



# Are We or Are We not Amused?<sup>\*</sup>

Chaiyan Rajchagool

*Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace,  
Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand*

## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to look at the underlying logic of humor. Initially it will focus on an implicit debate on the characteristics of humor by two eminent Thai scholars, Nidhi Eawsriwong and Chetana Nagavajara. Probably not being aware of each other's opinions, they have expressed opposite views on "what makes us laugh". After an examination of these two positions, the paper will venture into ideas about humor discussed by a profound humorist whose nation likes to claim to have invented humor! Several stories (and folktales), indigenous and modified jokes, including studies on humor, will be assessed in light of conceptions of "what makes us laugh". Subsequently from the standpoint of the Thai context, the paper will try to make some remarks about the nature of humor in general and of jokes in particular.

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In line with what anthropologists may possibly call "particularism," Nidhi, a noted historian, is of the opinion that humor is culturally specific. He illustrates this point by examples of jokes in Northern Thailand. These jokes would not be funny unless one understands the Northern dialect and the context from which they arise. The importance of the language of the audience is, of course, obvious. He, however, does not mean language per se, but rather its subtlety, its use of puns, its implied meanings, etc. As jokes, generally speaking, need to leave some crucial points unsaid, a fairly good command of the language is essential. This is due to a common characteristic of jokes, which is that the audience is required to fill the "gap" in the punch lines. An art in joke telling is that the funny parts

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are to be only partially expressed. It is the listener's job to make them whole. Only a competent person in the language would be able to work out what is to be completed. Otherwise the joke would go flat. And that is why once this "to-be-filled" part is known, the comic aspect is lost. It is extremely embarrassing for the teller to tell the jokes already known to the audience. A joke is therefore rather short-lived. It has been told once and for all. A line from Twelfth Night, Shakespeare's comedy, is very apt here. It is how Lady Olivia reprimanded Feste (court jester) "Now you see, sir, how your fooling grows old, and people dislike it" (I.5. 106).

In addition to language, the context is equally important, if not more so. It is the context that mainly renders the meaning of a joke. This point can be substantiated by my own experience. At a recent gathering of academics from Southeast Asia, upon friends' request I told a joke as follows:

At a teashop, in the midst of a half-serious half-jolly conversation, a person made a point to his companions that all the Thai generals, and most of all, the supreme commander, are stupid. He was immediately arrested by a plain clothes policeman nearby. Eventually he was taken to court and got a very severe long-term imprisonment. Why? Not for defamation, for that charge is punished by imposing only a small fine. The charge was that the person was guilty of disclosing a top state secret!

The joke went absolutely flat. The reason was that those who hold the military in high esteem did not find it funny. Contrary to our perception of the military in Thailand, the military in other countries in the region have shown skills, prowess, and patriotism. The "joke," therefore, is seen as being in bad taste particularly in the eyes of the Vietnamese participants and perhaps also the Cambodians.

The question of the context can well explain why a story can be hilarious for some, and distasteful for others.

True to his historian's vocation, Nidhi regards "linguistic communication" and "context" as indispensable in understanding jokes. In other words the two are *a priori* components in humor.

Another example is a joke from Romania.

- Did you hear Ionescu was found dead at the wheel?
- What happened? A car crash?
- No, there was no car crash. The autopsy didn't reveal any contusion either. All they found were some traces of yogurt in his stomach.





This joke is beyond non-Romanians' understanding. Paraphrasing the original source, the explanation goes like this: With respect to Romanian salaries a car costs a huge fortune. Car buyers had to scrimp on everything. But since they could not lessen any other expenses but food, they had to eat only yogurt which was one of the cheapest foods available. The yogurt diet had to be constantly continued after the purchase of cars, because the cost of petrol was also exorbitant. And owing to the low quality of car-making, cars often broke down. The spare parts, which could be found only on the black market, were also very expensive. The car-buyers had to go on economizing; consequently the cost of a yogurt diet was death.

This particularist view is unarguably plausible in many cases. Its limitation, however, is that it does not always square with cross-cultural humor. The humor displayed in Charlie Chaplin's silent movies is a case in point. Even in the case of verbal jokes, Nidhi's theory does not hold water. Once the linguistic barrier broken and the context grasped, the jokes can be understood without much difficulty by people of different cultural backgrounds. That is why the translation of jokes is very common. Jokes have always been "plagiarized" across cultures and time. There must be some kind of commonality of what is regarded as "funny". Chetana (1977: 41-48) goes a long way with this line of thinking. Utilizing unspecified psychological studies, he has outlined five features of humor as follows:

- i. "far-flung out of norm" action;
- ii. mechanical action;
- iii. non-acidic emotion, and keeping comical phenomena at bay from one's own involvement;
- iv. "laugh at" implies a "superior" position of those who find the action, phenomena, expressions, etc. funny
- v. an enticing device transforming illusion into reality.

Examples of these items are *<1>* wearing an overcoat in a hot country; *<2>* mechanical behaviour to a predictable extent. An example is a character in one of Molière's plays who as the messenger walks repetitively from one end of the stage to the other; *<3>* a light-hearted reaction to another's mild misfortune (for example somebody tripping over a banana peel); *<4>* an ironic situation in a stage play where the audience knows the situation while some characters are still ignorant about it; *<5>* revealing something in an entirely different light from the way it is usually perceived, as is often the case in political satires/jokes/cartoons.

Of course, these are far from being exhaustive, and each item is relative. They are here cited merely to illustrate the possibility of, in lieu of a better term, the "general" traits in humor.



Both positions, “the particularist” and “the generalist”, can substantiate their respective arguments with endless cases. Since their convergence can occasionally occur, one perspective is not always at one opposite end of the other. The overlapping of both positions offers a strong possibility of a “third position”. This position usually sees either of the two positions being extreme and one-sided. This view likes to see itself standing on a higher moral ground, and those adhering it correspondingly earn themselves the label of “the neutralist”. In their view, this third position is regarded to be more objective, even broad minded. For the “neutralist” (including their fellow-traveler: the liberal) it is even seen as the way of the “middle path”, a self-congratulating designation.

## II

Viewing these positions against a tantalizing number of funny stories/actions prompts a basic question: Are they adequate to help us conceptualize “what makes us laugh”? Frank Muir (1992) has gone a step further in suggesting varieties of what is funny. There are apparently marked differences among “comedy”, “wit”, “buffoonery” and “humor”. These divisions can be equally found in both the positions, although either position might bear characteristics of one category more than others.

According to Muir, to paraphrase his expositions very liberally, “comedy was light-hearted and filthy and dealt with the goings-on of everyday folk like corrupt religious leaders, golden-hearted prostitutes, venal slaves, and bent magistrates. Aristotle summed it up as “an imitation of men who are inferior but not altogether vicious.” Tragedy was about heroes, gods, and unhappy endings. Comedy was about ordinary citizens and happy endings” (p. xxvi).

Wit is the aristocratic aspect of comedy. The original meaning was sharp intelligence, wisdom. It was essentially aristocratic because it was an intellectual sport played between gentlemen using ideas as shuttlecocks. The language of wit was rich in poetic references and paradoxes and puns which only extensively educated minds could bandy. It was also so much in use in upper social circles as an offensive weapon that Aristotle defined wit as “educated insult”. But wit was not there to be laughed at. It was to be admired with a lift of an eyebrow or a half-smile or a nod of appreciation but not so much more than that (p. xxvii).

The Eiffel Tower is the Empire State Building after taxes. The particularist perspective could well add this line into its arsenal. This line is probably bitingly funny for those working at Wall Street. But it is perhaps not really comprehensible to the Masai in Kenya. Buffoonery, on the other hand, is more commonly appreciated.



Buffoonery: overt comicality, popular fun, ...cheap and cheerful ... the sole purpose is to induce laughter. It makes use of things such as funny hats and red noses to help induce a comical mood and it can be a social weapon of attack ... telling jokes is the most widespread form of buffoonery, probably because a joke is self-contained and the easiest device with which to trigger off laughter (p. xxviii).

Humour: lies in between wit and buffoonery. If wit belongs mainly to the well-educated classes and buffoonery to the lower-classes, humor is middle-class. For Muir "... humor is observational. Unlike wit and buffoonery, humor, like life and art, is quite useless and has no function to perform apart from being itself. And it is a contribution to culture which England has given the world; not Britain, not Scotland, Ireland, or Wales – but England" (xxix).

All these subdivisions fall under the generic term "comedy". For some, they do overlap one another. For many, they could be confusing; their meanings change over time and their usage is frequently even interchangeable. An American publisher gave advice to an author "... not to mention 'humor' in describing your book to the book-trade. 'Say it's comedy,' he pleaded, say it's wit, but don't for God's sake call it "humor". In this country "humor" means books about "batty old ladies being silly in English villages."

Muir's classification, at best, helps to make distinctions among undefined terms. By so doing he tries to discover the basis of "what makes us laugh". But, at worst, Muir's classification is "Anglo-centric". He even subscribes to Sir William Temple's view that the English originated humor! His employment of a class dimension as a classifying criterion calls for skepticism. Even if he uses "class" in social rather than economic terms, the question remains how "class" is such a paramount factor in humor. Shakespeare's comedies in his days gained laughter from common folks in his town as well as from the Queen of England. If we were to follow the advice "not to argue with the English about Shakespeare" (because they are greater than he!), we are left with the question of whether or not the "class" criterion is relevant for the non-Anglo world?

Two examples in the Thai repertoire (one modern, the other traditional) of "what makes us laugh" stand in contrast to Muir's classification. One is *Talok Café*, the other is stories about a character named Sri Thanonchai. *Talok Café* is a kind of popular entertainment played in nightclubs and similar establishments and sometimes on Thai TV. In *Talok Café* actions as well as verbal expressions tend to focus on "foolishness", "child-like" play (two fat men pushing their bald heads against each other), ambiguity about sex and sometimes politics. Although *Talok Café* can initially and even easily become buffoonery, a closer look reveals its various artistic features. Acting, slapstick, wit, costumes, stories, etc. magnify the funny effects.



Stories about *Sri Thanonchai* are found in different versions in different parts of mainland Southeast Asia. There are Thai, Laotian, Cambodian and Burmese tales about *Sri Thanonchai* whose name signify being witty, tricky, and serve as an epitome of folk wisdom (comparable to the well-known *The Good Soldier Švejk* in Czech literature). This wisdom is situated in the social hierarchy which, as often found in Shakespeare' comedies, was turned upside down by the wise fool. A typical feature of the *Sri Thanonchai* stories is how he uses puns, tricks, pretense, etc. to outwit the king. The following story may also be familiar to friends in our neighbouring countries.

Can you induce me to go into the pond?" the king challenged Sri Thanonchai. "Let's have a bet for a purse of gold coins. OK?" Sri Thanonchai nodded as the custom demands and exclaimed "Yes sir, Your Royal Highness". After a pause he added "that is beyond me, your humble servant, sir. If the bet is the other way around, it would be fairer. That is once you are in the pond, I can persuade you to come out of it. Would Your Royal Highness accept the bet, sir?" The king responded positively. He then walked into the pond. Sri Thanonchai then exclaimed to the entire king's entourage: "The purse of gold coins is now mine.

Folk plays in central Thailand such as *lam tad* (ลั่ตตัด), *likay* (ลีก) offer ample anecdotes of a combination all those subdivisions. Although it is true that these plays are performed mainly in rural communities, it does not mean that the so-called "aristocratic" elements, e.g., wits, are absent in them. On the contrary wits are the "heart and soul" of *lam tad*, albeit the content and expression may, of course, be "rustic".

Even the Buddhist sermon is not always devoid of humor. The question-answer form (*pujcha-visatchana* บุจชา-วิสัชนา) of sermons displays the wit of prudent-minded monks.

The majority of studies and comments on "what makes us laugh" are generally presented from the standpoint of the "author" and the "text" standpoint at the expense of the "audience" perspective. The findings of a thesis entitled "Sense of Humour among Nurses Providing Care for Psychiatric Patients" (Wallapa 1999) give much food for thought. Markedly different from other nurses, the psychiatric nurses have significantly armed themselves with humor. Two factors account for the relative high degree of their sense of humor. One is stress, the other work-period.

An observation about political and economic stress in the "Communist Bloc" supports this thesis. It is generally recognized that a high output of jokes both in quality as well as quantity occurred in Eastern Europe during the dictatorship



period, but not so much during the thaw and in the “liberal” time.

The stress factor, however, can be disputed on the grounds that the nurses in emergency/operation rooms and in the wards for patients of terminal illness can be equally stressful, if not more so. But the stress experienced by psychiatric nurses is of a different kind. It is a stress caused by the human relationship environment, not a stress resulting from physical or time-pressed conditions. This kind of stressful environment is amendable, and humor, among other things, can do the trick. Oddly, however, if this thesis is valid, why then Germany under the Nazi regime did not produce much humor of note. (However, one might impertinently ask whether this was due to the Germans or to the Nazis). Is it an exception to “the rule”?

The time factor can accentuate the point. Leaving the personality predilection aside, the longer one works with psychiatric patients, the more humorous one becomes. The senior nurses therefore are more innovative at how to amuse themselves. And they have gained a higher degree of a sense of humor over time.

Is it tempting to say that, at the risk of inviting counter arguments, the more stressful you are, the more humorous you could be prone to be?

The “stress” explanation is very telling; the marathon political rally (March 14 - May 19, 2010) in Bangkok is a case in point. A large number of devices had been employed to sustain the protesters’ enthusiasm and fighting morale. Telling political jokes was among them. The following, for example, drew peals of laughter.

Abhisit and Newin (his chameleon-type ally) had wanted to do a rapid appraisal of rural poverty in the Northeast. To economize the whole operation, they went up to the sky with a pilot in a small plane. Looking down from above, Abhisit was sorrowful to see how miserable the people’s condition of living was. Taking out his wallet, he said to Newin: “since I can’t help the whole population with our party programme, let me throw a ₩1,000 banknote down there. At least I can make one person happy.” Newin had a smarter idea: “Instead of that ₩1,000 we’d better throw ten 100 baht bills. Then we can make up to 10 people happy.” The pilot was a little impatient: “If both of you throw yourselves down there, that would make almost everybody in Thailand happy.”

What makes us laugh, however, goes beyond the content. The “politico-cultural *Zeitgeist*” in the broad sense of the term provides the basis of assumed understanding. This “understanding” is implicitly shared between the “author” transmitting a joke and the “audience”. With it, some crucial elements in a joke can be left unsaid, but understood. To emphasize this point, earlier put, in a



slightly different vein, the author may give some hints, and the audience is to fill that “missing hunch”. Without it, the author is required to tell all which could nullify the comic logic of the joke. This point is analogous to poetry. Contrary to a straight forward essay, a poem offers principally suggestive, not definitive, meanings. If there is no demand on the audience to generate meanings to the symbols and the unwritten parts, then what is the point of writing/reading poetry?

The emergence of a critical outlook at Thai nationalism has, in recent years, markedly helped form a new way to view our own selves. This new idea environment could make the following joke funny.

Someone has served his time in heaven! It is his turn to be reborn again. God granted him three possibilities for his next life. They are being Thai, being honest and being intelligent. But he must choose only two of these attributes. Since he knows that Thailand is the happiest country on earth, naturally his first choice is to be a Thai. He must choose one more option. God said to him “you must choose between intelligence and honesty”. While the man was pondering over the alternatives, God tried to help him make the best choice. “Once you are Thai and intelligent, you cannot be honest. If you are Thai and honest, then you cannot be intelligent. But if you want to be both honest and intelligent, then you cannot be Thai.”

Is this story funny for the Thais? Certainly not for all the compatriots! But during the period of the 1950s through the 1990s when nationalism was at their height, it could not even be receptive to any degree and to anyone. Today, as the counter force of cosmopolitanism has become more visible, a self-critical outlook could be more appreciated, providing that the teller is also a Thai. For if the joke is among the Thai, then is it offensive to anyone in particular? Well,

No individual could resent  
Where thousands equally were meant.

Some jokes, however, may get at both a specific person and the whole nation. The joke below, somewhat modified from a soviet joke, can serve as a good example:

God granted three Southeast Asian Prime Ministers facing severe problems a meeting for consultation. First, the Cambodian asked: “When can we overcome the aftershock of the killing fields, and become a country of good Buddhists again? God pondered over the question and replied: “In one hundred years”. The Prime Minister sadly cried: “Oh, I won’t live that long”. Next was the Laotian Prime Minister. His question was: “When can we achieve full socialism after three decades of revolution?” God said: “In





two hundred years". The Prime Minister tearfully cried: "Oh, I won't live that long". Next was Abhisit's turn. He said: "Since 1932 we have had 18 *coups d'état*-s, when is Thailand going to reach democracy?" God took a long while to think and then burst into tears: "Oh, I won't live long enough to see that happen".

The dichotomy between the particularist and the generalist does not lie in the nature of jokes. But it does lie in the content. That is to say one must ask what is crucial is the point of the joke in question. Is it aimed at a specific object or something in general? The generalist perspective is apparent, if some kind of a predicament is a common experience.

### III

Frank Muir, the renowned English humorist, has suggested some insights into jokes or "what makes us laugh". It is true that he has immersed himself in the English sense of humor. Yet he has tried to see the general features of laughable things. But he has limited himself to the particularist stand of Englishness. At least his two collections of jokes (1980) illustrate this point. Occasionally, however, regarding the underlying logic of "funny things" he makes a highly perceptive observation pertaining to all jokes. He suggests that the discrepancies between "what is supposed to be" and "what really is" provide a fertile ground for humor. He has used the example of sex, but his point can be applicable to other areas as well, e.g., politics, human meanness, etc. He wrote:

"Lust is one of the Seven Deadly Sins and also part of one of the world's greatest pleasures. As a result, attitudes to it are always a bit ambivalent and perhaps that is why it features so universally in humor. Stories of lust and its attempted gratification are part of comedy in all fields – from the sophistication of Restoration Comedy to its (the) bawdiness of dirty jokes" (Muir 1980: 132).

Political jokes and jokes about the inhumanity of humankind subscribe to this logic. For example,

Someone, in a very long and seemingly endless queue for a government's handout, was angry with the immobility of the queue. He said to all those around: "This government is so inefficient and corrupt. They can't do anything properly. I would like to go kick the prime minister." "Yes, hurrah, haho, you should do it, on our behalf too," said the others in the queue. "We will keep your place here for you, don't worry" So the man went to kick the prime minister. After only a short while he returned looking very dejected. "Did you kick him," asked the people in the queue. "No, he answered. I couldn't do it, the queue to kick him is even longer



than this one.”

The discrepancy between what is professed and what really is is distinct. With a better and more insightful expression, Critchley (2002) writes the first sentence in his book: “Jokes tear holes in our predictions about the empirical world. We might say that humor is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality. Humour defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves”. That is why the story is bitterly so funny.

Another joke is here presented for comparison:

Somewhere in Thailand there are two village headmen notoriously known for being stingy. One always wants to outdo the other. They even spy on one another to find out about the ways they can gain more and lose less. One day one of the village headmen came back from the field and asked his wife if anybody had brought any thing on that day. “Yes, my love”, she replied. The headman was excited and asked: “Who had brought it, and what?” “Oh the other village headman sent his wife to offer us a chicken”. “Jolly good,” he responded obviously delighted. “Let’s have a look”. But his wife said “No, it is not a real chicken. Have you forgotten their stingy ways? His wife just made a picture of a chicken in the air, and gave it to me. It is an imaginary chicken, you know.” Um!, the headman knit his brows, obviously disappointed. “Did you give anything to her in return?” “Yes, a watermelon. But of course I didn’t give her a real one either.” She then made a picture of a watermelon indicating with her arms the size of the watermelon. Her husband was very angry and slapped her hard. “Why did you make it so big, stupid cow? You should have made a smaller one. “One this small” and he made a gesture with his finger and thumb.

At first the joke may seem to be context-specific. But its particularism is deceptive. Would any prime minister or village headman be offended? Why? The target is not directed at the prime minister or the village headmen as such. They are just the means to make a point. The absurdity of extreme frugality in combination with wits is at the core of the joke. The characters can be changed into any personality type. Providing the sharp wit is there, they can be equally funny.

## IV

Substantial contributions about the generalist traits of jokes have been made by various academic studies. In his book, *On Humour*<sup>1</sup>, Simon Critchley explains



John Morreall's three theories of humour.

1. Superiority theory: This theory is akin to the notion of "laughing at". We put ourselves at a higher position in relation to what we find odd, strange and hence comical. In Critchley's words: "We laugh from feelings of superiority over other people."
2. Relief theory: "... laughter is explained as a release of pent-up nervous energy... where the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity."
3. Incongruity theory: "... Humour is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke, gag, jest or blague." (Critchley 2002: 2-3)

Studies on humor in the archives of Thai Studies are meager. The same point, speculatively speaking, probably can be said of the situation in other ASEAN countries as well. They do not give us full confidence to validate (or invalidate) these theories. At the elementary level, however, there is a certain degree of correspondence between the relief theory and the study on the psychiatric nurses. A large number of jokes (e.g., Thais making fun of the hill tribes, Bangkokians mocking the "uncouth" country folk, intellectuals getting back at the politicians, etc.) do seem to support the superiority theory, and the incongruity theory. Nevertheless, critical scholarship must caution us against unexamined credibility and easy conclusions. The "tourist" glance can at most serve only as a point of departure.

If, (a big IF at that), these theories were really sound, is the particularist school of thought then to be discarded altogether? If (an even bigger IF), they were validated by other theories and numerous cases all over the world, are we then at the end of the story?

Contrary to the naïve view and cynicism of many folk, jokes and humor are not merely trifling matters. Has Umberto Eco's famous novel, *The Name of the Rose*, shown that holy people could go as far as murdering others to wipe out laughter, and they did it in the name of holiness? Why did the Catholics condemn laughter in the early Middle Ages? And why is it rare for the dictators to laugh or even smile (some even never do!). Why are Hitler, Stalin, Big Brothers/Fathers and many others so humorless? Why are the English so proud of and noted for their sense of humor? Why is the term "English sense of humor" more commonly known than, say, "German sense of humor"? Is there such a thing as an "Israeli sense of humor"? Discussion about the significance of humor can be tiresome. Suffice to say: we know that jokes and humor can function in simple



and complex ways that make a difference in how we think and how we live. They can express hurtful criticism of the powerful and the tyrannical, and even shake the foundation of the dictatorial and oppressive regimes.

Jokes and humor can be a vignette through which we can see culture and other aspects of society. The methodology to get into the underlying logic of humor varies in its sophistication, from a complex anthropological study to a daily-life observation. The former is, for example, Mary Douglas' ground-breaking study of "Jokes and Rites" which can really be inspiring for us all. The latter example is a received idea that one cannot understand the English deeply unless one understands their humor.

Similarly the complexities of Thai and other Southeast Asian societies cannot be fully understood or appreciated, unless we can figure out what they laugh (and do not laugh) about. We need to study and learn if there are kinds of humor peculiar to us and simultaneously funny for people of other cultures as well. At least two objectives can be aimed at, namely,

- (1) to make contributions in theoretical terms to the human psyche/ culture and different ways to self-understanding;
- (2) to create certain effective tools that can change our lives. The study of humor in ASEAN countries is now a seriously neglected field.

Let's hope that there will soon come a time when the study of "what makes us laugh" becomes a promising subject of academic endeavor.

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