

Joking Relationships in Burkina Faso: A Strategy for Peace Building in Traditional Burkinabè Communities¹

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Joking relationship, also called joking kinship, is a social practice in West Africa that allows two individuals from the same ethnic group or two distinct ethnic groups to badmouth each other or exchange insults, mockery, and any sort of criticism as a means of promoting fraternity, social harmony and reinforcing peace in society. Although this practice is often perceived as strange by people outside Burkinabè communities, it is reported to be one of the most important strategies for building and maintaining peace and social harmony in the traditional West African society.

In this paper, I intend to explore its history and effects in the present-day Burkinabè communities. Due to the recent outbreak of inter-community conflicts in Burkina Faso, it is important to examine this social practice which had been a catalyst for peace and social harmony. It is also important to see how this practice can help the country maintain peace and social harmony. To do so, I will try to answer the following questions:

- (1) What is the origin of joking relationships?
- (2) What kind of jokes or things do members of joking relationships perform?
- (3) What is the purpose of this social practice and when and where is it forbidden?
- (4). What is the impact of modernism on this social practice?

Previous Studies

There have been many studies on joking relationships in sociology and cultural studies (Diallo, 2006; Davidheiser, 2006; Jones, 2007; Lamle, 2019; Parkin, 1993; Smith, 2004; Sogoba, 2018; Vienne, 2018). One thing all these studies agree on is that it is a social practice existing in West Africa, though its origin remains unclear. According to studies such as (Canut & Smith, 2006, Jones, 2007; Lamle, 2019; Sogoba, 2018), joking relationships might have been initiated by Sundiata Keita, the emperor of the Manding Empire. This assumption seems true when we look at article

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7 and 43 of the Charter of *Kurukan Fuga*, the constitution of the Manding Empire that was established in the 13th century.

Article 7: It has been established among the Mandenkas, the Sanankunya (joking relationship) and the Tanamanyöya (blood pact). Consequently, any contention that occurs among these groups should not degenerate the respect for one another being the rule. Between brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, grandparents, and grandchildren, tolerance and rag should be the principle.

Article 43: Balla Fassèkè Kouyaté is nominated big chief of ceremonies and main mediator in Mande. He is allowed to joke with all groups, in priority with the royal family.

(Cf. Niang, 2006, pp. 75-77)

These two articles of the Charter of *Kurukan Fugan*, one of the oldest constitutions in West Africa, clearly indicate that joking relationships had been formally established between certain people of the Mali Empire during the height of the Mali civilization. However, the reasons for inserting such a relationship are not known. According to Jones (2007) and Smith (2004), this relationship might have been linked to a past incident of shedding blood. That is, an incident might have triggered a conflict that led to blood-shedding, which forced the leaders of the communities to sign such a pact that prevails joking among the people living in the communities as well as outside the communities and bans any conflict among those people. Accordingly, this social practice seems to have been initiated in order to prevent any hostility in the traditional West African society.

However, Parkin (1993) mentions that there is a degree of hostility involved in this social practice and that breaking the limits may lead to serious fights or emotional offenses. Besides, Parkin states that it only takes place between individuals of the same sex and cannot cross the sex line. This implies that a joking relationship was not permitted between a man and a woman in the West African communities. On the other hand, Smith (2004) and Sogoba (2018) mention that marriage between members of joking relationships is prohibited. These two assumptions seem a bit confusing. If a joking relationship was not permitted between a man and a woman, how can marriage between two individuals be banned because of it? Or does it mean that there were no marital ties between two ethnic groups bound by this social pact? To the best of my knowledge, marriage between two individuals of the same sex did not seem to exist in traditional West African society. Then, the fact that marriage was prohibited between individuals who were bound by a joking relationship suggests that this relationship could take place between a man and a woman as well. Accordingly, the claim that marital ties were prohibited because of joking relationships needs to be thoroughly investigated.

What kind of jokes are authorized in the communities?

As far as the forms of jokes are concerned, many authors argue that they could be verbal or physical. Verbal jokes consist in insulting, criticizing, mocking, and/or bantering one's joking kinsperson. As for the physical jokes, it may involve pushing, tripping, or pretending to hit the other party (Canut & Smith, 2006; Parkin, 1993; Smith, 2004; Sogoba, 2018; Vienne, 2018; among others). Although Parkin (1993) claims that there are limits in joking relationships, many authors mention that there is no limit on the time and place of such practice (Canut & Smith, 2018; Sogoba, 2018; Vienne, 2018). People who are bound by the pact of joking kinship can exchange insults, mocking, criticism, or bantering at any time or place (festivals, funerals, at work, at home, *etc*). According to Sogoba (2018), though there is no limit on the time and place as well as the forms of jokes, there are some boundaries that need to be respected. For example, it is unacceptable to drag someone's mother into it or start an actual fight. In case these boundaries are trespassed, the trespasser must ask for forgiveness by presenting a kola nut² to the other party (this varies from one ethnic group to another).

One question that should be raised here is whether this custom of teasing or bantering to laugh still exists in contemporary West African society, a society in which inter-community conflicts, terrorism attacks, and inter-religious clashes have been increasing. This contribution aims at investigating how this social practice used to be performed in Burkina Faso, one of the West African countries with recurring terrorist attacks and inter-ethnic/inter-religious clashes, and whether it still exists today.

The Method of the Investigation

This paper is based on an investigation that was carried out by the *Center for Cultures and Languages la Diversité*, a group created by young Burkinabè to document all the social practices that are about to disappear in Burkina Faso. The method of the investigation consists in interviewing elderly people in rural areas of Burkina Faso.³ A total number of 15 people were interviewed for this study. The rural areas of the country were selected because most of the guardians of the Burkinabè traditions and cultures live there. In the interview, the task of the elderly people consisted in answering some questions about the traditions and customs of the country including joking relationships as shown in (5a-b) (see also the appendix below for more examples of the questions used in the interview).

(5) a. Quelle est l'origine de la parenté à plaisanterie ?

² Kola nut is a seed of a plant, called cola or Kola tree, that is found in the tropical forests of Africa and can be eaten.

³ The interview was carried out with two ethnic groups (Mossi and Dagara). Due to a limited financial resource, we could not reach all the ethnic groups in the country.

- 'What is the origin of joking kinships?'
- b. Où et quand est-ce que cette plaisanterie n'est pas autorisée ?
'Where and when is this joking relationship allowed?'

The interview was recorded and transcribed by native speakers of the language the elderly people used. Note that before starting the recording of the interview, the interviewers asked for the elders' consent to use the recording and the photographs taken there for research papers and presentations. No personal information was taken from the interviewees.

Results and Discussions

The results suggest that the origin of joking relationships is unknown to the elderly people in Burkina Faso. Indeed, to question 1, the elders answered as below:

Q1: What is the origin of the joking relationship?

A1: "It is what our ancestors were doing."

A2: " I don't know but my grandparents were doing it."

A3: "It does not have a beginning and should not have an end."

There was no answer indicating some origin of this relationship. This indicates that the origin of this social practice is difficult to trace back. As one elderly person mentioned, "claiming that joking relationships have an origin would be to tell lies". This finding is congruent with the previous studies that claim that the origin of this social practice is not well known.

Concerning the forms of jokes people performed in Burkina Faso, the elderly people claim that the most frequently used are mocking each other, insulting each other, pretending to hit each other to make people laugh, and/or flattering the other party. For example, a Dagara who meets a Gbin for the first time will have insulted him or her without even knowing his or her social status, provided that the ethnicity of that person is known. Note that Dagara and Gbin are two ethnic groups in Burkina Faso that are linked by this social practice. Likewise, a Mossi will have told a Samo that the Samo is a peanut consumer or his/her slave and should have been in a peanut field instead of mingling with other people. The Mossis and Samos, two ethnic groups, are also bound by joking relationships. According to the elderly people who were interviewed, these insults and mockery will not have any negative consequences because any fight between two individuals or two communities who are related by this social pact is prohibited. In fact, the purpose of these jokes (insults and mockery) is to create and maintain social harmony and peace, to promote fraternity through laughter.

The elderly people further stated that one can imitate the actions including the way of speaking of his or her joking kinsperson in that joking kinsperson's funeral ceremony. Indeed, the scene of imitating a deceased person is also another form of jokes performed in the community. In addition, one can sequester the corpse of one's joking kinsperson and ask for a ransom from that deceased person's family. The price requested is subject to negotiation. For the elderly people, it is usual to see many scenes of theatre during the burial ceremony of elderly people in West Africa. Note that it is forbidden to perform these jokes in the funeral ceremony of a young person. One thing to note is that imitating one's joking kinsperson in his or her funeral ceremony or seizing the dead body of this joking kinsperson for ransom or simply to entertain people is said to be a way of appeasing the soul of that kinsperson. Joking kinspeople are in fact considered as the intermediate (i.e. a kind of lawyer) between the other party and their ancestors or gods. Consider the following illustration:



Suppose that A and B are bound by joking relationships. A can insult, mock, and even banter B whenever and wherever they meet. B will also do the same. At the same time, A and B act as each other's lawyer before each other's ancestors or gods. That is, B acts as A's lawyer before A's ancestors or gods and A also acts as B's lawyer before B's ancestors or gods. Then, in case A runs into trouble with his family, clan, ancestors, or gods, the only person who is apt to intervene and solve the problem is B, his joking kinsman. Therefore, it is forbidden to harm one's joking kinsperson as that person is one's defender before gods. Following this, an elderly person mentioned in the interview that "harming a joking kinsperson is an unforgivable sin toward their ancestors". I assume that this statement contradicts Parkin's assumption that joking relationships involve hostility and can lead to serious fights.

Although previous studies claim that marriage is forbidden between two individuals who are tied by this relationship, elderly people in Burkina Faso rejected such a claim and argue that marriage is even encouraged between two joking kinspeople.

As for the last question (i.e. whether there is an impact of modernism on this social practice), the answers seem opaque. Since Burkina Faso has experienced colonization, one could think that such an experience might have negatively affected the traditions of the country. However, many elderly people claim that there has been

no impact of colonization on joking relationships. At the same time, they mentioned that this social practice is about to disappear because of the ignorance of today's youth *vis-à-vis* the traditions and the abandonment of all the traditional practices in present-day Burkina Faso.

If colonization does not have any negative influence on the traditional practices of the country, what causes the abandonment of those traditional practices?

I suspect two factors that cause the abandonment of the traditional practices of Burkina Faso. First, the Islamization and the Christianization of Burkinabè have greatly contributed to the disappearance of the country's traditional practices. As noted in Hien (2020), around 60% of the population in Burkina Faso are Muslims and 23% are Christians, according to a general census conducted by the government of Burkina Faso in 2006.⁴ According to Islamic beliefs, traditional Burkinabè cultural practices that are different from the practices prescribed by the Qoran should be abandoned if one wants to go to heaven. Likewise, Christianity considers Burkinabè cultures, especially Burkinabè religions to be an abomination. Then, Burkinabè must take an oath to deny those cultures and customs if they join Christianity. One example is that before getting baptized, a period of the confirmation of their faith, names originating from native African languages must be abandoned. Thus, being a Muslim or a Christian in Burkina Faso is conditioned by, on one hand, the abandonment of any African tradition and customs including names that originate from African languages. On the other hand, new Muslims or Christians must defend Arabic and the European languages and cultures.

The second factor that is responsible for the abandonment of the Burkinabè cultural practices by young Burkinabè is the education system of the country. Although European languages, cultures, and history are taught in school in Burkina Faso, Burkinabè languages, cultures, and history are not. Indeed, as mentioned in Hien (2020), it is not surprising to see “Franco-Arabic” schools in Burkina Faso, where Arabic and Arabic cultures and French are taught in tandem. But there is no such a school as “a Franco-African school” where African languages and cultures can be learned properly. Although public universities in the country have departments devoted to the study of foreign languages and cultures, there is no such department devoted to Burkinabè languages and cultures. In early 2020, a new department called the Department of Arabophone Studies and Oriental Languages has also been established in the University Joseph-Ki Zerbo to teach Arabic and Mandarin Chinese to Burkinabè. On the other hand, there is still no desire from the local authorities to establish a department of Burkinabè studies where the cultures, traditions, and history of the country can be learned properly. Following this, one can assume that the school system in Burkina Faso is established to deprive Burkinabè of knowledge of their own cultures and history including Burkinabè languages. A fact that clearly indicate that the school system of Burkina Faso is established to prevent Burkinabè from learning

⁴ *Comité National du Recensement*, July 2008.

about themselves is "the story of the monkey skull necklace". Indeed, twenty-five years ago, Burkinabè students would wear a monkey skull like a necklace for 24 hours whenever they used their mother-tongue at school. A student wearing a monkey skull necklace would be referred to as a fool by all his or her schoolmates and teachers. Their schoolmates would laugh at them if you were found with that monkey skull. Students would also be flogged for not using French at school or for not being able to understand information in French. I assume that these punishments were/are just to prevent students from showing interest in their respective mother-tongue and culture. Today, though around 70 languages are spoken in the country, French is the unique language of education.

However, as Awoniyi (1982, p.15) pointed out: "African languages are the purest manifestation of African cultures (...). One of the best ways to understand African cultures is to study those languages". According to Awoniyi (1982), children were taught African cultures and traditions from an early age in life through their native languages. The teaching of African cultures and traditions fostered social harmony and collaboration in traditional African society. Since colonization by Europeans, African cultures and traditions are no longer taught because they are thought to be vulgar as compared to the European and Asian cultures. This is responsible for the fact that young Burkinabè no longer have any knowledge of their own cultural practices. Accordingly, one can assume that colonization does have a negative influence on the cultures and traditions of Burkina Faso.

Conclusion

The present paper investigates a social practice in West Africa that used to be employed in peacebuilding and the promotion of social harmony. This social practice, known as "joking relationships" or "joking kinship", allows two individuals, two clans, or two ethnic groups to tease each other, exchange insults and accusations, banter with each other in a fun way in order to promote brotherhood, strengthen social harmony, and consolidate peace in society. According to some elderly people of Burkina Faso, this social practice can also be manifested through jokes such as seizing the corpse of one's joking kinsperson. The insults and mockery proliferated under joking relationships are said to have no negative consequences as an actual fight between two individuals or two communities with such a pact is formally prohibited. Most of the findings of this contribution are congruent with the previous studies on joking relationships in West Africa. However, the claim that a marital tie is forbidden between two individuals who are bound by joking relationships is not shared by the elders of Burkina Faso.

Although this social practice was used to consolidate peace and social harmony in traditional Burkinabè society, it was not taught in schools until now in Burkina Faso. Today, it is not known by a vast majority of young Burkinabè. Regarding its

importance, one can assume that it could help reduce the inter-ethnic conflicts and terrorist attacks throughout Burkina Faso if it was introduced in the educational system of the country. Teaching this social practice to all the young Burkinabè could strengthen the national unity of the country since it could instill in them the notion of solidarity, mutual appreciation and respect as well as the spirit of being one people.

The limitations of this study:

This study focuses only on joking relationships in the Dagara and Mossi communities, two ethnic groups out of around 70 in Burkina Faso. The results would be more significant if the elderly people were interviewed in many ethnic groups (at least 35 ethnic groups). Then, a more comprehensive investigation must be conducted in the future by considering many ethnic groups.

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Appendix: Questionnaire sur la parenté à plaisanterie chez les Dagara

Q1 : Quelle est l'origine de la parenté à plaisanterie ?

(D'où provient cette parenté à plaisanterie ?)

Q2 : Quel est le but de la parenté à plaisanterie ?

(Pourquoi les Dagara plaisantent avec les autres Dagara, ou les autres ethnies par exemple ?)

Q3 : Qui sont les parents à plaisanterie des Dagara ?

Q4 : Est-ce qu'il existait ce lien de plaisanterie à l'intérieur de l'ethnie Dagara ?

Si oui, qui sont ces acteurs ?

Q5 : Quelles sont les formes de plaisanteries chez les Dagara ?

Q6 : Est-ce que les parents à plaisanterie peuvent se bagarrer, se faire du mal, ou se tuer ?

Est-ce que vous connaissez des parents à plaisanterie qui se sont tués dans le passé ?

Q7 : Quel est le rôle des parents à plaisanterie dans les cérémonies Dagara (funérailles, rituelles, festives) ?

Q8 : Est-ce qu'on peut s'énervier et agresser réellement un parent à plaisanterie si celui nous insulte et ça nous choque ?

Q9 : Où et quand est-ce que cette plaisanterie n'est pas autorisée ?

Q10 : Est-ce que des parents à plaisanterie peuvent se marier ?

Q11 : Selon vous, est-ce que cette relation à plaisanterie a changé maintenant ?

Si oui, qu'est ce qui a changé ?

Q12 : Quel est l'impact du français ou de la colonisation sur la parenté à plaisanterie ?

Q13 : Est-ce que la parenté à plaisanterie joue un rôle dans la résolution des conflits ou dans le maintien de la paix ? Comment?