affirmative way their overall poverty condition; in spite of that, their representatives foster some attitudes that reinforce social standards, such as sexism and heterocentrism. The last example was about humor made by a group that uses its own weapons in order to know their enemies better, and maybe, as a form of resistance. Specificities taken, in all the examples it is possible to include humor among the social strategies to deal with power relations and inequalities. In that regard, we can agree with the mentioned authors, underlining that jokes always depend on the contexts we create for them. Of course, there are other possible ways to analyse this three examples that we can discuss futher.

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