

Palestinian Humor on the Peace Process

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Abstract

This article consists of two main parts: a theoretical part which proposes considering the joke as a form of play and an applied part which illustrates the theoretical part using political jokes produced by the Palestinian society during the five years of the "Peace Process" extending from mid 1991 to early 1997. This period is divided into five stages with several variables including the prevailing political conditions, the motivating factors for the production of the jokes, the individuals targeted by the jokes, and the overall mood reflected in the jokes for each of the five stages. Several representative jokes are quoted for each of the five stages.

Keywords: Narratives, humor, Palestine, folklore, peace process.

Introduction

This article explores the issue of how jokes respond to military and political conflicts and to the moods of the people experiencing such conflicts. The article approaches this issue by reviewing some of the main theories in the field of humor. The conclusions reached through this review are then illustrated by evidence taken from research results of the author's work on humor among Palestinians concerning the Israeli Arab conflict. In this article the author deals specifically with humor related to the so called "peace process".

Theoretical Background

There are many theories of humor or of the joke. Looking at these theories closely we can see that they tend to supplement rather than exclude each other. The reason for this is that these are not alternative views of the same thing but different views of different things; they actually describe different parts or different aspects of the same creature we call "the joke." A joke is a complex and multifaceted thing, and a "theory of the joke" may deal with one small aspect such as its motives, its function, its structure, its meaning, its message, its technique, its nature, its appreciation, its enjoyment, its understanding, or the conditions necessary for its creation. A "theory" may deal with the verbal, the social, the behavioral, the emotional, or the cognitive level. We can elaborate on this for a long time.

Subsume all existing theories of the joke can, however, under one or the other of two general theories. One is the psycho-functional theory derived from the work of Freud (1905, 1928) and deals mainly with the psychological motives and functions of the joke. It postulates that the jokes motivated by the repressed aggressive and sexual impulses and gives pleasure because it saves libidinal energy, so to speak, giving the conscious monitor a short vacation.

The other broad formulation for a theory of humor is that of “incongruity,” ultimately derived from Bergson, which sees humor as resulting from a contest between two incongruous or contradictory realities or levels where the weaker or controlled level seems to challenge, or to rebel against, the stronger controlling level (See Oring, 1992; Douglas, 1975).

Douglas (1975) suggested a plausible idea which can bring harmony between these two types of theories: namely, that the incongruity portrayed in a joke cannot be appreciated unless it reproduces, or symbolizes socially experienced incongruity, rebellion, and contest at one or more levels of the social system, on the one hand, and reproduces or symbolizes the challenge which unconscious impulses pose to the conscious control. Thus, we end up with a series of levels each consisting of a pattern of relations, in each of which there are two levels, one being challenged by another, and this structure being echoed all the way from the psychic level through the cognitive, the behavioral, and the social.

One more idea can be added to this complex picture. Several humor scholars have made the connection between jokes and play. Oring (1992: 28) refused the almost universally accepted hypothesis, which considers aggression an inherent aspect of humor. Oring (1992) stated, “Humor, first and foremost, appears to be a subspecies of play. Like aggression, play must be considered a primary impulse... [But] Aggressive impulses may, on occasion, utilize forms of intellectual play (i.e. jokes) as weapons”.

I agree with Oring (1992) that humor is a subspecies of play but disagree with him on the nature of the relationship between humor and aggression. In my opinion aggression is an inherent element of play -- all play – both physical and verbal. Physical play among all animal species in the natural state is a primary impulse necessary for survival.

Physical play, I believe, is practice fighting. It is mock fighting. It is the way the young train to become good fighters when they grow up.

Bateson was right when he said: “The play nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (Bateson, 1972:180). The reason is that it is a mock bite, serving mock aggression, a practice for the time when the animal will need the real bite in the service of the real aggression. Thus, physical play is simulated physical fight, motivated by simulated aggressive impulses. When the species Homo Sapiens developed the complex symbolic system, we call language, human beings became capable of performing physical actions symbolically, i.e. have dry runs of the physical action inside their heads, or wherever the mind is, and became capable of expressing or portraying these acts or mental experiments, verbally without having to act them out physically. Thus, a verbal fight is a symbolic version of a physical fight and is equally motivated by aggressive impulses. And just as physical play is mock or practice physical fighting, humor or symbolic play is mock or practice verbal or symbolic fighting, and just as physical play always takes the form of a contest, humor also always takes the form of a contest. There are apparent aggressive impulses in both physical play and humor, but in neither case, are these impulses real. In both cases, they can be placed in the service of real aggressive, sexual, or any one of a wide variety of impulses. The only way to understand the real motives and the real intentions behind a joke is to be able to know and to understand the total context within which a joke is narrated.

Theoretical Conclusions

I conclude from the discussion so far that jokes always take the apparent form of an aggressive contest between two parties, but in their pure primary uncontaminated form the aggression is not real but mock aggression. However, jokes, because of their inherent form easily lend themselves to being placed – as they often are – in the service of other primary impulses, especially hostile and sexual impulses, depending on narrator, audience, setting, occasion, or any of many other possible aspects of the context. Or to put it the other way around, one of the safest methods for expressing a wide variety of socially unacceptable impulses is to put them under the naïve and pleasant disguise of humor, especially since the pleasurable effect of the technique of humor distracts one from the impulses behind it or makes him hesitant to question what is behind it (See Freud, 1905).

To these characteristics of the joke I would like to add one more, which Degh (1972: 69) phrased thus, “Although jokes tend to come in series (sick jokes, elephant jokes, shaggy dog

stories), they center on real or imaginary personalities and react immediately to worldwide and local events.”

Illustrating Theoretical Conclusions

For the remainder of this paper, I would like to illustrate some of the theoretical points I have just mentioned, using jokes which emerged among Palestinians in reaction to the so called “peace process” since the end of the Gulf War, and to show how the sub-cycles centered around individuals, why these individuals in particular were selected, and how the joke sub-cycles correlated with the fluctuating moods of the Palestinians.

I started collecting Palestinian folk narratives, including jokes, humorous stories, anecdotes, legends, rumors, and so on back in 1988, a few months after the beginning of the Palestinian uprising known as the “Intifada.” The only criteria I had for the data I collected were that the material qualified as folk narrative and dealt with the occupation or with the Israeli-Arab or Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general. I had no conscious theoretical framework or any specific hypothesis. I used no formal interviews and asked no direct questions. I simply kept my eyes and ears open as I participated in conversations and political discussions with relatives, friends, colleagues, students and acquaintances. I did, of course, seek out locations where I knew such discussions were likely to take place and people who were likely to bring up the kind of material in which I was interested. Occasionally, I tried to elicit jokes or other narratives by telling some myself. I also instructed my students to use similar methods. The narratives were written down on cards as soon as possible after hearing them, together with date, name of narrator, and some other aspects of the context.

Being a native participant observer, combined with this non-ideological and non-teleological style of collecting data, allows me always to go back and reanalyze the data in retrospect in relation to new variables and be able to see some new patterns in it.

Looking at all the jokes I have collected since 1988, while keeping Degh’s (1972) words concerning the nature of jokes in mind, I can see that Palestinian humor went through three different joke cycles from the beginning of the Intifada in late 1987 until early 1997 with several smaller sub-cycles within each cycle. The three main cycles are: the jokes related to the Intifada, the Gulf War, and the peace process. I have reported on the first two cycles in two articles published in the *Journal of Folklore Research* (Kanaana, 1990, 1995). In this

paper, I am concerned only with the cycle of peace process jokes, its sub-cycles, their meaning and the names around which the jokes clustered into sub-cycles.

According to my field notes, the first joke I would now classify as a “peace process” joke was recorded on June 15, 1991, about three and half months after the end of the Gulf war. The total number of the jokes I have classified as “peace process” jokes, which were collected during the period 15 April 1991 and 20th February 1997, i.e. about five and half years, comes up to over 350 jokes. With the hindsight acquired by suffering more than five years of “peace,” it is easy to see that the jokes in this cycle are not distributed evenly or randomly over the whole period. The appearance of the jokes can be seen to be correlated with the different significant stages in the process and to cluster in sub-cycles around names of people who assumed different roles at different stages of the process. The sub-cycles correlated with different stages and the clusters formed around names of different individuals have different flavors, carry different meanings, are powered by different motives, and are told by different groups of people. Next, I will look at the correlation between the different groups of jokes, the different stages in the process, and the logic of the harmony between the joke clusters and the names around which the clusters were formed.

The over 350 jokes in my collection can be seen to fall into four groups each related to a stage in the development of the “peace process”.

1. The First Stage

The first stage began in June 1991 about three and half months after the end of the Gulf War and extended up to the Madrid conference in October of the same year. Talk about a peace process in the Middle East started shortly after the end of the war. The United States and Israel agreed to exclude Yaser Arafat and the PLO from this process and to involve only Palestinians from the Occupied Territories. Most Palestinians were unhappy about this decision. Contacts were made mainly with Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi, and it was these two Palestinian figures who became the target of Palestinian humor during this stage. The very first joke I have classified as a “Peace Process” joke, a very mild one, accused Husseini of trying to help the Israelis end the Intifada:

They say that Faisal el-Husseini declared an end to the Intifada. But the Israeli Border Police Force (considered by Palestinian youth to be the most

vicious among Israeli forces) were so unhappy they went on strike, because, they said, they had nothing left to do.

However, many more jokes were directed at Hanan Ashrawi. She was a much easier target; she was not from an ancient, aristocratic, nationalist family as Husseini was; she was young and a newcomer to politics; she was a woman competing among men, and a Christian competing among a large Moslem majority.

2. The Second Stage

This stage lasted for about two years, from the Madrid conference up to the time the Oslo talks between the Israelis and Palestinians became known. The selection of the delegation to Madrid, and later to the peace talks in Washington, made it clear that the PLO controlled the Palestinian delegation. The danger of the United States and Israel creating an alternative Palestinian leadership other than the PLO disappeared. The United States and Israel were now openly, though indirectly, bargaining with the delegation of the PLO. The danger that the Palestinians were going to be split up into two competing camps, the “Outside” and the “Inside,” had passed. The Palestinians were pleased with this achievement, and the great majority of them, explicitly or implicitly, approved of the talks and were hopeful about the results. The performance of their delegation, they thought, especially that of the head of the delegation Dr. Haider Abdul-Shafi, was more than satisfactory. The PLO was proven effective. There were only a few complaints and a few criticisms. These generally came from intellectuals and from young aspiring politicians who were jealous of those appointed to the delegation and considered themselves more qualified for the job. Almost all the humor during this stage came from these intellectuals and was directed to the Palestinian Delegation members, not to the leadership of the PLO.

The jealousy and hostility directed to the delegates show clearly in the following two jokes in which they are accused of stupidity and lack of patriotism:

1. One time Arafat, Habash, and Hawatmeh were driving down the street in a car. A donkey stood right smack in the middle of the street and refused to budge. Hawatmeh got out of the car walked over to the donkey and talked to him, but the donkey refused to move. Then Habash went and talked to him to no avail. Finally, Arafat walked over to the donkey and whispered something

in his ear and the donkey moved away immediately. Habash and Hawatmeh were surprised and asked Arafat what he whispered in the donkey's ear that was so effective. "Well," answered Arafat, "I told him that if he did not get out of the way I was going to appoint him a member in our delegation to Madrid."

2. When Arafat appointed one of the West Bank mayors to the delegation, someone called him up on the phone and said: "Congratulations, you have been appointed a member of the delegation to the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks". The mayor answered, "To which one of them"?

3. The Third Stage

The third stage extends from the time it become known that talks parallel to those in Madrid were taking place secretly in Oslo between the Israelis and the PLO, through the signing of the agreement in Washington on Sept. 13, 1993, and for a honeymoon period of about five months after that, up to the time of the massacre in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron on 25 February, 1994. Palestinians did not know at the time exactly what the agreement involved and the PLO people did their best to make it sound good.

Palestinians, anyhow, expected the occupation to be removed and some sort of an independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, to be established. They raised Palestinian flags openly, danced in the streets, honked the horns of their cars for several days, and celebrated collectively for the first time since 1967. Palestinians were slightly bothered by the fact that Arafat had been holding secret talks with Israel, but at the same time they thought he was very shrewd and had obtained what he wanted from the Israelis without the support of the Arab countries.

The idea of Gaza-and-Jericho-First was somewhat amusing, but it was not seen to be very bad since it was only a temporary arrangement until the Israelis finished their withdrawal from the rest of the West Bank. All together, they did not think it was a very good deal, but they considered it acceptable under the circumstances.

Humor during this stage shifted completely from the delegation members to Arafat himself. The Oslo talks and the Washington Agreement were seen to be totally the responsibility of

Arafat. The humor was kind, somewhat playful, not obscene or hostile. Palestinians needled Arafat and teased him rather than attacking him. Some of the jokes teased him about the Gaza–Jericho arrangement. Two Arabic words each with a double meaning and relevant to the arrangement were utilized in the creation of the humor of this stage. The first one is the Arabic name for Jericho which some pronounce “Reeha” exactly the same pronunciation as the word for smell and can mean fragrance or stink depending on the context. The different connotations of this word produced many political jokes about the Gaza–Jericho–First Agreement. One particular Arabic proverb was especially relevant; it says: “The smell of a husband is better than no husband at all.” The other relevant word with a double meaning is the Arabic word “qirn” which means something like “pod” but is used with a much wider range of fruits and vegetables. This word literally means “horn” as in the horn of an animal. Thus, in Arabic we say a “qirn” of pepper, and a “qirn” of banana. Now Gaza is famous for its superior hot peppers and Jericho for its great bananas. Several of the jokes during this stage played on the different sexual connotations of these two items and of the word “qirn”.

Although this stage is short, it produced a large number of the jokes I have classified as “peace process jokes”. And although some of them sound quite offensive now, they did not sound that way in the original context in which they were narrated. The main reason for that was that they were told mainly by Arafat’s own supporters and were clearly not intended to be harmful or offensive. The reasons why Arafat’s supporters told such jokes were two. First, Arafat and his followers were thoroughly aware that most Palestinians were not completely happy with the deal he had made, so they assumed the position that they also were of the same opinion. They took advantage of every occasion they had, including occasions to tell jokes, to declare in the presence of the opposition groups that they also saw the weaknesses of the agreement and were not happier with it than anybody else but it was the best possible deal they could get under the circumstances.

The second reason, a closely related reason, was that by telling such jokes they preempted criticism by other groups, at the same time that they prevented serious discussion of the situation from taking place. (See Freud, 1905.)

The playfulness of the humor of this period is reflected in the following joke, which teases Arafat about his strong inclination to hug and kiss whomever he met.

American mediators were trying to get Arafat and Rabin to meet. Arafat said he was willing to meet with Rabin assuming Rabin did not place any prohibitive conditions. The next day the mediators came back with Rabin's conditions. Arafat accepted all the conditions including not raising the issue of the settlements or the issue of Jerusalem. But when they mentioned that Rabin says no kissing at the beginning of the meeting, Arafat responds, "Now this condition is prohibitive!"

This wave of jokes was interrupted in February, 1994, by the massacre committed by a Jewish settler in the Ibrahimi mosque in which nearly 50 people were killed. A short cycle of massacre jokes followed, then for about 8 months I was hardly able to collect any humor related to the "peace process."

4. The Fourth Stage

This stage extends from around November 1994 – at the end of an eight-month lull, which followed the massacre – up to June 1995. By the beginning of this stage Palestinians had started to realize that what the agreement gave them was much less than they had hoped for or expected and much less than the Palestinian leadership had led them to believe they were getting and that what Israel was willing to implement was even less. The economy had become much worse rather than better as they were promised. Disorder and demoralization prevailed. Hostility, alienation, and bitterness increased. This is the mood reflected in the humor of this period. The jokes are generally bitter, cynical, and obscene. The humor of this period can be divided according to its targets into three sub-types.

The first is jokes directed to Arafat either directly or through insults to his wife. (We know that the hostility is directed toward Arafat himself, not his wife, because she is not significant enough to be attacked for her own sake).

We notice also that no jokes during this stage are directed towards those who were responsible for all the evils and weaknesses of the "peace process."

The jokes, as we have mentioned, were hostile and obscene and cannot be included in this paper. The milder ones among these accuse Arafat of being dictatorial in his rule and of being

unable to delegate authority to any of his followers or appointees. One of the mildest says that the Italians donated two million pairs of shoes to the Palestinians, only one of which has laces, because there is only one Palestinian who can “tie or untie,” i.e. who has any say or makes any decisions.

Another one says that when the Palestinian TV station was about to start broadcasting, they brought Arafat some applications and asked him to pick a news announcer. His response was, “What news announcer you are talking about? *I am going to read the news!*”

The second sub-type of this stage includes jokes ridiculing the expected Palestinian state about its size and the inefficient way it is expected to be run.

The one joke of this sub-type most often heard talked about the Palestinian government establishing in Jericho a factory for Palestinian cars which have only first and second gears because if they were to shift to third gear they would already be outside the Palestinian State.

The third sub-type of this stage includes jokes which talk about the different intelligence and secret service systems operated by the Palestinian authority, especially by the president’s own office. The jokes talk about simple people being beaten up or tortured by the secret service men for innocently and unintentionally saying things which could be interpreted to be offensive to Arafat or to other Palestinian authority figures. The fear expressed in the jokes of this stage may actually have something to do with the decrease in the number of political jokes exchanged among Palestinians in the next stage.

5. The Fifth and Final Stage

The final stage extends from around June 1995 until early 1997. This stage is characterized by a change in the atmosphere related to joke telling among Palestinians. The atmosphere no longer seemed to be conducive to joke telling. Palestinians, at least in public settings, were less interested in discussing politics and tell fewer political jokes when discussing politics, and those who know some political jokes were hesitant to tell them in public. However, the few new political jokes which emerged during this stage are no different from those of the previous stage, except that there was a tendency during this stage to use jokes imported from other countries and changing the names to suit the Palestinian context. A large percentage of those are borrowed from Egypt.

Here is a somewhat mild joke which was quite popular among Palestinians during this stage.

A Palestinian policeman wanted a few days leave. He asked his commanding officer for the leave. The officer refused, but the policeman insisted. Finally, the officer said: “You see that donkey on the side of the street over there? If you can make him laugh you can have your leave. The policeman went to the donkey, whispered something in its ear, and the donkey exploded with laughter. Then the officer said that that was not enough and the policeman must make the donkey cry, and the policeman did. The officer was not satisfied and wanted the policeman to make the donkey leave and the policeman did. Finally, the officer said, “You can have your leave, but first you have to tell me what you whispered to the donkey to make him laugh, then cry, and then leave. The policeman explained, “First, I told him I worked for the Palestinian administration, and he started to laugh. The next time I told him that I have a wife and three children, and I make 800 shekels a month and he started to cry, and the third time I asked him if he wanted to work with me for the Palestinian Authority, and he ran away”.

Another characteristic of the humor of this stage is the appearance of a new, unique and strange kind of jokes which denigrate both traditional and sacred Arabic and Islamic values and ideals. The jokes make fun of things most sacred to Palestinians including the blood of the martyrs (Shuhada) and things most sacred to Moslems and Arabs in general including the prophet Mohammed or even God.

The humor in these jokes is often achieved by bringing in the same setting a sacred value, figure or object together with a Western superficial value, figure, or object and making the Western or modern ones appear more effective or more valuable. Of this type is the following joke making fun of the belief that the blood of a martyr cannot be washed off his clothes.

Three Palestinian freedom fighters (Fedayeen) crossed the border from Lebanon to carry out an operation in Israel. During the operation one was killed, another was wounded, and the third got away safely. On the way back, the wounded one died. The other one took his blood-stained shirt back and gave it to his mother. The mother washed the shirt, but since the blood was that of a “shahid” it did not come off the shirt. The mother kept the shirt

with the blood stains on it. One day an old man with a big white beard, dressed all in green clothes with a large green turban, came to the mother and said, "Are you so and-so, and such and such happened to your son, and you washed the shirt, and the blood did not come off?" Everything he mentioned was true and the mother kept answering, "Yes, yes..." Finally, the old man said, "So, do you know why the blood of your son did not come off the shirt?"

Desperately, the mother said, "No I don't. Please, my holy man, tell me why." And the old man responded, "Because you did not use Snow (A brand of detergent advertised on Jordanian TV)".

I have mentioned the possibility that the fear of the Palestinian Secret Service men may explain the decrease in the number of political jokes. That, however, does not explain the emergence of the new type of jokes. I believe a better explanation for both phenomena, and more in harmony with the general mood of the Palestinians is that most Palestinians, after realizing what the peace process actually meant, have lost hope and lost faith in everything and have become apathetic and despondent, each caring only about his own personal daily affairs and interests.

Conclusion

Thus, we have seen in this article how tracing the history of the Palestinian political joke presents us with a clear picture of the history of the political process and of people's reactions to it. In the Palestinian joke, we see a progression of intensity. We see a mild uneasiness in the first stage, then resentment of the delegates to the peace talks, and thirdly a sometimes gentle "teasing" of Arafat. This is followed by a sense of intense frustration with the lack of effectiveness of Palestinian efforts and finally, the most intense of all, a denigration of traditional and spiritual values.

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