Interracial
Humor in
Hawaii

by Fred Blake

Ethnicity is the source of much of Hawaii’s unique humor, and what is most significant about this uniqueness is the way the humor has evolved to shape a local culture. This is not to say that humor, or more precisely ethnic joking, does not aggravate ethnic conflict or foster a form of violence. It uses ridicule and insult to aggravate conflict, and many jokes play on fantasies of violence, but the aim of humor is to substitute laughter for physical assault. Depending on the situation the space separating these two forms of “conflict resolution” may be narrow and tense or broad and mirthful. The tradition of ethnic joking in Hawaii’s trends toward the latter in so far as it is essentially in-group (local) humor. The joking is “interethnic” in that every group is grit for the local joke mills. Each group takes its turn as the butt of a joke. The joke is not so much on a particular group as it is on all the groups. The joke is on the thing that separates local people into different groups, that is to say, the joke is on ethnicity itself, or to put it in another way, the joke is on ourselves. As such, ethnic joking in Hawaii’s helps to shape a rather unique kind of civic culture, what has sometimes been called “local boy culture.”

This local culture in which ethnic humor plays a significant role was grounded in the “Democratic revolution” of the late 1950’s which radically undermined the territorial system of racial domination and exclusion. The territorial system was built on a hierarchy of ethnic enclaves that coalesced notions of racial pride with notions of racial tolerance. The University of Hawaii’s campus is a good example of how the system replicated itself in one of its key institutions. The annual Ka Palapala Beauty and Cultural Pageant traditionally included a parade of clubs dressed in their respective national costumes. Drawn largely from the racially exclusive sororities, they included “Caucasian,” “Chinese,” “Japanese,” “Korean,” “Filipino,” “Hawaiian,” and “Cosmopolitan.” Beauty queens were selected from within each enclave; it was a celebration of ethnic pride coupled with mutual respect for ethnic group differences. Significantly the pageant included the “cosmopolitan,” which symbolically embodied the spirit of mutual respect in the practice of racial mixing.

By the 1970’s, “the cosmopolitan spirit” was spreading while that of racial enclaves and ethnic pride seemed increasingly anachronistic. A new, more inclusive, community emerged. As Cooper and Davis (Land and Power in Hawai’i) have shown, this new community is based upon an assumed commonality based on a real estate market that brought many hitherto antagonistic segments of the local community, including the various ethnic enclaves, together under a new hegemony based on local (mostly “Asian”) leadership. The emphasis was on “local” in opposition to specific ethnic or racial affiliations. This new “local boy” hegemony promoted the mystical of its working-class origin with powerful symbols such as “wearing palaka” (plaid cotton shirts of local working people). In this milieu of ethnic realignments around a “local” identity, ethnic humor played an increasingly important role.

The public culture of the 1970’s and early ’80’s spotlighted a host of comedians that made ethnicity their stock in trade, such as Andy Bumatai, Ray Reipinger, Frank De Lima, Ed Kaheakulana, James Grant Benton, and Mel Cabang. There was a comedy club in Kahakuloa. There was the “Crack Me Up” comedy conference. Publications like Pigdin to da Max (1982), which demonstrated how much of local humor was written up in the language, were extremely popular and went into multiple editions, including one in Japanese.

As the 1980’s wore on, however, ethnic humor began to pale as a significant factor in our civic culture. Ethnic joking lost much of the public spotlight along with some of its everyday acceptability. Talk about a “local boy culture” tapered off and symbols such as wearing palaka lost their mystique. Important elements of the “local boy” infrastructure—Arakawa’s store in Waipahu for instance, or the local clubbing out of business. Frank De Lima remembers the only “Booga Booga” left in the business of telling ethnic jokes, a business that he was increasingly called upon to defend. In 1993 De Lima helped the Office of Attorney General produce a videotape called “A Community in Concert: Has Hate Come to Town?” Brief clips from Nazi and Klan rallies and riots on the Mainland provided shock value while warnings were offered about the increase in numbers and diversity of non-traditional minorities in Hawaii’s local boy culture. This brings us to the special role of the “Portagues,” with both Frank De Lima and Larry Price affiliated.

If one group is singled out more than any other group for bearing the brunt of this new form of ethnic division it is the “Portuges” (“Portuguese”). They are most often the butt of the so-called “morum jokes,” or what I will call the “crude jokes.” The crude jokes are often about fun of persons who invert the common sense: “How many [clowns] does it take to change a light bulb? It takes two (or more)—to hold the bulb and one (or more) to turn the switch!” The group bracketed as the butt of the crude joke is common among the tentative object of their verbal assault. A study in California found that teenagers telling “Polak jokes” did not differentiate between ethnic jokes with actual Polish people. But why do certain groups become the butt of jokes? One answer could be that because their numbers are relatively small, they are often treated by their own or others in a position of power as if they have no rights or if anyone who disproves them or herself isesty that they have no rights or if anyone who disproves them or herself (identifying herself as “Portuguese”) wrote a letter offering to punch me in the nose! To depend on the effect of that certain holds any water, it defeats everything I am attempting to say here. I think there is a more satisfying explanation which suggests that, perhaps even more provocatively, that the “Portuguese” is in effect nowhere and yet everywhere! The “Portuguese” is a mirror image of our own ethnic selves.

The reasoning goes something like this: In Hawaii, the common sense is that they are a joke in one ethnic group. If you don’t think so, try talking about another person without tag- ging them as “Portuguese,” and then try to see how long you can go without your everyday supply of ethnic labels. I think most of us find it difficult to buck this element of the common sense. The “Portuguese” have no clear-cut position in the structure of ethnic or racial group differentiation. The “Portuguese” are “Caucasian,” but hardly “Malo.” During the Territorial period of racial domination for example, “Portuguese” was a separate census category until it was subsumed under “Caucasian” in 1940. On the other hand, their “local boy” credentials were never doubted, which in effect made suggestions that they might be “Malo” ludicrous. In this way “Portuguese” bridged the racial and ethnic divide and in effect disappeared from the structure of domination and exclusion. They violated the common sense that everyone belongs to a clear-cut position in the system of racial differentiation. Hence it is “Portuguese” that is cast in a role that violates the common sense, which is what the clown does in the joke.
But in Hawai‘i there has been a benefit attached to this stigma. The complementary sense of ethnic and racial differentiation violates the "spirit of aloha," the spirit of racial union and non-distinction. If the "Portagée" is cast in the role of clown, then the "Portagée clown" also represents our most revered value, that which makes our civic culture possible. In effect, we in Hawai‘i lack the common-sense sense when we celebrate those among us whose ethnicity, contrary to common-sense appearances and claims, is not clear. This cherished paradox is reflected in the widespread intermarriage and the total lack of stigma attached to the ethnic or racial in-between, the "hapas" as they are called. The "hapas" are also represented in the local jokelore when in making fun of crosses between stereotypes we demonstrate the idiocy of taking ethnicity seriously. "What do you get when you cross a Portagée with a Paki? Someone who saves all his money, but can’t remember why." Much of the local humor plays with crossing images and stereotypes.

If "Portagée" represents the foolishness of racial and ethnic differentiation, "Caucasian" represents the not-so-funny aspect of racial hierarchy and ethnic exclusion. The real test of local jokelore is its ability to transform "Caucasian" into "dumb haloo," a process that strains the local funny bone very near its breaking point. Once again, the title and very same light bulb joke is brought to bear on the problem. "How many Punahou students does it take to change a light bulb?" the answer is of course, "One! [Punahou students are, as we all know, very intelligent.] It takes one to hold the bulb while the world turns around him!" Punahou is a "haloo school" although I believe most of the students are of "local Asian" descent. More directly, "How many haloo does it take to change a light bulb? It takes six—one to call an electrician, the other five to write an environmental impact statement."

In these jokes, the "haloo" is not a clown, but a different kind of "babooze," the kind who doesn’t know how to change a light bulb, the kind who objectifies his or her immediate surroundings, the kind who can analyze a joke to death but can’t tell a joke to save his life! The local jokelore assigns "haloos" to the "dumb" role. The term "dumb haloo" has a double meaning that I think is especially pertinent in this context. On the one hand it refers to a slow learner, "What do you call a haloo in Waianae? A fool." What do you call a haloo on his second visit to Waianae? A slow learner!" On the other hand "dumb" implies being rendered silent, which plays on notions of authority and racial domination and the dangers lurking therein: "What do you call a haloo who is surrounded by three Samoans? In big trouble. What do you call a haloo who is surrounded by twenty Samoans? Coach!"

Rap Replinger once told a center stage audience at Ala Moana: "I never tell jokes about haloes...because haloes are not funny!" Of course, then he proceeded to tell jokes about "haloes," which was some relief to me.

Many people point out that the actual state of race relations in Hawai‘i falls way short of the celebrated ideal. Some of these people also feel that ethnic jokes only exacerbate these shortcomings. Some express the desire to see "more aloha" between the various ethnic groups but they fail to come up with a remedy other than the law to ameliorate the lamented state of affairs. Of course there is always the law with its appeal to "civil rights" coupled with the need to "tolerate differences" by cultivating a new "political correctness." Meanwhile, I have tried to point to the unique tradition of ethnic joking in Hawai‘i, which has been geared to the kind of ethnic "interaction" that forges a local in-group identity and solidarity. This model suggests that anyone who is willing to buck the common sense and to be roasted for daring to take seriously his or her ethnic group affiliation may be included. Joking has provided a popular grass-roots method for including rather than excluding peoples of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

RECOMMENDED READING AND VIEWING

A Community in Conflict: Has Hate Come to Town? [videorecording]
Honolulu: KIVY, 1993. Writer-producer/director, Edward B. McLaurin. Host, Frank De Lima. Examines the increasing incidence of hate crimes which are being committed against Hawai‘i’s gays and ethnic minorities such as African-Americans.


Pidgin to da max [videorecording]. Honolulu: KGMB, c1983. Series of humorous skits satirizing various television programs, all done in local Hawaiian pidgin English.

Pidgin to da max hana hou [videorecording]. Honolulu: KGMB, 1984. Sequel to Pidgin to da max and includes spoofs and satires on people, places and things familiar to everyone in Hawai‘i. Features Andy Bumatai, Frank De Lima, James Grant Benton and Toremoine Tanumise.


In his 1980 essay "The Comic and the Rule," Umberto Eco suggested that unlike tragedy, the comic "seems bound to its time, society, cultural anthropology. We understand the drama of the protagonist of Rashomon, but we don’t understand when and why the Japanese laugh." I am not sure whom Eco meant by "we," but I do know that many Japanese laugh at many of the same kinds of pratfalls, puns, and pretensions that elicit laughter in other parts of the world. Even if you’ve never been to Japan, a viewing of a film such as Tango or Sanshiro (the latter by the same director who gave us Rashomon) should make this clear.

Still, it is true that the comic pattern in Japanese literature and performing arts do not always correspond nearly as well to Western schemes. For example, the connection between laughter and happy endings, which has been considered a basic element of Western comedy since the days of Aristophanes, is not so close in Japan. This is particularly obvious in works from the premodern period,
The Comic in the Culture

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