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**“But look at the world.” Culture and humour: canon or apocrypha?**

*“A traveler, arriving in a Galician town, orders a pair of trousers from a Jewish tailor. Three months later he leaves, without the trousers. After seven years he happens to pass through the same place again and, lo and behold, the tailor comes to deliver the trousers. ”Well”, the traveler exclaims astounded God created the world in seven days-but you took seven years for a pair of trousers!” ”True”, the Jew agrees, quite unimpressed, ”but look at the world – and look at the trousers.” (Cohen 1987:3)*

How should this joke be interpreted?

“Wry”, “doubtful”, “blasphemous”? Does such a story temporarily allow the teller of the joke and his listeners to turn against and ridicule traditional values and norms which it twists around? (i.e. Freud 1982: 127-130) Or, is it the experience of the joke, and the free communication with the most important and “most sacred” components of their culture? (Cohen 1987: 1-16)

How does humour fit into the set of concepts and practices of a culture?

What is its relation to the “cultural-traditional canon” of communal values and norms? Do those who laugh at it, and those who find it inappropriate, or reprehensible, consider humour as some kind of “cultural apocrypha” norm and event? When, with whom, how, and why may we joke around? The following examples may provide a glimpse into the cultural meanings connected to these questions.

**1. Humour as apocrypha? Examples from the Japanese culture**

Judit Hidasi, in her study of *Why the Japanese don't laugh at our jokes?*, tells a story that she has heard in one of professor Inoue Fumio lectures (Hidasi 2008:56). According to the story, a Japanese linguist known for his excellent lectures had gone to Kagoshima prefecture to give a presentation. He intertwined his lectures with several jokes. His audience remained somber, never laughed at any of it, but instead only sat quietly staring straight ahead. The disappointed lecturer learned only later that the organizer warned the audience beforehand not to laugh during the lecture of this famous professor from Tokyo.

According to Hidasi, laughing, kidding around, and telling jokes are not part of the everyday communication in Japan. A joke is considered an “apocryphal” narration, and laughing is an “apocryphal” act. As such, joking disregards social norms. Uproarious laughter, for example, was

traditionally considered by the elite as “vulgar” behavior of the “lower classes”, the antithesis to the “ideal of self-control”.

“Spontaneous” laughter, even in contemporary Japanese social communication, is considered reprehensible behavior. It may show lack of self-control, and communicate disrespect. Tooth exposure is considered unaesthetic, “disgusting and rude”, and such, a vulgar behavior. This belief originated in the Middle Ages, when the sight of neglected teeth was regarded as a lack of “refinement”. Inseparable from all of the above are the rigid rules of interaction among Japanese. Married couples, relatives, friends, officials and subordinates, teachers and students must communicate with different expressions and gestures.

Recognition of this fact makes it understandable how the spontaneous reaction to a joke, or jest transgresses the framework of Japanese socio-cultural norms. It makes the accepted and defined boundaries between man-and-man, ideal social self-image and “spontaneous” attributes of personality “unmanageable” and “uncomfortable”.

From this perspective, jokes are regarded as “apocrypha” text, and the laughter they induce an “apocrypha” behavior.

However, as Judit Hidasi points out, Japanese humour is present in many forms and genres in their culture. Plays on words, and staged gags are alive and well in contemporary Japan. The basis of verbal humour is a spoof on human weaknesses. An example is the story of the tremulous samurai who, in the middle of the night, when he is scared to venture out to the outhouse, orders his wife to accompany him with a burning candle. When he reaches the outhouse, he asks his wife whether she is afraid. The wife, standing outside, assures her husband that she is not afraid. The samurai then proudly acknowledges that she is the ‘true’ wife of a samurai.

More typical of the humour genres mentioned by Hidasi is visual humour. An excellent example is the colour woodcut print, *Lovebirds*, created by Utamaro in 1788. The artist depicts lovers, their bodies curled around each other. The couple is tied in a loving kiss. Their heat of passion is indicated by their untouched meal and sake. Words on the fan held by the man puts the eroticism of the picture in a different context. The poem on the fan is as follows: “*Its beaks is stuck tightly in the oyster’s shell, the snipe cannot fly away into the autumn starlight.*” The versified humour pokes fun at the weakened man’s desire and futile efforts of getting free, made ever so difficult by the passion of the woman who is holding him tightly. (Sato Tomoko 2008: 62-67).

According to the stories told, Japanese humour makes fun of virtues that don’t fit their cultural ethos. The butt of these jokes are individuals and faults of personality which do not comply with the accepted and honored social norms , such as “bravery”, “resoluteness”, “directness”. In this way, the humour fulfils the role of “cultural canon”. Social virtues are emphasized when the consumers of humorous stories, jokes, and pictures laugh about the contrasting traits. At the same

time, if humour is not derived from a supportive source and context of the ethos, laughter may be an “apocryphal” act, for it violates the ethos by its “spontaneity”.

Humour and laughter, depending on the context, may be the expression of two opposite meanings in the Japanese culture.

## **2. Humour as canon? Examples from Africa and England**

A study, conducted by the well-known social-anthropologist, Radcliffe-Brown, documented in his book titled *On Joking Relationships*, through examples from African tribal culture introduces how humour may strengthen the “cultural canon” of rules of social interactions and connections in certain instances. (Radcliffe-Brown 2004: 85-106)

According to the anthropologist, joking within kinship groups follows and shapes the interactions, including belonging and separations, within the socio-propinquity. An example, manifested by this kind of jocularity, is the grandson who pretends desire to marry the wife of his grandfather, or acts like he already has her as his wife. Conversely, the grandfather jokingly takes ownership of the wife of his grandson. Humour in this situation is based on the generation gap, and the different social status between the grandson and his grandfather.

Similar examples, such as the joking relationship between nephew and his maternal uncle, come from other tribal cultures, where the lineage is traced along the paternal branch. In these cases the nephew may exhibit disrespectful behavior toward his uncle, and in some instances he may even take some of his possessions. Joking with the maternal uncle may at times be combined with irreverence. This kind of kidding around deepens the differences of socio-propinquity relations for those who take part in situational humour, and lessens the possible tensions which develop due to rules of social separation. Jokes of the nephew with his maternal uncle allows him to experience human relationship in a less restricted, deeper, and “more human” level. Must note, the way the nephew jokes with his maternal uncle, is not allowed with the brothers of his father. Also, that I turn, the nephew later will have to endure the rude jokes of his sisters’ sons.

Belonging to the paternal clan (including both its living and deceased members) is no “joking matter”. The son is tied by strict regulations and societal norms to the paternal branch of the family, which entails all sorts of obligations and responsibilities. Experiencing and expressing emotions, including the liberating feelings of humour, is only possible between relatives on the maternal side, or between those who are not considered rivals, members of different generations, grandparents and grandchildren.

Based on these examples we find that, depending on the cultural context, humour may be integral component of the “social canon”.

Anthropologist Kate Fox, in the chapter on humour in *Watching the English*, a socio-cultural work on English behavior, introduces English humour as the “comical” manifestation of “Englishness” (Fox 2008: 61-73).

The title of the chapter (*Humour Rules*) highlights the author’s interpretation, since “humour rules” may mean the rules (as principles or regulations) of humour, as well as the verb ‘to rule’, or ‘humour that governs, navigates, or guides”. Kate Fox, based upon her research findings, ascertains that the latter definition is more prominent. She believes that English humour, extends into all areas of life, and dominates the English social communication. Even if in a subtle way, humour in English conversations is omnipresent. Irony, joking, kidding, mocking, and self-mocking, intertwine the everyday interactions of English culture.

Part of their humour is the “rule of frivolity”: the ironic taunting of those who “take themselves too seriously”, mocking “overstated patriotism”, or “exuberant cheerfulness”. Irony is one of the most important elements of the English conversation. The English, writes Fox, do not joke around all the time; however, they are always ready to crack a joke, primarily by using irony. Accordingly, when someone asks someone else a simple question, such as “How are the children?”, the one who posed the question is prepared to receive such an answer as “They are magnificent, helpful, orderly, diligent!”, and then to give a knowingly sympathetic answer like “Are you having an awful day, dear?”

In English culture, the participants in social interactions are motivated to use humour in all elements of communication; therefore, if they became the receiver of the joke, they understand it perfectly. The humour, in this case, not only fits into the ‘canon’ of social practice of English culture, but becomes the symbol and marking of identity of “Englishness”. The true English is the one who “understands” the humour, is ready to take part in it, and participates in this activity accordingly.

Fox illustrates this with a comic episode that once took place between an English-lover Italian and the father of the anthropologist. Italian friends of her father simply could not get used to the ironic-humorous understatements of the English. They asked Kate Fox’s father to help them understand it. In connection, one of the Italian friends began to tell a story of the unpleasantness of a local restaurant where the food was inedible, the place was filthy, the service was terrible... to which Kate Fox’s father responded:

“Then, if I understand it correctly, you would not recommend this place to anyone, would you?”

Hearing this, the Italian friend lost his cool:

“Well, that’s it! This is what I’m talking about! How do you know when to respond like that?”, he asked. The father replied apologetically: “I cannot explain. We only do it. It comes naturally.”

The types of English humour, concerning being humorous as a permanent “ready to use” form of communication, a “tool”, is part of the English cultural practice and social ‘canon’. This is why it often creates problems when, writes Kate Fox, the knowledge and understanding of the above is thought by the English to be self-evident even for those who are part of other cultures and are not familiar with the “rules” of the English humour, or the system of its “rule”.

### **3. Canon or apocrypha? Example of “sick humour” from America**

Alan Dundes, in his book, titled *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humour Cycles and Stereotypes* writes about the “dead baby joke cycle” phenomenon. (Dundes 1987, also explanatory remarks by Oring 2008). Typical example of these kind of jokes as follows:

What is small and red that sits in a corner?

A baby with a razorblade.

This and other similar jokes, according to the author, express loathing and anger felt toward babies. Those feelings are considered “apocryphal” in the American ethos, and go against the accepted cultural norms and decency. How could it be then that these jokes had wide range of popularity from the 1960s to the 1980s in the United States?

Alan Dundes’ theory of catharsis is based on Freud’s observations, according to which, through jokes, people can express their suppressed sexual or aggressive desires, and can also liberate themselves from the burden of worries and anxiety. Telling jokes about dead babies dehumanizes those babies. Dundes points out that in American social communication, the worry, anxiety, guilt and feeling of complicity attached to the recently legalized contraception and abortion brought into existence and kept them alive during that period of time.

Dundes applied this theory in his analysis of jokes about Auschwitz. According to his findings, from the perspective of social ethos, humour based on jokes considered ‘taboo-wrecking’, “vicious”, or “sick” may be part of the “cultural canon”, since they satisfy such psychological needs of the individual and collective members of the society and community as easing and releasing of anxiety, suppression, pain and trauma.

### **4. Canon and apocrypha? Example of Jewish humour**

As the last example, let us return to the joke about the tailored suit and the imperfect world mentioned in the introduction. The question arises: is not such a joke, which allows the “total” criticism of the work of the Eternal One, a manifestation of disrespect toward God, and as such, a “blasphemy”? To formulate a possible explanation, let us examine a few examples of the “canon” of Jewish ritual life and its experience.

The meaning and main point of ritual life in Judaism is adequacy, derived from the Biblical tradition of the Jews. It is the task and responsibility assigned by God to His chosen people, to abide by the day-to-day conduct according to the collection of laws defined in Halakha. In everyday cultural practices, separation of territory into sacred and non-sacred is wrought out to the finest details. (In a like manner the Eternal One differentiated between His people and the others.) The Halakha system defines the order of rituals, such as the proper way of tying shoelaces in the morning, how many steps may be taken without head cover, when married couples may sleep together, how to separate meals containing milk or meat products which is further separated to edible or inedible, and differentiation between the holiday and the weekday. All aspects of Jewish religious practices deepen the dichotomy that separates the sacred from the profane for members of the community.

Communal projection of this is the separation of the chosen ones from the rest. Being chosen, however, does not mean superiority or any such elitist haughtiness. The essence of meaning of being chosen is a mission, or an obligation, which requires the Jews to keep the commandments given by the Eternal One collected in the Torah (the “Teaching”, or “Instruction”, in the five books of Moses), and through it represent and promulgate the Truth of the One Single Creator god. Responsibility of the others is, to observe the example set by the Jews, accept the existence of God, and keep the seven binding laws given to Noah by God after the Flood. The rabbinic explanation deduces from relevant parts of the Book of Creation (1Moses 9, 4-7) the seven fundamental laws to be adhered to by all humanity: the requirement of maintaining courts to provide legal resources, prohibition of blasphemy, idolatry, sexual immorality, murder, theft, and eating flesh taken from an animal while it is still alive. (Hertz 1984 I: 80-81; Unterman 1999: 175-176)

Insofar as gentiles accept the existence of God and adhere to these fundamental commands, they are granted eternal life same as the Jews. In the mean time, to fulfill their mission, the Jews must adhere to six-hundred-thirteen commandments, not to mention additional rabbinic instructions which are like “fences” surrounding those commandments. To remain devoted is necessary in order to ensure the integrity of norms described in the Torah.

As we can see, the “stake of sacredness” in the culture of Judaism is not self-serving. The reason why the individual has to live by the sacred orders is so that his community may live up to the will of God and serve the good of all humanity. This is why every little detail is so important; tying the shoelaces in the right order, using separate refrigerators to store food that contains milk or meat products, or the timing to light the candle on Sabbath. All these details determine the fate of the world. The “stake of sacredness”, the attainment of sacred aim cannot be reached without the separation of sacred and profane. Practice of separation on social level maintains the sacred-ethnic community of Jews.

Opposite to this pattern is the everyday reality, which determines the “quality” of the world. The “world”, and life within it, is imperfect not because of any acts of God. Based on my research, conducted in the synagogue on Bethlen Square in Budapest, I believe the aim of the jokes in all cases is man and his imperfections. (Papp 2009,2010,2012) An interesting illustration of this topic is an imaginary event that they shared with me as a “joke”.

*“The Eternal One in those times offered the Torah to others, who immediately rejected it: The Edomites did not like the commandment ‘Do not kill!’, the descendants of Ishmael the ‘Do not steal!’, and so on. Finally the Jews asked:*

*How much does one commandment cost?*

*It is free – said the Lord.*

*Then we take ten!”*

Humour and self-irony, easing and relaxing the patterns of Torah and the “permanent” anthropological reality, are the defining motif of the traditional Jewish folklore. Let us take an example from the treasure of traditional anecdotes of the Hungarian Jewish community.

*“Why had they persuaded the Jews to take a loan for the exodus from Egypt? – poses the rhetoric question [Rebbe Moshe of Lelov].*

*The answer is simple. If they owe that much, then they most likely won’t feel like returning to Egypt.”*

*“A follower of Jewish faith from the countryside moved to town and bragged of the devotion of the congregation he came from:*

*Folks in our congregation at Yom Kippur, to torment themselves, put kernels of corn into their slippers and stand on those while they pray all day long.*

*That’s nothing! – retorted Rebbe Kive, leader of the local congregation. Here, folks in our synagogue, stand on pins and needles even on a regular Saturday.”*

Self-ironic humour is inseparable even from the centuries old Eastern-European Jewish folklore. (For examples see Kraus 1995:120, Don-Raj 1997:106, also Benedek 1990:70; Wiesel 2007: 297-298; Zborowski-Herzog 1962: 409-430.) In this communication it is constituted by the meeting of sacred patterns and those who try to live up to them. This is deeply experienced by the members of the community at the time of Teshuvah, (repentance) which, according to the ecclesiastic calendar, begins with the month of Elul and ends at Yom Kippur. At that time people, feeling sincere remorse, can seek forgiveness for the wrongs they have committed:

“Our traditional customs are traced to the institutions of our religion and practices as far back as to ancient times. It also traced the origin of the forty day period that begins with the first day of Elul and culminates at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, back to heroic times. It was on the first day of Elul when Moses received the merciful message of God: go up to Mount Sinai to receive once again the two tablets made of stone, to replace the ones broken earlier because of the ‘sin of the golden calf’. For forty days the children of Israel were in self-torment, waiting the return of their leader: Will God forgive them? They spent the fortieth day, tenth day of Tishrei, in particularly deep penitence, fasting while practicing abstinence. On the evening of that day Moses returned with the tablets of Ten Commandments: God had forgiven His people. From that day on, so the legend says, from year to year on that day, God with His special loving forgiveness turns to His fallible children hopeful of rectification.” (Hahn 1995: 42-43.)

The ritual tradition therefore, carries the sources of psychological tension. It is not by chance that in the month of Elul I was able to collect more jokes in the Bethlen Square Synagogue in Budapest related to the theme of Jewish conscience and religious value system. During that month, the week before Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), when prayers at dawn pointedly call for repentance, they told me two jokes (during the prayer) with this comment – *“I just remembered, it is the time of Selichot (time of early morning prayers of repentance)”*:

*“Uncle Cohn is standing in front of the butcher shop. He is looking at the different sausages when thunder and lightning starts. He looks up and says: But Lord, I’m only looking!”*

*“At Yom Kippur Cohn is late from church. He quickly runs up to the rabbi and says: Imagine! The Ford stocks are up 52 percent!”*

*Listen Cohn, says the rabbi, do you realize, you made three mistakes at once? First: you were late from church. Second: at Yom Kippur you were not supposed to mind such a mediocre matter. Third: Ford stocks are already up 55 percent.”*

On the following days I got to learn more of the Uncle Cohn jokes:

*“Uncle Cohn steps into the butcher shop and says: I want a fish! – and points at the ham. But this is ham! – says the butcher. So, have I asked the name of that fish?”*

*“Cohn goes to the synagogue at Yom Kippur. He finds the shammes (church attendant and caretaker) at the door, who asks for the church ticket. Cohn thinks for a second then says: Let me in only for a moment, I’m looking for someone. The shammes lets him in. When Cohn does not return, the shammes goes after him to find he is standing in the tier. He walks up to him and exclaims: Hey! You “ganef” (cheater), you’re here to pray!”*

The punch-line of this joke suggests that even during sacred times, Jews are more concerned with cheating than being honest. The example of the ‘ganev’ who sneaks in to pray, also points out that in the emotionally taxing time of self-reflection humour may ease the tension.

We may come across humorous comments and witty remarks even on the most somber day of the Jews, at the fasting day of Tisha B’Av in the month of August. Without recognizing the aspects of self-irony, we may label these comments and remarks made on “sacred days” a “blasphemy”. Then again, at the center of these jokes, in all cases, stands the imperfect man. Sacred patterns and religious rituals never, in any joke, get criticized or attacked. Accordingly, the complaining tailor in the first joke may be interpreted as a “this-is-who-we-are” an auto-stereotypical self-deprecation. We don’t see or acknowledge our shortcomings. Instead of admitting this is how we are, we complain and shift the responsibility onto God. This is the message, among others, with the components of acerbity and “apocrypha”, not contrasting but complimenting each other, of this joke.

Recognizing this, even those kind of jokes that appear to be “blasphemous” may be analyzed as part of the “cultural canon”, because with the application of self-deprecation, the traditional-religious value system is strengthened further. “Skepticism” or “complaint” manifest itself only within this knowledge and connection, without creating a fissure between the sacred patterns and those who try to live by them, the members of the community. At the same time, it is impossible not to notice, or to explain away the “acerbic”, “apocrypha” sharpness of the joke, quoted at the beginning of this study.

Along with the ones analyzed, “apocrypha” is part of the Jewish humour, which makes this kind of humour exciting, equally interesting and “Jewish” for the listeners.

Throughout my research, my partners in conversations continuously emphasized that the essence of Jewish humour is the freedom to make jokes about subjects connected with sacred rites or observances that would be considered “blasphemous” in other religions. The “freedom” of humour, therefore deepens the special characteristic of Jewish religion in the community. Thus humour, as appearance of “canon” *and* “apocrypha”, becomes the representative characteristic of Jewish identity.

### **5. Canon and/or apocrypha? Possible interpretations**

The examples point to the inseparability of humour from a given cultural-social phenomenon, and the situations of the joke. How, when, to whom, and what kind of meanings get communicated on the individual level depends on the knowledge of the culture, socialization and personality of the participants.

“The humour and responsiveness to its forms, with aspects of production, performance, and reception is the intellectual factor that constitutes the elements of any given culture. As with the

culture itself, “humour-competence” belongs in the category of transmitted and learned knowledge passed on during the developmental stage of socialization.” (Hidasi 2008:55)

Humour-competence therefore, is collectively defined by the norms learned during the process of socialization. For example, when and how to reward or sanction a child’s attempts of making a joke. It is also defined by one’s personality traits, such as who and to what extent they can comprehend a joke, who is a good storyteller, who will become a comic, or good listener. Likewise, the aesthetical-psychological aspect of humour is also inseparable from the role it fulfills in cultural practices. This also depends on the socio-cultural context, which carries and determines the possibilities and boundaries of the aesthetical-psychological experiences, the emotions and the cathartic spiritual moments it generates. Mary Douglas, with her symbolic anthropological approach, defined these as such:

“The joy generated by a joke, whatever it may be, is joined by a latent enjoyment of wit: the harmony of social accordance and social structure.” (Douglas 2003: 128)

Hereby, the humour may collectively represent the social norms, the “canons” in their rephrased, understated, parodied, “apocrypha” forms.

The jokes, comical situations *within* the common cultural knowledge, in the communication of cultural patterns and meanings, present themselves and become comprehensible, interpretable, even if there are some who misunderstand or sanction those who tell them. The “not suitable”, “inappropriate” humour generates assessments and reactions also through common knowledge. The excitement of laughter arises from the common experience of the joker and his listener, as they share the “canon” and “apocrypha” meanings, based on their common cultural knowledge, since telling a joke, making a ironic comment, or playfully mocking someone are all tied to a “cultural canon” and its “apocrypha” interpretation.

Humour is part of a common cultural discourse which takes place, or “plays out” in the context of “cultural canons and apocrypha”.

Humour is then a particular and exciting part of the cultural discussion and communication on the subject of “canon” and “apocrypha”. The anthropologist researching humour, may have the opportunity to observe when, where, and in which way humour is being used during social interactions. Also, where, in which way, and why a person reacts to humour. Observations of situations and understanding internal-cultural interpretations makes it possible to share our thoughts with those who laugh at different jokes in different situations. It may even enable us to laugh wholeheartedly at each other’s jokes, and at the same time at ourselves, instead of laughing at each other.

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