Anthropological Forum
Vol. 18, No. 3, November 2008, 235–253

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Pragmatics of Rude Jokes with Grandad: Joking Relationships in Aboriginal Australia

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The classical joking relationship has fascinated anthropologists for decades, especially in relation to African societies. The existence of joking relationships in Aboriginal Australia has also been noted in ethnographies, but rarely described in a way that acknowledges that kinship-mediated humour can actually be creative and funny. Kinship is obviously central to an understanding of these relationships, but the institutions that engender joking relationships have (surprisingly) rarely been discussed in detail for any Australian Aboriginal group. Taking the Bininj Kunwok and Dalabon-speaking peoples of western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory as a case study, I seek to demonstrate a generalisation that, in this part of Australia, joking relationships index the absence of actual affinity. The pretentious bluster, vulgarity and teasing of joking relationships ironically echo appropriate ways of behaving with actual affines. Whereas respect and avoidance are the hallmarks of interaction between actual affines, one jokes with a class of potential affines with whom actual affinity is not envisaged or has been renounced. The two forms of behaviour are intimately linked. Respect for affines is the default form of behaviour and the markedness of the departure from this expectation in joking relationships signals the existence of a different type of affinal relationship.

Keywords: Humour; Kinship; Joking Relationships; Aboriginal Australia; Arnhem Land

In a paper entitled 'A structural analysis of a humorous story in Gooniyandi', linguist Bill McGregor writes that anthropology and linguistics have treated Aboriginal humour either very rarely or as some dull and inflexible ritual rigidly governed by kin-relations. McGregor (1989, 86) states that:

> In the received anthropological view, it would appear that even 'joking' was rigidly formulaic. The so-called joking relationship was institutionalised between

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ISSN 0066-4677 print/1469-2902 online
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DOI: 10.1080/00664670802429362

> individuals in a particular kin-relation to one another, usually the ego to mother's mother relationship, and was characterised by extremely formulaic exchanges. This is in fact the nearest thing to humour that anthropologists and linguists refer to at all frequently.

There are a number of references to joking relationships in many ethnographies of Aboriginal societies, but they are perfunctory and rarely include examples of actual face-to-face interaction and the so-called 'extremely formulaic exchanges' that McGregor refers to above.[2] The implied claim that joking relationship humour is somehow less than funny because of its so-called 'rigidly formulaic' nature is perhaps the result of descriptions that were written during an era of anthropology's structuralist fascinations. There are certainly principles governing the humour of joking relationships that can be subsumed under the rubric of kinship, but why should kinship structure somehow diminish the ability of people to be extremely funny and artful in the way they create humour? Another problem is what might be termed the 'you-had-to-be-there' syndrome; for once humour is removed from the context of performance and analysed it rarely seems funny any longer.

In this paper I revisit the institutionalised joking relationship in Aboriginal Australia. I seek to demonstrate that both joking and constrained forms of behaviour can occur within a wider class of kin considered affines and that there is an ontogenetic relationship between these two kinds of behaviour. There is little in the literature that has specifically focused on the institutions that set up joking relationships, and there are very few published conversational examples of what people actually say to each other in jest. The illustrative textual material used here is mainly sourced from the Bininj Kunwok[3] dialects of western Arnhem Land, but also includes examples from southern Arnhem Land, and a number of neighbouring language groups. For these areas in Arnhem Land, I am proposing that, as a general principle, joking relationships pragmatically index a situation in which potential affinity is not expected to be actualised. There is also evidence to argue that this feature of joking relationships is, or was once, widespread in various other parts of Aboriginal Australia.[4]

It is always worth remembering, when describing aspects of kinship systems, that initial descriptions sometimes require seemingly broad generalisations based on what people say they do in addition to what actually seems to be happening. A description for a particular group of people in one place will frequently be at odds with what their immediate neighbours 'do' (see Example 1 and discussion below). Even the expectations about what is generally considered normal behaviour within a particular system will be tempered with variation and manipulation motivated by a variety of reasons.[5] I hope that some of the generalisations offered here as a point of departure will elicit further documentation of what is known of joking relationships in other parts of Aboriginal Australia.

The development in anthropology of what became known as 'joking relationship studies' has always included a strong theoretical component, and became very popular from around 1940 onwards. The subject has been described as one that is 'as

old as academic anthropology' itself (Heald 1990, 377) and has always been closely associated with the sub-discipline of kinship studies. The level of interest in joking relationship studies has largely mirrored the trajectory of kinship studies more broadly within anthropology. One hopes that the recent revival of interest in kinship, at least in the Anglophone orbit (Patterson 2005), will seed a renewed critical engagement with the relationship between kinship and humour.

A great deal of the literature on joking relationships is based on African examples (Rigby 1968; Freedman 1977; Stevens 1978; Wegru 2001), and debate has centred on the theory of joking relationships as a social mechanism for the dissipation of underlying hostility between groups or individuals who are said to be in social relationships of simultaneous conjunction and disjunction. This view is largely the result of the work of Radcliffe-Brown (1924, 1940, 1949, 1952) who, surprisingly, does not mention joking relationships in Aboriginal Australia, let alone apply his theory to the place of joking relationships in Aboriginal kinship systems. There is, despite its prominence in Aboriginal societies, little satisfying discussion of the place of the kinship-based joking relationship for Aboriginal Australia.[6]

The principle illustrated in the Arnhem Land cases that follow is that speakers in joking relationships use the inversion of constrained behaviours to index pragmatically the absence of actual affinity. The humour created by such inversion serves to ratify relationships between classificatory affines who are usually not expected to become actual affines. The class of kin a person can call 'affinal' in Aboriginal societies depends on the rules for preferred marriages in each group. Usually, a spouse is also a relative belonging to a particular class (for example, MMBDC). Actual consanguineal or genealogically 'close' kin in the preferred class are often not marriageable, the preferred spouse usually being drawn from classificatory or genealogically more 'distant' members of such a class. A third class consists of other classificatory affines with whom no actual relationship of affinity is envisaged. Joking relationships occur with those in this third class, a group of 'potential' affines.[7]

Joking relationship language and behaviour are in most respects the antithesis of the constrained speech and behaviour of avoidance relationships. The range of prohibited linguistic forms and behaviours associated with avoidance relationships is not only allowed in joking relationships; it is mandatory. That which is taboo in one context is exploited in another. Behaviours deemed inappropriate in avoidance relationships become the appropriate manners in joking relationships. Both avoidance and joking behaviours, however, relate to issues of affinity. Generally, most relationships between genealogically close adult kin, at least in many Arnhem Land groups, are characterised by various forms of behaviour marked by respect, restraint or avoidance. The structure of the kinship system sets up a plethora of kin with whom restrained relations are the norm. Overlying this is the manipulation of the system in light of actual options that are available in relation to marriage. Such options may be influenced by a range of personal, social, economic and political factors. In a system in which classificatory kinship extends to an unlimited number of individuals, the number of people who could be considered potential affines will,

therefore, also be unlimited. Having to relate to all of these individuals with the necessary caution and formality characterised by interaction with one's actual affines would make life burdensome and tedious. Joking relationships pragmatically index the absence of actual affinity within the context of potentiality. They mark a relationship where the necessary structural prerequisite for actual affinity is present but not realised. This is illustrated well by Bininj Kunwok people in western Arnhem Land, who view joking partners and actual affines with a kind of structural similarity. A number of areas of evidence for this, such as kinship and speech style terminology, are discussed below.

Joking relationships in Bininj Kunwok

The main joking categories for those who speak Bininj Kunwok dialects are those called by the reciprocal terms *kakkak* ('MM, MMB and DC, ZDC') and classificatory *na-kurrng* ('MMBS/FZDCS'). When viewed from the perspective of the subsection system, one's *na-kurrng* is also in the same subsection category as one's father or son. This becomes important in understanding some of the explanations from speakers discussed below. The joking relationships I have observed in Bininj Kunwok-speaking communities are mostly amongst men, although some southern dialect groups (for example, Manyalaluk Mayali, a Bininj Kunwok dialect spoken today at the Manyalaluk community south-east of Katherine) say that a woman and her MM or MMB may use light-hearted speech with each other. So how is it then that maternal parallel grandkin are in any way associated with affinity?

There is preferred marriage with MMBDC, which means that joking with MMB is also joking with a classificatory WMF, and joking with MMBS is joking with a classificatory WMB. Parallel grandkin can be included within the broad class of affines if the notion of 'mother-in-law' bestowal is subscribed to. Mother-in-law bestowal is reported in a variety of Aboriginal groups across Australia (Shapiro 1981; Berndt 1970 8; Hiatt 1996, 67; Scheffler 1978; Goodale 1962, 1971; Garde 1996, 60). Thomson (1935, 40) records, in relation to Wik Mungkan, that it was members of the grandparents' generation who determined the woman a man might marry. Shapiro (1981, 48) describes the rite in north-east Arnhem Land known as *munyuk* or *bunitjun*, during which a boy's MMB presented his daughter to the chosen boy, following which the boy took facial oil from the side of his nose and, with his thumb, rubbed the oil down the abdomen into the navel of his MMBD. The girl was now promised to the boy as his mother-in-law. Grandkin are often viewed as marriage arrangers in many northern Australian societies. In the Cobourg Peninsula and western Arnhem Land, the parallel maternal grandkin terms *nuyi angamanjirri* ('MMB') in the Ilgar and Iwaidja languages, and *animanjirri mayagbu* ('MMB') in Mawng, literally mean 'the one who arranges marriage'. Following this line of thinking, the WMF can be viewed as a kind of affine, and, therefore, classificatory WMF who are not actual WMF can also fall within that special subset of affines with whom one develops joking relationships.

Speakers of the Kune dialect of Bininj Kunwok also recognise a joking relationship between MB and ZS, the *lambarra* relationship (as do the Rembarrnga). In addition to the category of MMBDC, distant classificatory cross-cousins can also belong to the spouse category which means that one's MB can also be a spouse bestower. Although their close neighbours, speakers of the Kuninjku dialect of Bininj Kunwok used in the lower Mann and Liverpool Rivers region, do not have joking relationships between MB and ZS, one young Kuninjku man told me he joked with a Kune man of about the same age who was unrelated genealogically but was a classificatory ZS of his. When I asked him why he joked with his *kangkinj* ('ZS'), he replied:

Example 1:
kunekke kabirri-yime bedda [that's what they (the Kune) do].

Also, instead of using the term, *lambarra*, he used the Bininj Kunwok *kun-doy* or *na-binjdoy* ('father-in-law') as referent terms for this category of joking partner. The joking is mostly based on mock refusals to promise each other's daughters as potential wives. An example of a typical exchange was given as:

Example 2:
A: *Kan-berrebbu daluk* [Promise me a wife].
B: *Larrk kaybun* [No, I'll refuse you]. (Both laugh)

The Semantics of Joking Relationship Terminology in Bininj Kunwok

The Stem, -kurrng

In Bininj Kunwok, the kin terms, *na-kurrng* (MMBS/FZDS and reciprocal) or *ngal-kurrng* (MMBD/FZDD and reciprocal), are translated into Aboriginal English as 'cousin' or, sometimes, 'poison cousin'. Numerous Yolngu languages of north-east Arnhem Land have the term, *gurrung* ('FZDC'), which is most likely cognate with Bininj Kunwok *–kurrng*. In addition to the kin terms, *na-kurrng* and *ngal-kurrng*, the stem, *-kurrng*, also appears with the *kun-* noun class prefix commonly used with words for language names or speech styles. Thus *kun-kurrng* means 'style of speech used with kin in the class of *na-kurrng/ngal-kurrng*'. The primary meaning of *kun-kurrng* is associated with the special register of constrained language used between WM and DH. 'Mother-in-law' or 'avoidance' registers in Australian Aboriginal languages have been the subject of a number of studies (*e.g.,* Dixon 1972, 1980; Haviland 1979; Harris 1970; Laughren 2001; McConvell 1982; Rumsey 1982). Like many of the avoidance styles in such studies, *kun-kurrng* involves extensive lexical replacement of nouns, verbs and adjectives with alternative forms, and avoids direct address as well as other circumlocutory stylistic features. The use of third person singular forms when a man refers to his WM or a woman to her DH (speaking to WM/DH is normally eschewed) is avoided by substituting polite forms that use the third person plural. This occurs in the following *kun-kurrng* example, in which a man asks his *kun-doy* or classificatory WF in a very circumspect manner for the loan of a

portable generator, and uses plurals for all pronominal prefixes as well as the irrealis and the conditional *bu* 'if':[8]

Example 3:
Bu kandi-weybu-yi ngarri-djaloy-i.
If 2a/1a-give-IRR 1a-want-IRR
If you (pl.) could possibly give it to us we would like that.

This is contrasted with the everyday language, which in a direct request between two individuals would be as follows:

Example 4:
a-djare kan-won.
1-want 2/1-giveNP
I want you to give it to me.

One of the main arguments of this paper is that either joking or constrained behaviours can occur with the same class of kin depending on whether or not there is an actual affinal relationship. If this is the case, then avoidance and joking styles of speech paradoxically belong in the same class, a class of marked speech that one uses with affines. Avoidance or lexical-replacement register is used with actual affines and joking register is used with certain classificatory affines with whom an actual affinal relationship is not envisaged.[9] Joking relationships are also further characterised by greater degrees of genealogical distance and social familiarity.

In Bininj Kunwok, the term, *kun-kurrng,* can therefore refer to both the avoidance register used between a man's WM/WMB and a woman's DH/a man's ZDH and, when a person's *na-kurrng* is a joking partner, to the marked register of humorous banter used in joking relationships, even though joking is carried out in ordinary everyday speech rather than in the special lexical replacement register. This is made clear, in Example 5, by a senior Kuninjku man, Mick Kubarkku, with whom I was having a metalinguistic discussion about the meaning of the term *kun-kurrng.* Up to this point, I had only thought of *kun-kurrng* as the label for that special lexical replacement register that one used with tabooed kin.

Example 5:
MK: *Yoh kabirri-durren. Kuneke kabirri-durren kabene-re.*
Yeah, they swear at each other. They always swear at each other.

'*Ngudda*', *kabi-marneyime, na-wu daluk-ken kun-warre kabi-marneyime.*
'You!' he says to him, and says rude things to him about women.

Na-mekke kun-kurrng kun-modjarewarre bonj kabirri-durren.
That *kun-kurrng* 'cousin' joking language and *kun-modjarewarre*
'grandkin joking style', it's OK for them to swear at each other.[10]

Based on this use of the term, a definition of *kun-kurrng* in Bininj Kunwok is more along the line of 'marked styles of speech that are used by those who call each other *na-kurrng*'.

A man does not joke with his *ngal-kurrng*, although in north-east Arnhem Land there is a possible joking relationship between a man and his classificatory mother-in-law, which, as Shapiro (1981, 51) also notes, represents a 'renunciation of potential affinity'. Women who call each other classificatory *ngal-kurrng* sometimes joke with each other, but the intensity of the teasing is much less and references of a sexual nature are quite circumspect. The term, *kun-kurrng*, seems to encompass stylistic opposites: the highly polite and cautious avoidance register, on the one hand, and the often risqué and outrageous humour of the joking relationship, on the other. This provides further evidence for strong connections between two speech styles that are often described as being at opposite ends of the patterned speech behaviour continuum.

In keeping with this world of ordered inversions, the behaviour that can be observed between two men who call each other *na-kurrng* is sometimes quite ambiguous. A pair of *na-kurrng* who are in a joking relationship can also display to each other a demeanour of marked circumspection, which suggests notions of both affection and respect. Both *na-kurrng* (WMB-ZDH) who are joking partners and actual *na-kurrng* in a constrained or avoidance (non-joking) relationship will pass food or other objects to each other using a respectful gesture that entails holding one's own forearm—the one attached to the hand passing or receiving the object—with one's other hand. Two brothers-in-law or any other pair of actual affines will do the same. Joking partners will often use this physical advertisement of affinity, and at the same time exploit it by taking the pretence of respect up to a certain point and then delivering a humorous *coup de grâce*, as in the following interaction:

> Example 6:
> A: *Nja* [pause] '*kas*' [holds arm in respectful gesture] *yi-ngu!* [pause] … *Ba yi-dedjdabkerren.*
> Here you are [pause], my 'cousin', eat this [hands damper over] … so you can block your arsehole with it!
> B: *NGUDDA yi-ngu, ba yi-korddjabname!*
> YOU eat it, so you can make a big pile of shit!

Kun-modjarewarre Grandkin Joking

In Bininj Kunwok, the style of joking language used between those who call each other *kakkak* (MM[B] and ZDC) is referred to by the term *kun-modjarewarre*. This term is only used for the joking speech used between parallel maternal grandkin. It cannot be used as a label to describe the joking speech between *na-kurrng/ngal-kurrng* even though the content and subject matter of the humour is identical. In Example 5 (above), Mick Kubarkku refers to two joking relationship speech styles, *kun-modjarewarre* and *kun-kurrng*, which appear to have no stylistic differences. The term used for the joking speech style used with parallel maternal grandkin, *kun-modjarewarre*, can be analysed as:

> *kun-* 'neuter noun class (includes language class) prefix'
> *-mo* 'bone'

-djare 'desire, want'
-warre 'bad'.

The connection between 'grandkin' and 'bone' can possibly be equated with the same correspondence in the neighbouring Burarra language, where the MM(B)–(Z)DC grandkin relationship is described as follows:

Example 7:
an-ngardapa an-mama butala [They have the same bone].

The segment *djare* ('desire') is more difficult to explain in terms of relevance to a joking speech style. Berndt and Berndt (1970, 90) also recorded the Bininj Kunwok term *djarewarre* ('*djuruwari')*, which they discuss as a form of illicit extra-marital relations between a man and woman who call each other classificatory *kakkak* ('MM/DS or MMB/ZDD'). A cognate term, *jarawarra*, also exists for speakers of the neighbouring Burarra language, who observe joking relationships between individuals in patrilineal groups. Here, joking only occurs with those who are called *jerda* (MMB, MMBSS and other equivalents), *mununa* (MM) or *ganggurda* (ZDS, ZDD and equivalents) and who do not belong to a patrilineal group to which WM or potential WMs belong.[11] Hiatt (1965, 62) notes that:

> Joking between *jarawarra* relatives consisted of allegations of abnormally large sexual organs or appetites and occurred both in ritual contexts and everyday encounters. It was always good-natured and appeared to be a recognized way of demonstrating friendly relations between two groups whose members performed unpleasant duties for each other.

The joking between a male and female *kakkak* (in Bininj Kunwok) and the circumspect, although relatively lame, sexual innuendoes that are common in interaction between *kakkak* in cross-sex joking relationships may be the basis for such illicit *djarewarre* relationships. In this context, the term, *djarewarre*, might be understood to mean 'illicit desire', but I suspect the term, *-warre*, has more to do with the classification of *kakkak* as a kind of affine. Numerous affinal kin terms in Kuninjku (and the other Bininj Kunwok dialects) contain the segment, *-warre*, and the semantic shift from 'bad' to 'affine' has been noted in other Australian languages. Sommer (1978, 180) discusses the semantic connection between 'bad' and 'taboo' in a number of Cape York languages, noting that: 'The use of the term ''no-good'' in an opposing semantic sense is not only relevant to clan lands or food, but also to close consanguineal or affinal kin.'

Sommer (1978, 180) also lists a number of kin terms in Cape York languages (Ogh Undjan and Oykangand) that contain morphemes related to proto-Australian **wara* 'no-good' (or **warri* 'bad' [Evans 1990, 138]). Likewise, Sutton (1982, 190) mentions the use of the Wik term, *waya* ('bad'), in reference to 'taboo[ed], dangerous or restricted' affinal kin, 'which expresses formal shame at the making of references to *wiinhtha* [constrained relationship kin] people'. Bininj Kunwok *-warre* is almost certainly related to **warri* also.

Dalabon[12]

Dalabon speakers described joking relationships between *winjkœn* ('DS') and *kakkak* ('MM(B)'), and between *winjkœndjan* ('DD') and *kakkak* ('MM(B)'). The same marriage rules discussed above for Bininj Kunwok (and Burarra) also apply for Dalabon.

The joking between cross-sex grandkin amongst Dalabon people is said to be somewhat less ribald than that which they report for their eastern neighbours. However, cross-sex grandkin joking was reported to be quite risqué at Roper River, with the following comment given (with code mixing of Kriol and Dalabon):

> Example 8:
> *Roper River said, kœrdœkœrd. They filim yu, kurdih. Ah nomo laikajed yu meikim mi shem. Laik Dalabon-walœng "Mak kah-kalmi".*
>
> At Roper River, the women [your MM or ZDD joking partner], they feel you up, excuse me for saying it. 'Hey, don't do that, you'll embarrass me.' Like in Dalabon [we say], 'Don't fiddle with me'.

Joking relationships also exist between male classificatory *djaburlh-ko*, 'a pair of WMB/ZDH':

> Example 9:
> *djongok orait, yu ken faniwan, im from yu father* [It's OK for you to joke with your *djongok* (MMBS, FZDS); he's from your father].

The comment, 'he's from your father', describes a joking relationship between a man and the classificatory brother of his father (see Fig. 1). These two men call each other *djaburlh* or *djongok* instead of father and son as might be expected. Sibling equivalence is broken between the two 'brothers', and the son calls his actual father *bulu-ngan* ('my father') and his father's classificatory (and genealogically distant) brother *djaburlh-ngan* ('my WMB').[13]

Typical ribald Dalabon joking is said to include epithets such as the following:

> Example 10:
> *Djah-morlo-kardabun* [You long prick]!

Or, to a female joking partner, the rather vulgar taunt:

> Example 11:
> *Djah-dun-boyenj* [You big hole]!

Two women who call each other *djaburlh* (or in Kriol *gadjin-gidja*, 'a pair of cousins') will joke also, especially about accusations of oblique sexual references and lusting after men.

> Example 12:
> *Djabulh-ko keh-berrmarrœniyan* [A pair of 'cousins' joke with each other].

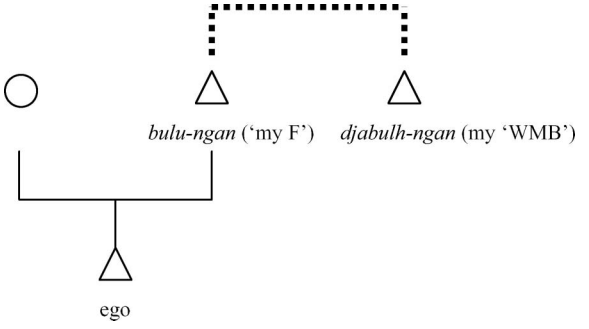


Figure 1 Dalabon classificatory FB and *djaburlh* 'WMB' as joking relationship classes.

Finally, Dalabon speakers identify a joking relationship similar to the MB *lambarra* joking discussed above, except that there is a special term for a classificatory uncle with whom this joking occurs: *barnkarl* ('classificatory MB').

> Example 13, in Kriol:
> *Barnkarl from natha angkal, not yu ful angkal maitbi yundubala faniwan meikim*
> [Your *barnkarl* is a classificatory MB not your 'real' MB and you two can joke together].

The Arnhem Land pattern of joking relationships that emerges across the various Aboriginal groups described is one of creating joking relationships between those who are classified as a particular kind of affine. Actual affines who establish their relationships by following the marriage rule norms for a particular kinship system, as a generalisation tend to speak to each other with restraint, defer to each other (depending on the symmetry of the relationship) and display a circumspect demeanour to each other. That class of affines who are not expected to become actual affines are those with whom one can establish a joking relationship. This is especially the case where there is also a high degree of social familiarity and considerable genealogical distance. The joking relationship can be viewed, then, as a pragmatic index of the absence of actual affinity in a class of kin where there is principled potential but no actualisation.

The Pragmatics of Inversion

It is by now quite obvious that most of the topics of joking relationship exchanges deal with mock threats, feigned aggression, mock refusal of requests, unbridled sexual obscenity, alleged sexual exploits and misbehaviour, and bodily function topics such as elimination. The following example ironically echoes the obligation a person has to provide food for his *na-kurrng* ('MMBS or WMB'):

Example 14:
Kun-wern njamed man-me marneyakwon (laughter). *Yi-kornbadjan!* (laughter).
[I'm going to finish up all of your food. You big balls!]

Joking of a less obscene nature occurs between cross-sex joking partners such as a woman and her MMB (or a man and his MM). In these cases, joking often focuses on accusations of having secret romances or being overly active 'at night'. In addition, there is less mock hostility and contradiction, as the following example in the Burarra language (Margaret Carew, pers. correspondence 1996) illustrates:

Example 15:
One example of joking between *jerda* (MM, MMB) and *ganggurda* (a woman's DC, a man's ZDC) centres on teasing about girlfriends and boyfriends and is quite gentle: no swearing. For example, if a man is entering the camp alone from somewhere, or is walking along by himself, his granddaughter could call out something like: *jerda, jin-nginyipa mipilinyjirra ny-boya achila, ya?* ['Granny, are you going to see your girlfriend?']. *Jerda* will go along with the joke, saying something like: *Ngaw jin-geka ngu-mangga* ['Yes, I've got a new one'].

The following exchange in Bininj Kunwok involves two joking partners, Dj and TW, who call each other classificatory *na-kurrng* (MMBS and FZDS). Dj arrives in the community art and craft centre and, although he is younger than TW, is recognised as a talented and developing artist. TW is not recognised as an artist, and is feeling quite shy as he brings in a couple of bark paintings he had just completed. Dj looks at them and immediately starts the teasing:

Example 16:
Dj: *Makka man-warre yi-marnbom. Njale yi-baruy kurdduk?* [You painted a heap of crap. What did you use to paint it; shit?]
TW: *Yi-ngarreyabmeng!* [Fuck you!]
Dj: *Kaluk nga-bakke nga-we 'rubbish'* [I'll break it and throw it in the rubbish].
[Both laugh intensely.]
TW: *Mani na-ngale bimbom?* [Who painted this one?]
MG: *Yiddunu* (*i.e.,* the name of Dj's younger brother)
TW: *Berd-dunu, berd-kuyeng!* ['Prick-dunu', the big prick!]
Dj: *Balmarded!* (redressive sibling sympathy response).[14]

A few days after the above exchange, Dj and TW find themselves together in the art and craft centre again. This time Dj brings in a bark painting for sale and the art centre co-ordinator hands him a cheque in payment.

Example 17:
Art centre co-ordinator to Dj: You'll get a good cheque for this one.
TW: (in an aside to Dj, his *na-kurrng* ['MMBS']): *Ba kan-yibayahme daluk.*
[So you can pay to give me a wife now! (*i.e.*, Dj's daughter)]
Dj: *Bonj kaybun* [I won't give you anything!].

The above examples are littered with the forbidden themes and behaviours of avoidance relationships. If joking relationship behaviour is a kind of ironic comment on the proper way to behave with actual affines, this behoves us to consider more carefully the nature of affinal relationships and the obligations affines have towards each other in terms of day-to-day interaction.

The use of terms such as 'avoidance', 'formality' and 'respect' to describe relationships of constrained behaviour has been criticised on the grounds that these terms are used by different writers to mean different things and that they are highly ethnocentric in meaning (Wierzbicka 1991, 1992; Goddard 1992). Whilst I do not intend to evaluate such debates here, Goddard does summarise well the principles behind the behaviour of those in constrained relationships, such as between a man and his mother-in-law. The behaviour of those in constrained relationships is the expression of what Bininj Kunwok speakers call *kun-yeme* ('shame or embarrassment'). This seems to be a universal concept in Aboriginal Australia, and the principles underlying it are described by Goddard (1992, 108):

> First, there is an injunction against specificity of reference. Second, there is an injunction against expressing personal opposition, thus ruling out overt denial, refusal and disagreement. Thirdly (and perhaps most interestingly) there is an injunction against directly expressing a range of 'you-influencing' illocutionary intentions.

These principles describe nicely the 'way things are' between kin in constrained relationships, but still require some explanation. Relationships of constraint are between actual affines, and the central themes of affinity are, of course, marriage and sexuality. The most heightened form of constraint is between a man and his mother-in-law, and explaining the motivation for it has puzzled anthropologists for over a hundred years. Drawing on 'fragments' from a range of ethnographies that have considered mother-in-law avoidance in Australia, Hiatt (1996, 151) constructs the following profile:

> If we attempt to construct a pen-portrait of the mother-in-law of a man from these fragments, a truly enigmatic phantom emerges. She is a benefactress, his [the son-in-law's] dearest friend because she gave him his wife. In return he must hunt for her and give her meat, yet he must not go near her, look at her, speak to her, or utter her name. She arouses in him feelings of profound shame, as well as fear, and her sexuality must be expunged from his consciousness. She is poison, a source of danger, polluting like a corpse. Yet myths tell of mother-in-law rape and son-in-law seduction, and rituals license forbidden conjunctions.

This expunging of sexuality is evident in all aspects of interaction between constrained kin, and, in language, sexual references and terms are widely reported as being non-existent in the lexical replacement registers or 'mother-in-law' languages. In *kun-kurrng*, the Bininj Kunwok 'mother-in-law' register, no words exist for intimate sexual terms such as genitals, sexual intercourse and other sexual behaviour. Haviland (1979, 373) notes the same for Guugu Yimidhirr on Cape York:

> Strikingly, some words in the EV [everyday] language have no equivalent in BIL [brother-in-law register]. Words in this category clearly form a coherent and

Table 1. The inversion of constrained and joking relationships.

Constrained or 'avoidance' relationships	Joking relationships
Indirect speaking 'sideways'	Speak directly
Avoid direct address	Address directly (*i.e.,* not via an intermediary)
No vocatives	Use vocatives freely
Do not look at addressee	Look at addressee
Speak quietly and slowly	Speak loudly and rapidly
No passing objects hand to hand	Pass objects freely, throw objects in jest
No close physical proximity	Joking partners camp together
No physical contact	Horse-play, snatching at each other's genitals
No visiting the camp of …	Joking partners always visit each other
Avoid sensitive lexical items such as sexual references, elimination, words with sensitive connotations	*Concentrate* on sexual references, genitals, elimination, sexual relationships, exploit 'sensitive' connotations of words
No joking	Constant joking and humorous interaction
No imperatives	Use imperatives
No contradiction	Contradict openly in jest
No 'strong' speech *e.g.*, threats	Mock threats
No refusal of requests	Mock refusal to meet a request

> significant class. They include the EV words for 'bad smell (e.g. human sweat)', 'testicles', 'vagina', 'pubic hair', 'masturbate', 'woman's pubic area', 'have sexual intercourse', 'penis (also means: greedy)', 'erect phallus', 'rape', and 'clitoris'. Of such words it is said: You can't use those guugu [words] against your mother-in-law.

In addition to the avoidance of sexual topics, Tonkinson (1991, 62) lists the following behaviours as forbidden to those in what he labels as 'restraint relationships':

> touching, joking, passing objects directly hand to hand, sitting together, visiting the camp of, calling by name, looking directly while talking, and arguing with or physically assaulting any member of certain kin categories. This system is regulated principally by the pervasive inhibitor of shame or embarrassment rather than by threats of punishment.

The above topics and behaviours are, however, exactly those associated with joking relationships. Touching, horse-play, direct reference and address, mock arguing and threats and similar proscribed behaviours all appear in joking interaction or terms relating to joking relationship language.

The speech and behaviours of both avoidance and joking relationships are compared in Table 1.

Conclusion

The language of joking interaction is primarily an advertisement of the ratification of particular social relationships. The literal meanings of the light-hearted swearing and

teasing are considered by Aboriginal speakers as 'saying nothing' and being based on the creation and expression of friendship, as Thomson (1935, 475) also records:

> When I asked two men of the Kuuku Ya'u tribe who stood in a joking relationship and who were perpetually exchanging terms of abuse, why they swore, one of the men replied "Yor'yor (nothing), ati (friend), make happy little bit, no swear proper!"

Bininj Kunwok speakers have told me of the affection they hold for those joking partners with whom they are able to carry on the most intense ribald abuse and swearing. 'He's my really good friend that bloke' is how one man put it in English.[15]

Rituals of rebellion, role or identity reversal and ritualised clowning have all been included in studies of symbolic inversion (Babcock 1978; Mitchell 1992), and Australian Aboriginal joking relationships are yet another form. Hale's (1971, 473) description of the Warlpiri tradition of antonymy is a further example of linguistic inversion. This practice involves using a secret ceremonial speech style called *tjiliwiri* where nouns, verbs and pronouns of ordinary Warlpiri are replaced with an antonym. *Tjiliwiri* is also a term used to mean 'funny' or 'clown' and, as Hale (1971, 473) notes, 'refers specifically to formalised "clowning" during *kankarlu* ritual and to the men who serve as guardians of junior *kankarlu* novices'.

Joking relationships can be considered a means of neutralising the onerous burden of proper demeanour with affines and any associated fears of 'shame' that interaction with affines can bring. The irony and frequently false assertions of joking relationships are based on the sort of topics that no one would be caught dead saying to their actual affinal kin. The conventions of proper behaviour with affines are intended to be flouted in joking relationships, suggesting some explanation in 'release' theories of humour (see Redmond, this volume, for further discussion of this topic). Through the breaking of conventions we all feel a certain kind of relief. The conventions of affinal kin interaction become ever-present, given a system of kinship extension that creates an unlimited class of affines.

The hack phrases and swearing epithets of joking relationships might seem like a formulaic and uninspired form of humour to some, but such utterances can cleverly condense mutual knowledge of certain cultural practices into one-liners that evoke such practices. Another irony is that the kinship system, which has been rendered by anthropologists as suppressing creative humour, is in fact both the inspiration for, and target of, a very creative and hilarious form of verbal art. Clever joking relationship comedians are not simply limited to a repertoire of swearing or hack phrases, although they often use these to hilarious effect. One example I recorded was in 1996 at a major regional patrimoiety ceremony in central-north Arnhem Land. With hundreds of men gathered in the early evening, I witnessed a Burarra man stand in the midst of the ceremony ground and deliver a serious speech exhorting everyone to follow correct procedure and ensure that initiates are kept awake and observe all the rituals planned for the coming evening. After completing his speech, a cry of formal approval and agreement came in reply from the crowd, followed quickly by

the man's joking partner who called out loudly in Bininj Kunwok *Yi-kornbadjan!* ('you big testicles!'), which dissolved the camp into laughter. Again, it might seem, in analysis, an unsophisticated kind of joke, but, in combination with the chosen intonation, the spontaneity and the gravity of the context, it was an absolute winner.

The outrageous insults of joking relationships create humour by expressing an attitude to norms of language use amongst certain classes of kin. Such an attitude echoes or invokes the social norms of the rule: 'speak to affines using constrained speech and be circumspect in your behaviour with them'. Avoidance or respectful behaviour in this context is the basic standard from which joking speech and behaviour are derived. Propriety, politeness and respect for the class of kin who provide a spouse constitute a basic standard in most cultures. Joking language also conjures up, to a ludicrous degree, the failure to observe the otherwise appropriate rules of propriety when speaking with relatives in the affine class. The flouting of the rules for correct behaviour is incongruous with their proper usage, with such an apparent breach of propriety only possible with affines of a particular type. By pretending to fight or exchange extreme insults, joking ironists revel in and encourage seemingly inappropriate behaviour. Yet, when such pretence is delivered with artful skill, in a licensed context, that which is inappropriate is always the basis for a good laugh.

Notes

[1] *Acknowledgements:* I wish to thank Patrick McConvell for guidance and encouragement during the formation of earlier incarnations of this paper. I am also indebted to Yasmine Musharbash and John Carty for their constructive engagement with the shortcomings of previous drafts, and to *Anthropological Forum's* anonymous referee. In the spirit of the subject at hand, I wish I could find someone else to blame for the inadequacies that remain, but unfortunately they are obviously solely my responsibility.

[2] References to kinship-based joking relationships in Australia include Goddard 1992, Jackes 1969, Thomson 1935 and Sommer 2006, 95–110.

[3] The term, Bininj Kunwok, is a recent appellation (Evans 2003) used to refer collectively to the chain of mutually intelligible dialects in western Arnhem Land and Kakadu National Park of which the best known in the anthropological literature is Kunwinjku (which, prior to the establishment of a practical orthography, was spelt Gunwinggu). Other Bininj Kunwok dialects include Gundjeihmi, Kuninjku, Kune, Kundedjnjenghmi and Mayali.

[4] See Garde 1996 for a comparative survey that presents evidence I am unable to provide here.

[5] In a study of code-switching amongst a Gurindji-, Wanyjirra- and Kriol-speaking community in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory, McConvell (1988, 110–111) discusses code-switching in a conversation that takes place during the butchering of a beast on a cattle station and subsequent distribution of meat. Two men in the conversation are related to each other as classificatory mother-in-law's brother (WMB) and sister's son-in-law (ZDH) and, although this is not a recognised joking relationship category for this particular group (it can be in most Arnhem Land language groups), the sister's son-in-law commences joking with his mother-in-law's brother, possibly as a means of creating a fictive MB-ZS joking relationship in which a 'nephew can make strong demands on his maternal uncle (McConvell 1988, 121).

This manipulation of principles relating to joking relationships was presumably undertaken in order to secure better access to the resource in question, that is, the meat being butchered.

[6] An unpublished study is the 1967 Masters thesis on Wik Mungkan joking by Mary Jackes, the major hypothesis of which is the rather unsurprising observation that joking 'occurs regularly between people who are members of identifiable categories' (Jackes 1967, 274). Further, Jackes (1967, 244) concludes that 'there is simply not enough evidence to give full support to conclusions on Wik Mungkan joking'. A recent and very welcome contribution is Sommer's (2006) work in southern Cape York. Other brief references to the language of joking relationship interaction include terms such as 'conventionalised' or 'formalised joking' (Malcolm 1982, 59), 'light-hearted swearing' (McConvell 1982, 98) and 'a kind of obscene verbal joking' (Haviland 1979, 212). Tonkinson (1991, 62) describes joking relationships as involving 'rowdy exchanges of sexually explicit epithets and mock abuse, with much body contact, which amuse onlookers at least as much as the joking pair'.

[7] Finding an acceptable label for this group is fraught with difficulty. The term, 'potential affine', is wanting in the sense that in those parts of Arnhem Land where I have undertaken fieldwork, joking relationships with 'potential affines' can mark the renunciation of potentiality. The nature of the affinal relationship can be evaluated in light of the reality of whom a person has actually married. A person may no longer be a 'potential affine', merely because the person s/he could have married has married someone else. Childhood 'promised marriage' arrangements also create expectations (realised or not) about who will or will not become an actual affine. It is also possible that a 'potential affine' who was not expected to become an 'actual affine' can move unexpectedly from the former category to the latter. In such cases, any joking relationship, if present, would cease (as documented by both Hiatt 1965, 61 and McConvell 1982, 97–98). Generalisations always have exceptions, and kinship systems are, of course, frequently manipulated for a variety of personal, economic and political reasons (some of which run contrary to the wishes of the betrothed).

[8] The abbreviations used in the interlinear morpheme glosses in text examples (3) and (4) are: 2a/1a 'second person augmented (plural) subject acting on a first person plural object', IRR 'irrealis', 1a 'first person plural subject, 1 'first person subject', 2 'second person subject', NP 'non-past tense form of the verb'. In order to provide a note of clarification, the numbers refer to grammatical person (first person, second person *etc.*) and the slash represents the combined grammatical encoding of a subject acting on an object in the prefix on the verb *(e.g.*, *kandi-won* 'you [plural] give us' whereby the prefix *kandi-* means '*you plural* as subject acting on *us* as object'). The term 'irrealis' refers to a form of grammatical mood representing a range of 'reduced realities', for example, something that did not happen, might happen or should happen, but also, as in this particular example, it encodes the expression of a wish as opposed to a demand.

[9] The renunciation of potential affinity is not irrevocable. In the case that those previously in a joking relationship become actual affines, the joking will cease. This has been reported for other Arnhem Land groups (see Hiatt 1965, 61) and also by McConvell (1982, 97–98) for the Gurindji. This reverse evidence is what one would expect if, indeed, joking relationships do mark the absence of actual affinity.

[10] A distinction needs to be made between the swearing used in joking relationships and the swearing of anger and intentional insult. This distinction has been discussed by Langton (1983), who notes that serious swearing in Aboriginal societies plays an important role in the processing of disputes. The swearing of joking relationships is unrelated to this function and, paradoxically, has more to do with the creation and maintenance of amity.

[11] This at least is the ideal but, of course, as Hiatt notes, marriages can occur between members of joking patrilineages and, in these cases, according to Hiatt (1965, 61), joking between the man and the relatives of his wife's mother (WMF and WMB) ceases although other members of the two groups continue the joking with each other.

[12] The following information on Dalabon joking relationships was collected from brief field work in 1996 at Bulman, Wimol and Momob outstation.

[13] I use the affinal definition, WMB, here, as *djaburlh* can also be defined in a variety of other consanguineal terms, for example, MMBS, FZDS, MMF.

[14] Joking relationship interjections such as *balmarded* pragmatically index social relationships. A person overhearing his or her sibling or MB/ZC subjected to a joking taunt must reply with the interjection, *balmarded,* meaning 'excuse me for being in earshot; that's my kin X you are taunting'. Another interjection, *kurdih*, indexes the following kin: M, MBC, FZC, MF, FM, a man's MMBS ('WMB'), WB.

[15] In Kriol (also spoken by the speaker in this example), the word, 'friend', can also mean '[brother]-in-law', which is further evidence of the role of unrealised affinity in joking relationships.

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