

# Joking Through Hardship: Humor and Truth-Telling among Displaced Timbuktiens

Andrew Hernann

**Abstract:** This article argues that one way in which internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from Timbuktu, Mali, negotiated and made sense of the occupation of northern Mali in 2012 and the hardships of displacement was through joking. A genre of unofficial communication, joking asserted local truths and produced counternarratives. Sharing in this humorous reproduction helped to alleviate some of the anxieties of displacement and strengthen interpersonal relationships. The result was a *communitas* that reproduced the local Timbuktian community in exile.

**Résumé:** Cet article fait valoir que, en 2012, c'est en partie grâce à la plaisanterie que les personnes déplacées en internes (PDI) et les réfugiés originaires de Tombouctou au Mali, ont géré les difficultés du déplacement et fait sens de l'occupation du nord du Mali. En tant que genre de communication officieuse, la plaisanterie a affirmé des vérités locales et produit des contre-narrations. Faire partie de cette reproduction humoristique a contribué à atténuer certaines des inquiétudes dues au déplacement et à renforcer les relations interpersonnelles. Le résultat a été une "communitas" qui a reproduit la communauté tombouctienne locale en exil.

**Keywords:** War; displacement; joking and humor; genre; *communitas*; race; ethnicity; Mali; Timbuktu

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One morning in Bamako, Mali, a displaced group—mainly ethnic Songhay internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Timbuktu and the one American anthropologist—gathered to eat breakfast in the courtyard of an overcrowded house. The Timbuktian head of the household, who had been working in the Malian capital for the past decade, had opened his doors to those fleeing the religious and ethnic violence that had erupted in northern Mali. We had just sat down when Rahim, who is ethnic Tuareg, came in. Seeing him, Poubelle, whose nickname (meaning “trashcan” in French) references his famously large appetite, immediately jumped to his feet.<sup>1</sup> “Ah, you’re Tuareg!” he said, jokingly and gently nudged him away from the food. “Timbuktu is not for you anymore. You stay in Burkina [Faso]. I’ll go to Timbuktu and take care of your house and your wife. Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of them.” Everyone laughed, including Rahim. Then, our host offered him a “bismillah”—welcome—and Poubelle, still joking, “reluctantly” led him by the hand to the circle to eat (fieldnotes, Bamako, January 2013).

What is a joke? What does a joke accomplish? Jokes and joke telling can be socially significant and powerful for a number of reasons. Communal laughter can provide for the cathartic release of anxiety or anger while bringing people together and reinforcing the boundaries between in- and out-group (Apte 1985; Basso 2007 [1979]; Ziv 1984). “Inside jokes” are those that only certain group members understand. And more broadly, ethnic and regional styles of humor prevent many—though certainly not all—outsiders from understanding a joke (Ziv 1988). Further, jokers capitalize on their keen observations and commentaries of social and political oddities. Similarly, friends often joke with one another about their particularities, or about instances when they did something outlandish. To be sure, as the popular adage goes, “There is an element of truth in every joke.” Joking has the ability to counter dominant narratives, as the comedic inverts majority values, thereby asserting and validating minority positions and divergent political subjectivities (Bakhtin 1990; Cardena 2003; Douglass 1999; Freud 1960). Meanwhile, jokers remain relatively immune from backlash (Pye 2006; Ziv 2010). For even if a statement is subversive, offensive, or otherwise potentially risky for the teller (even, that is, if the statement rings true), jokers are protected, because rather than making actual claims, supposedly they are “just joking.”

Earlier anthropological studies of joking in Africa examined, for example, how joking during initiation rites helps to build particular relationships among and across kin (Coenen-Huther 1987; Griaule 1948; Moreau 1944; Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Rigby 1968). Expanding upon these analyses, more recent approaches have looked at joking not only as a component of ritual, but also as an expression of ritual *language* (Apter 2007). That is, joking itself expresses deep local knowledge that comes alive during ritual contexts. However, joking in Africa is also a means of negotiating social or political barriers, not to mention conflict and crisis. For instance, joking can alleviate social tensions and assist in conflict resolution (Mitchell 1956; de Jong 2005). Joking can also be deployed in order to cope with, introduce, or transgress themes that are socially taboo, particularly surrounding gender, sexuality,

and/or illness (Black 2012; Wiley 2014). At the same time, joking is a means to “say without saying,” a way to critique someone—even the ethnographer—for committing a local transgression (Rasmussen 1993).

While there are clearly numerous approaches to investigate joking, many contemporary examinations—both within Africa and without—remain focused upon the relationship between joking and social structure (see, e.g., Carty & Musharbash 2008). I argue that rather than limiting our analyses to such a focus, we should also examine joking in Africa as an unofficial means of oral transmission which—like rumor, gossip, hearsay, and so on—records the historical present.<sup>2</sup> This is significant, for unofficial oral genres offer alternative, sometimes subversive, versions of dominant narratives and official history. A number of scholars (e.g., Besnier 2009; Scott 1985) have examined forms of unofficial communication as local and everyday commentaries on and interventions in society and politics. Indeed, Austin (1979 [1961]) and Haviland (1977) assert that gossip reveals how individuals think and talk about their moral dilemmas. And White (2000) argues that rumor is a cultural mechanism through which groups comment upon and manipulate political events. In this vein, I maintain that we must examine how joking—as a form of unofficial communication—produces counternarratives and influences community formation.

In this article I analyze how internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from Timbuktu, Mali, joked with one another during the Malian crisis of 2011–2012 when Jihadi–Salafi militants stormed the north and eventually occupied Timbuktu town. Specifically, I ask: What did joking accomplish among displaced individuals? How did joking foster solidarity among fellow Timbuktian IDPs and refugees? And what kinds of information did Timbuktian joking, as a specific type of speech act, convey? As such, I explore how joking—at least within the context of crisis—serves as a socio-cultural mechanism that can nurture cohesion (see Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Turner 1957). However, and not unrelatedly, I also explore joking as a discursive genre that serves as a local form of social commentary (see Bakhtin 1984 [1965]; Žižek 2001). As I will demonstrate, joke-telling was one of the primary cultural tools that many Timbuktiens used in order to manage the hardships of crisis and uprootedness. I examine how joking lessened interpersonal conflict and promoted a sense of solidarity and *communitas* (according to Victor Turner’s [1957; 1990 (1974)] famous formulation), thereby relieving stress and strengthening old and new relationships. But I also interrogate joking as truth telling. While engaging dominant and official narratives and categories, joking also undermines and subverts them. Indeed, joking exposed displaced Timbuktiens’ acceptance of certain widespread assumptions and social categorizations as well as their own local, more nuanced understandings based largely on shared knowledge and experience. It was through joking, as a particular speech genre, that displaced Timbuktiens made sense of and commented upon the occupation and their displacement, while also asserting their local minority narratives. Significantly, this creation and sharing of local narratives also

served to further develop the feeling of *communitas*. In other words, among Timbuktian IDPs and refugees, joking strengthened interpersonal relationships through the process of asserting local truths that countered dominant narratives. In what follows, therefore, I describe the events surrounding the Malian crisis, after which I explore the joking relationship and joking as truth-telling, followed by a concluding discussion of some of the theoretical implications of analyzing joking as an unofficial speech genre.

### The Occupation of Northern Mali

The Republic of Mali is a diverse, landlocked, Muslim-majority West African and Saharan state. It is formally divided into eight administrative regions, but according to my Malian friends and interlocutors, most Malians conceptually divide the country in two: northern and southern Mali. Timbuktu, a town dating back to at least 1000 CE, is the (symbolic) cultural and religious capital of the north (Saad 2010 [1983]). Northern Mali is often thought of as “the desert,” and negative stereotypes about the residents’ supposedly “backward,” Islamic “fundamentalist,” and impoverished living are prevalent. Southern Mali, due to its more abundant resources and political centrality, is considered more lush, wealthier, more cosmopolitan, and less religiously radical. Another difference is that the population of southern Mali comprises Mande ethnic groups, the largest of which is the Bambara, whereas the population of northern Mali is more evenly divided among the Songhay and Tuareg ethnic groups, with Arabs and Fulbe making up substantial minorities (Elhadje 2011).

Importantly, these ethnic groups are racially different. Most southern Malian groups almost exclusively racialize themselves as black. Racial belonging remains more complicated in northern Mali. Before French colonization, indigenous northern Malian frameworks situated “race” according to religiosity, behavior, and descent. That is, those of slave and sub-Saharan origins who engaged in less-than-“noble” labor were often racialized as black, whereas those of nonslave, North African, or Middle Eastern ancestry who engaged in “noble” professions were often racialized as white (Austen 2010; Hall 2011; Lecocq 2010; Klein 1998). Despite these local idioms of race, however, French colonial soldiers and administrators introduced and reproduced Western racial frameworks throughout West Africa that identified “Africans” as black and “Arabs” (including certain Tuareg) as white (Hall 2011; Mann 2006; Robinson 2004). This resulted in the deracialization of an internal “white” elite within Songhay society (Hall 2011). As a result, most contemporary Songhay perceive themselves as black. However, much of these local frameworks remain within Tuareg and Arab society. Among northern Malians, for example, many Tuareg and Arabs, regardless of skin color, are not considered white because of their lower socioeconomic status; this is particularly true among the Bellah and Haratin, and (former) Tuareg and Arab “slaves.” However, some Tuareg or Arab individuals, attempting to assert their superiority over their darker-skinned counterparts, may claim their “whiteness” with reference to French racial categories.

Significantly, though, while such racialized nuance remains legible largely within northern Malian society, most southern Malians tend to perceive northern Malians as lighter skinned and eager to claim their whiteness—and thus, their supposed dominance—over black southern Malians. Almost formulaically, categories of ethnicity, race, and region have come together to produce certain givens among the southern Malians I came to know. To be Songhay, Tuareg, or Arab is also to be a northerner; and to be Bambara is to be a southerner. Or, to be a southerner is to be black, while to be a northerner is to be white. Or, to be a northerner is to live in the desert, thereby suggesting backwardness, impoverishment, and religious radicalism, whereas southerners are associated with cosmopolitanism, power, and wealth.

After Malian independence in 1960, these racialized ethnic divisions—rooted in colonial and precolonial political and territorial claims—became formalized into competing Mande nationalism in the south and Tuareg nationalism in the north. Opposed to what many northerners perceived as the south's political economic domination and the purposeful underdevelopment of the north, Tuareg nationalism, while continuously smoldering, erupted as rebellions against the Malian state between 1960 and 1963, and again between 1990 and 1996. These rebellions also put the Tuareg and Songhay communities at odds with each other, especially as—due to differences of race and ethnicity—the Tuareg rebel groups largely excluded, and in some cases persecuted, the Songhay (see Soares 2005; Grémont et al. 2004; Lecocq 2010). And despite a negotiated peace settlement and the Flame of Peace Ceremony in 1996 between the Malian government and Tuareg nationalists mainly based in the Kidal region, hostilities remained. More recent violent flare-ups have sharpened lingering tensions both among northern Malian communities—i.e., “black” versus “white,” nomad versus sedentary, Songhay versus Tuareg versus Arab—and between the north and the south (Lecocq et al. 2012).

Following the fall of Muammar Qaddafi in the summer of 2011, battle-hardened Tuareg of Malian origins who had fought in Libya returned to Mali and joined various organizations endeavoring to assert their dominance in the north. Some linked with a group of young Tuareg and experienced Tuareg politicians, forming the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in October 2011. An extension of previous Tuareg nationalist groups, the MNLA has sought increased autonomy or independence for “Azawad,” a region largely comprising northern Mali. The influx of fighters in the north, however, spawned additional groups. The transnational Jihadi–Salafi movement called Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had been in the southern Sahara for the past several years. However, in December 2011 a new organization, the Movement for Divine Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) emerged from within its ranks (Lecocq et al. 2012). A more locally rooted Jihadi–Salafi movement called Ansar Dine also developed in late 2011 after MNLA leadership rejected a proposal to reform the organization along shari'a lines (Erless & Koné 2012). In late 2011 and early 2012 these groups began attacking villages and Malian military

and police headquarters situated mainly near the Algerian border and in the mountainous Kidal region. However, these numerous organizations, while at times loosely collaborating, are divided over nationalist and religious objectives and have never formed long-lasting alliances (Grémont 2013).

While accustomed to instability in the north, the Malian public, increasingly angry over a series of defeats, found two outlets for their rage (see BBC 2012; Lecocq et al. 2012). In and around Bamako, crowds targeted light-skinned Africans and those thought to be MNLA sympathizers, attacking property and people. The other object of public anger was President Amadou Toumani Touré (known as ATT), who was accused of failing to arm and equip Malian soldiers. Boiling over, these frustrations manifested themselves as an “improvised” coup d’état (Lecocq et al. 2012:5) on March 21, 2012, in which the mutineers stormed the presidential palace and the state broadcasting center. The next morning Captain Amadou Sanogo of the Malian army, the leader of the junta, temporarily suspended the Malian constitution and dissolved all Malian institutions. Significantly, neither the coup nor Sanogo was universally unpopular throughout Mali, at least initially. Many disapproved of ATT, perceiving him not only as incompetent, but also as the most recent despot in a series of postcolonial leaders who espouse democracy while engaging in corrupt and authoritarian practices (see Whitehouse 2012b; Nathan 2013). Nonetheless, following the coup the Malian army collapsed, as much of its general staff was under arrest and vital northern garrisons were in mutiny. This created a power vacuum in the north. On May 30, 2012, a loosely coordinated MNLA, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO coalition chased what remained of the army out of northern Mali. The insurrection started in Kidal, and by April 1 all three main northern Malian towns—Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu—had been captured (Koné 2012). MUJAO quickly established control within Timbuktu town, removing the MNLA to the outskirts. And by summer 2012 the Jihadi–Salafi movement had introduced and begun to coercively enforce their interpretation of shari’a law.

Starting with the initial clashes in late 2011, some northern Malians had begun to leave the region. However, when the fighting intensified—particularly following the coup d’état and the occupation of the north—thousands more fled. In response to growing insecurity—including the forcible recruitment of adult and child militants; the pillaging of hospitals, schools, churches, and public buildings; sexual assault; the threat of collateral damage; and the fear of swift international military response (Human Rights Watch 2012)—at least 268,000 northerners had been displaced in southern Mali by April 2012 and 161,000 had become refugees in neighboring Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Algeria (UNOCHA 2012). This was the political and humanitarian context during which I began my twelve-month fieldwork in January 2013. Centering my research on the Malian crisis, I focused specifically on how Timbuktian IDPs and refugees experienced, negotiated, and made sense of occupation, displacement, and the eventual international military intervention. In fieldwork concentrated

in hubs of internal displacement in urban southern Mali, in refugee camps in Burkina Faso, and eventually in Timbuktu town, most of my interlocutors were adult Songhay and Bellah men, aged roughly eighteen to fifty-five, though I was also able to speak with some women. Access to displaced Tuareg and Arab Timbuktiens was more difficult because compared to their Songhay counterparts they tended to be more distrustful of the Malian soldiers who had reentered Timbuktu and many, therefore, did not return as quickly. My time in Mali involved many conversations over tea, hanging out with people while we listened to the radio and played checkers, trips to the marketplace, and work with community-based organizations and aid agencies helping families repair and rebuild houses.

It became immediately clear to me through personal observations and discussions with IDPs and refugees that displacement brought many hardships. Most Timbuktian IDPs were Songhay and darker skinned. They settled primarily in the neighboring towns of Mopti and Sevare (situated just south of the *de facto* border between southern and northern Mali) or in Bamako. Space and privacy were often at a minimum, as was money. Many IDP households had to rely on just one salary, that of a family member who had previously moved to the south and already had a job. Others, however, were not so lucky, and had to scrape by doing odd jobs, draining any savings, and purchasing goods on credit.

Most of the refugees were Tuareg and Arab. As most Malians associate these ethnic groups with the MNLA, Ansar Dine, or AQIM, even those Tuareg and Arab families not affiliated with these groups (the vast majority) did not feel safe in the south. Indeed, on multiple occasions, different Bambara individuals would pull me aside to “educate” me: to explain, for example, how all northerners were (supposedly) complicit with the occupation or that white Malians could not be trusted. Recalling the anti-Tuareg pogroms of the 1990s, many Tuareg (and Arab) families feared retaliation at the hands of the Malian army, fleeing to refugee camps outside the country (see Lecocq 2010). They, too, suffered economic hardship. Not only were they without jobs, but most also had to abandon their livestock as they departed, thus losing even more of their livelihood. Contrary to their IDP counterparts, many refugees were able to more or less regularly access humanitarian assistance, although complaints abounded concerning too little food, inedible ingredients, and the severe lack of firewood.

Not all hardships were material, however. Indeed, most were emotional. Frequently families and friends were divided, causing intense feelings of worry and loneliness. And particularly as communication was expensive and difficult, many had not talked to one another since leaving Timbuktu. Most also expressed anxiety and anger, confusion and impotence over the continued occupation of the north. Displaced Timbuktiens attempted to navigate these hardships in many ways. They looked for jobs and humanitarian assistance, at least initially. They borrowed money to call loved ones in other parts of West Africa. They listened to the news on the radio to hear word of home. But they also attempted to achieve some level of normality,

even under such abnormal conditions. Many managed, at least partially, to pursue their usual activities. Younger women cooked or cleaned while chatting among themselves and with the older women who supervised. Younger men played soccer, tended to small gardens, and gathered to drink tea and talk. Children played and studied. Significantly, though, one of the practices that pervaded many of these activities, a practice that helped displaced Timbuktuans to navigate the many hardships they encountered, was joking.

### The Joking Relationship

Of course, joking and joking relationships occur everywhere, including (as I often observed during earlier fieldwork in 2010) in Timbuktu and throughout West Africa, and outside situations of crisis. Many West Africans are connected by overlapping networks that can provoke joking on topics such as reciprocal obligations, behavioral taboos, or the stereotyping of others according to ethnicity, region of origin, or clan affiliation (Davidheiser 2005). In addition, joking among Malians differs according to the many interrelated and historically significant categories into which they organize themselves, including Muslim versus “animist,” sedentary versus pastoral/nomad, (former) “slave” versus “master,” and urban versus rural (see de Moraes Farias 2003; Grémont et al. 2004; Souag 2015). To be sure, as elsewhere in the continent, these categories are fuzzy and contested (see Alidou 2005). Nonetheless, they represent centuries of northern Malian social, linguistic, political, and economic exchanges that have served to reproduce certain stereotypes and joking relationships. Most of the people with whom I interacted had known, or had known of, one another prior to the occupation. However, displacement dispersed many families and friends, and in some cases, social groupings contained new acquaintances along with siblings, cousins, and close friends. Because more Songhay were IDPs and more Tuareg and Arabs were refugees, many of these displaced groups tended to be ethnically homogeneous. However, I witnessed many instances of joking among groups of multiple northern Malian ethnicities. Most joking tended to occur in groups of similarly aged individuals—that is, young people joked with fellow young people, older people joked with other older people. And jokes tended to take place in all-male or all-female settings, although this was not always the case.

Within African studies the theorization of the joking relationship dates back to the 1940s when Radcliffe-Brown argued that within certain African groups such relationships serve to enhance social cohesion through “a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism” (1940:195). Many earlier anthropologists of Africa pondered how so-called stateless societies, particularly “acephalous” ones, were able to remain integrated, and thus they examined joking largely as a ritual practice that maintains order and enhances group solidarity (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1976; Gluckman 1965). These anthropologists described, for example, how certain kin and/or affines within a particular group were expected to tease or jab an initiate during a rite of



passage and examined playful banter between group members of greater and lesser social standing (Griaule 1948; Moreau 1944; Rigby 1968). Their conclusion was that formalized joking, and the relationships that emerge, enhances group cohesion by creating bridges between individuals who otherwise would be expected to maintain a respectful distance.

These scholars accurately identified a vital and widespread cultural practice that lessens differences among individuals within a group. As Whitehouse (2012a:16) states about Malian migrants in Brazzaville, Congo, “a system of joking relationships cuts across distinctions of social status and ethnicity.” That does not mean that jokers remain unaware of socially significant differences, or that these differences are unimportant. Just as specific relationships do not mechanically generate joking behavior, joking is constantly negotiated, creating (or disrupting or reframing) particular relationships (Launay 2006; from Wiley 2014). And at least according to my observations, joking does not “cut across distinctions” based on prestige and socioeconomic class; that is, nonelites rarely joke with elites, and vice versa. Significantly, despite illuminating cultural systems in which joking relationships enhance group solidarity, anthropological studies have largely considered the joking relationship as an exchange between two people (see Apte 1985; Rasmussen 1993; Wiley 2014; Launay 1977). While Radcliffe-Brown and others made important contributions in their analyses of the joking relationship and its ritualistic components, they neglected, among other important elements, the role of the audience. But joking does strengthen the bonds among (most of the) members of a group, thereby strengthening the group as a whole. Certainly, joking builds interpersonal bonds. However, these bonds are not only built between the joker and the recipient (i.e., the “butt” of the joke), but also spread out to encompass a much wider audience.

I remember one instance in Bamako: A large group of Timbuktian friends—mostly Songhay, but some Tuareg, too—were chatting in a semicircle around a small television as we waited for a soccer match to begin. Most were men between the ages of sixteen and forty-five, though both children and older individuals would stop and join the conversation for a moment or two before moving on. Just adjacent to the semicircle were a few women. Braiding each other’s hair, they were able to maintain their own separate space though still participate in the general chatter. As the sun set, most began to perform their ablutions and pray. Eventually Mahmane, who had almost always skipped Qur’anic school as a kid, began his *raka’at*.<sup>3</sup> When he concluded, another friend—who had signaled for me to pay attention—asked Mahmane to recite the Fatiha, typically the first prayer a Muslim learns as a child. Mahmane waved him off, but the friend persisted, and the rest of the group watched with half-suppressed smiles. “Mahmane,” he insisted, “how does the Fatiha go? Recite the Fatiha. Mahmane, the Fatiha. Mahmane!” Eventually, and reluctantly, Mahmane started to quietly mumble something unintelligible, not unlike someone attempting to sing along without actually knowing the lyrics. Everyone burst out laughing,

and the children began to run around while chanting the Fatiha. The friend turned to me: “André, you know, when the Islamists came, they said they were bringing shari’a, and anyone who didn’t obey would be punished. Mahmane got so scared, he started *pretending* to pray! He doesn’t know we’re in Bamako. He thinks the Islamists are coming!” (fieldnotes, February 2013, Bamako). Everyone laughed harder. Some mimed Mahmane’s faux prayer, while others patted Mahmane on the back and the joker on the shoulder.

Clearly, the joke involved more than just Mahmane and his friend; indeed, I rarely witnessed joking that did not occur among a group of five people or more. It also involved certain components that I witnessed repeatedly: an initial signaling on the part of the joker to his audience that a joke was about to commence but that no hard feelings were intended; a repetition by the participants of part or all of the joke throughout the rest of the afternoon or evening. Audience members are thus active participants as they create mood, laugh, goad, mimick, affirm, and repeat. In many ways their presence and participation convert what might otherwise be (mis)interpreted as teasing—or an insult—into a joke (see Irvine 1992; Radcliffe-Brown 1940). While they congratulate the comedian for his well-executed joke, they simultaneously signal to the recipient that there are no hard feelings. Audience participation therefore broadens the joking relationship beyond the joker and the recipient, and as those present become involved the interpersonal relationships among all members of the group are strengthened. Moving beyond the narrow analysis of the ritualized joking relationship, I argue, then, that joking in this less formal sense can also “knit” society together and create a sense of solidarity and *communitas*, especially among members of diasporic and displaced communities (Whitehouse 2012a).

According to Edith Turner’s (2012) expansion of Victor Turner’s notion of *communitas*, it consists of the sense of satisfaction and of living a meaningful life that is felt by a group of people who have, perhaps through necessity, rid themselves of narrow concerns about social status and received social constructs and thus can see their fellows as equally worthy human beings. Victor Turner (1990 [1974]) theorized about the emergence of *communitas* in the context of ritual enactments such as rites of passage and other social dramas, in which the state of “liminality, . . . of being betwixt and between” (E. Turner 2012:4) generates feelings of equality and comradeship. One need not limit the experience of *communitas* to the outcome of a given ritual, however. I would like to suggest here that the structural and existential position of liminality that exists in rites of passage accurately parallels the status of refugees and IDPs who are at once classified and not yet classified as citizens (Malkki 1995) and that displacement, as a liminal position and experience, similarly creates a space where *communitas* can flourish.

Similarly, the loss of ego and group solidarity experienced during ritual enactments resembles the unity inspired by joking. The displacement I observed led to feelings of listlessness, fatigue, stress, and loneliness.

Joking and the emergent *communitas* played a major role in disrupting lethargy and bolstering both old and new relationships. Joking also eased the tensions that often led to arguments. As much as families and friends attempted to hide their anger in various situations, occasionally tempers would boil over. One person might accuse another of being lazy or messy, of mooching, of not looking for work, of not being respectful, or of being a coward. In such situations, as many theorists have shown, humor, like Bakhtin's notion of the "carnavalesque" in literature (1984 [1965]), could be used to ease tension, make light of an otherwise oppressive situation, shorten the length and diminish the intensity of an argument, (re)affirm social norms and group unity, and help the protagonists avoid more serious conflict (see Ziv 2010; Davidheiser 2005; Wilson-Fall 2000).

In one instance, for example, my friend Maryam—whose fiery temper is as short as her stature—started arguing with Fatoumata, another friend. A group of us had been socializing in a courtyard in Sevre when Fatoumata accidentally spilled some tea on Maryam's dress. Maryam jumped up and began yelling at Fatoumata, calling her clumsy, an imbecile, and so on. "Who are you calling an imbecile?" Fatoumata responded angrily, and the two exchanged more insults as they got closer to each other, waving their hands in the other's face as they screamed. Before the argument could escalate further, a third friend, Amina, intervened. With a cracked smile, she signaled that everyone else should watch. First she got on her knees mimicking Maryam's short stature. Then, facing Fatoumata, she echoed Maryam's insults in a warped, high-pitched voice—"You imbecile!"—all while waving her arms erratically. The audience began roaring with laughter. Even Maryam, when she recovered from the shock of seeing Amina's imitation, giggled, put her palm in the air, and conceded with an "Alright, alright." Everyone congratulated Amina for the successful joke, and Maryam and Fatoumata for their quick reconciliation, as we all returned to our seats. And every now and then throughout the rest of the evening, someone would good-naturedly tease Maryam with another squeaky, "You imbecile!" (fieldnotes, April 2013, Sevre).

### The Truth behind the Joke

For my Timbuktian interlocutors, then, joking strengthened interpersonal links among fellow displaced persons, thereby creating an informal community. However, it was not only their liminal position or their joking per se that helped them to manage the hardships of displacement and produced the sense *communitas*. Another vital component was the narrative of the joke, the sharing in a joke's truth-telling and even subversive content.

People do not always speak the truth directly; instead they construct and repeat stories—or in this case tell jokes—that carry values and meanings that they wish to express (White 2000). Foucault (1990, 1995) argues that individuals enter the historical record by means of discourse; as a process of subject formation, the act of talking about oneself or others disciplines

individuals and populations within the framework of dominant value systems. However, “crude” or “crass” speech, according to Foucault, can find itself outside of this disciplinary framework. Similarly, joking, because it ambiguously conveys both affability and hostility, remains (somewhat) unregulated (see also Bakhtin 1984 [1965]; Radcliffe-Brown 1952). Joking, therefore, often serves as a truth-telling mechanism with the potential to subvert and contradict the narratives aimed to discipline it in the first place (see Basso 2007 [1979]; Voloshinov 1973 [1929]; Wiley 2014:114; Žižek 2001). In the words of Bakhtin (1984 [1965]:94), “laughter is essentially not an external but an interior form of truth; it cannot be transformed into seriousness without destroying and distorting the very contents of the truth which it unveils.” Like the “carnavalesque” (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]), joking operates as a local speech genre whose ambiguous nature allows socially and politically marginalized individuals to exchange information that critiques and undermines the dominant narrative. The jokes of my Timbuktian interlocutors represented analysis, commentary, and refraction, highlighting contradictions and revealing underlying truths. Such free expression was possible because jokers, of course, can always defend themselves by claiming that they were “only joking.”

Of course, for humor to be successful jokes must be articulated in forms and with content that participants share and understand (Douglass 1999; Haviland 1977; Ziv 1988). As sociopolitical subjects, individuals are subjugated “by the very power that constitutes both their subjectivity and the discursive formations through which they articulate that subjectivity” (Crapanzano 2011:6). As such, jokers, particularly those from marginalized societies, engage with the categories that influence their political existence—in this case, the dominant tropes of ethnicity, race, and religion, and the popular narratives that position northerners against southerners, white Malians against black Malians, and even Tuareg and Arab Timbuktians against Songhay Timbuktians (and vice versa). To make sense of Timbuktians’ jokes during the occupation (and thus the local truths that they expressed), one must understand the historical and sociopolitical hierarchy embedded within these tropes and the way in which joking challenged the presumptions behind them and revealed contradictions. In this way joking, by staging a confrontation or “dialogue” (Bakhtin 1990) between dominant and marginalized traditions, represented a “common language” (Apte 1985) communicating local truths and minority identity in the face of more oppressive majority and hegemonic values (Besnier 2009; Cardena 2003).

Consider Poubelle (from the opening vignette), for example. What often made his jokes so successful were the truths they revealed. In his joke described above he satirized the ethnic tensions that had emerged in northern Mali. Counter to the MNLA’s demands, he suggested that Timbuktu was in fact for the Songhay and that the Tuareg should stay away. However, he simultaneously highlighted that such tensions were largely exaggerated. At other times, with plenty of onlookers nearby, he would ask the head of the household (and the only resident with a consistent salary),

“Why did you buy so little bread?” Or, “Why didn’t you slaughter a goat when I arrived?” “Why won’t you give us air conditioning?” “Where’s the satellite TV?” Often to a soundtrack of laughter, the head of the household would counter, “Ah, you want air conditioning? Where’s your money?” Or, “You want luxury without paying for it, are you sure you’re not the President?” (fieldnotes, January 2013, Bamako).

Such joking revealed two things. First, the trope of the impoverished northern Malian brought to light everybody’s shared poverty, the fact that the head of the household could not serve as a proper host, and that none of the displaced persons could afford to contribute anything to the communal pot. Making light of such a situation, in addition to expressing a certain shared reality and making it easier to manage, also revealed that this suffering was not new, contrary to popular claims and stories in the media. What made the group laugh was the joking suggestion (contrary to fact) that before the occupation and their subsequent displacement most Timbuktiens had been able to afford sufficient bread, unlimited goats for slaughter, air conditioning, or satellite television. The joke reminded the audience that in Mali wealth had always belonged to someone else and that there were Malians—many of whom, from their perspective, southerners—who could afford such luxuries.

I encountered similar joking in the refugee camps. Just outside of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, I met a jovial elderly Tuareg woman and her family in their UNHCR-issued tent. She wore thick, cloudy glasses that were scotch-taped together at the nose and white beaded plastic bracelets that rattled on both wrists. When our conversation turned to their displacement and the question of reconciliation and their return, she smiled and then, smacking my knee, yelled, “It’s not worth it!” The adults and children in the tent started to laugh. Seeing this, she continued. “It’s not worth it! It’s just not worth it! The Bambara are just waiting for us to cross the border. Then they’ll round us up and [lifting her arthritic hands in front of her and miming a machine gun] bam, bam, bam! That’s right [laughing and smacking my knee], the Bambara! Bam, bam, bam! Bam, bam, bam!” I was a bit horrified at the idea of mass executions, but everyone else was in stitches. And every time the conversation fell silent during the next hour, the old woman would reenergize the group. She would just look up, point her fingers at a different person, and say (sometimes whispering, sometimes yelling): “Bam, bam, bam!” (fieldnotes, May 2013, Camp Sangongo, Burkina Faso).

Poubelle’s joke played up the Timbuktien trope of the impoverished northern Malian and the wealthy—and therefore indulgent and corrupt—southern Malian. The elderly Tuareg woman’s joke played up the trope of the bloodthirsty Bambara soldier and the victimized Tuareg refugee. Poubelle’s humor emerged through the inversion of expectations, in the suggestion that the Timbuktiens were the wealthy ones. The Tuareg woman’s humor emerged through exaggeration. But the jokes were successful particularly because all of the participants “got it.” That is, everyone had

knowledge of the local landscape and everyone understood the tropes that the jokers directly and indirectly referenced.

However, access to common, local knowledge was not the only significant element. Who does—or can—tell a joke complicates the social landscape and suggests that it is not only what one says, but also who says it, that counts. Indeed, as Poubelle's jokes also frequently revealed, the power and social position of the joker relative to the audience is often equally revealing of both the dominant narrative and the counternarrative. Take, for instance, another popular joke. One day Souleymane, who is Tuareg and light skinned, described the first reencounter that had taken place between him and fellow displaced Timbuktian friends when he arrived in Segou after spending months in a refugee camp in Burkina Faso. "Ah, look out, the MNLA has arrived!" shouted his darker skinned Songhay counterparts before wrapping him in a big hug. Sometimes, as Souleymane explained, upon being called a rebel or terrorist he would even keep the joke going by threatening to shoot or kidnap one of the jokers. Another interlocutor, Bachir, who is Songhay but has lighter skin than most other Songhay, described a parallel incident.

After the Islamists moved south to Konna, I left Mopti for Bamako. There, I stayed with my family, but they wouldn't let me leave the house for one week because Bamako had the same problems as Mopti.<sup>4</sup> After that week, though, I couldn't take it anymore. I started going out and looked for some of my friends. When my friends—they're black, Songhay—first saw me, they started teasing me. "Rebel! Rebel!" they'd say. Or, "Azawad! Azawad!" It was funny. I laughed. (Fieldnotes, Timbuktu, October 2013)

Referring to a lighter skinned individual as a terrorist or a rebel was probably the most frequently expressed joke. And it operated on many levels: It employed the dominant categorization that suggests that all light-skinned Malians are either Arab or Tuareg, and vice versa. It also suggested that all Arabs and Tuaregs were complicit with the MNLA, Ansar Dine, AQIM and/or MUJAO. In this sense, therefore, Timbuktian joking operated as a form of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1984 [1965])—a type of "double-voiced discourse" by which the joke simultaneously appropriated the dominant narrative and undermined it. It highlighted the knowledge that many light-skinned Malians are not in fact Arab or Tuareg, and that not all Arab or Tuareg Malians supported the occupation of the north.

Finally, telling a successful joke also involves the contexts in which a particular joke is appropriate and who can say what to whom: in other words, the joker must understand the elements of power and position in the total social situation. Consider the following example of a failed joke. One evening in Bamako in December 2013 several friends were sitting outside in a residential neighborhood. The group was mixed—a handful of Songhay Timbuktian IDPs, migrants from various parts of southern Mali, and myself. We had just finished listening to a news update, and as happened

so many times afterward, individuals started discussing the occupation. At one point during the conversation a Bambara man joked, “Ah, you northerners, you’re all terrorists anyway!” Immediately the Timbuktiens in the group leaped from their chairs and began chastising him: “You can’t say that about us!”; “It’s not all northerners. It’s the MNLA. It’s [AQIM]”; “How dare you? You haven’t suffered. You’re home. This isn’t our home. We had to run away. We’re in Bamako and in over-crowded refugee camps in Burkina and Mauritania.” The joker attempted to retract his jibe: “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. It was just a joke. I don’t actually think that all northerners are terrorists!” But it made little difference, as the Timbuktiens continued to shout, “You can’t say that! You can’t say that!” Eventually, some of the less hotheaded individuals in the group calmed everyone down. Everybody retook their seats, and one of the Timbuktiens explained that the joke “just wasn’t funny” (fieldnotes, Bamako, December 2013).

In the cases of displaced Timbuktiens teasing other displaced Timbuktiens, all participants found the jokes to be humorous. No lines of power were crossed, and there was a presumption of shared experience and community. The rhetoric also remained focused on the Timbuktian participants and did not concern non-Timbuktian social and political matters. In the exchange between the southern and northern Malians, by contrast, the attempted jokes were based not on firsthand knowledge but rather on the dominant narrative. As Turner explains (2012:4–5), “*Communitas* is togetherness itself,” and the existence of a community, or “in-group,” implies the existence of an “out-group.” Joking, similarly, draws boundaries between those who are allowed to participate in a joke and those who aren’t. Shared access to and participation in jokes not only implies group membership but also functions as a quick and easy way to (re)establish it and to promote one value system at the expense of others. In the situation discussed above, the displaced Timbuktiens would not allow their Bambara friend to participate in the kind of joking that they actively practiced themselves. Because he was Bambara, his joke, instead of inverting dominant tropes, served to reinforce them, reminding the Timbuktiens of their marginality vis-à-vis the south. As a result, his joking failed to even register as such. Instead, it was an insult.

In this sense, joking operates as a speech genre whose primary purpose is to share a particular type of knowledge and (re)produce local truths among certain participants. As a form of knowledge production, joking allowed the displaced Timbuktian speakers (and audience) to appropriate and invert dominant narratives, temporarily suspending the received social and political hierarchies. When commenting upon the Malian crisis and their own displacement, joking accomplished an additional dimension of refraction: not only inverting the dominant narratives and value systems that typically privilege southern Malians, but also subverting the process through which southern Malian groups came to be privileged in the first place. By jokingly demanding wealth, for example, or calling nonmilitants “terrorists,” “MNLA,” and “AQIM,” displaced Timbuktiens highlighted contradictions within the dominant narrative. Such joking challenged not only existing social categories,

but also categorization itself, the process by which categories are created and recreated in the first place. And yet in the telling of the joke the categorical boundaries were firm and unbreachable; in the incident above, joking that would have been permissible and successful within the in-group (the Timbuktiens) was completely unacceptable from their Bambara friend.

### Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, through joking, individuals and communities interpret events and comment on the political and social dynamics that surround them. For my Timbuktien friends and interlocutors, joking about race, ethnicity, and politics was a sociocultural and linguistic mechanism for strengthening relationships and community in the face of the considerable hardship resulting from the occupation of the north and the displacement of so many of its inhabitants. In this sense, both the crisis itself and the subsequent joking dialectically reproduced and privileged Timbuktien conceptualizations of regional, national, and interethnic Malian politics, as well as Timbuktien community and belonging.

Among fellow IDPs and refugees joking nurtured a sense of *communitas*, easing individual stress and loneliness while also alleviating communal existential anxiety. It also operated as a speech genre through which Timbuktiens, through humor, could communicate minority truths. Indeed, the production of a counternarrative through the sharing of mutual perceptions and mutually experienced affronts and offenses created ties of intimacy and a sense of *communitas*. Furthermore, the production of an “enemy”—or, more accurately, a clearly defined southern Malian “other” or out-group—through joking’s exclusivity likewise enhanced Timbuktien solidarity. Such exclusivity, therefore, not only determined who could and could not participate in a joking relationship, but also made the joking more effective. By inverting and exaggerating dominant Malian tropes, Timbuktien jokers, rather than perpetuating the notion of their community as the marginalized Malian “other” (as dominant southern notions of Malian nationalism would suggest), repositioned Timbuktiens themselves as central.

Whereas past anthropological analyses of joking focus mostly on the elements of ritual and social solidarity, I argue that by analyzing the joke as a sociocultural phenomenon we can enrich our comprehension of politics and culture. By taking joking seriously as a genre of unofficial communication, we can complicate our understandings of both nondominant counternarratives and the communities that reproduce such narratives. An analysis of joking exchanges in the Malian context also enriches our understandings of how refugees and IDPs experience, conceptualize, and navigate the hardships of crisis and displacement. For displaced Timbuktiens, joking was a particular form of commentary that sustained local values and *communitas* even in the face of assaults or impingements from transnational forces—from al-Qaeda to the Malian army to governmental and nongovernmental humanitarian agencies. As a practice that builds



relationships, facilitates conflict resolution, and produces counternarratives, joking reestablished the distant and dispersed Timbuktian community in exile.

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## Notes

1. Although this is the real nickname, the names of the other interlocutors are pseudonyms. Many of those sharing this house were Songhay and related to the head of the household (i.e. siblings and cousins). Others were friends of his, or friends of his relatives. And some were ethnically Bellah. While there were almost as many female as male IDPs sharing this house, those in this breakfast circle were all male, as Timbuktian social norms suggest that males and females eat separately. The head of the household, in his early forties, was the eldest in the circle. The youngest was in his late teens, and most were in their twenties and thirties. Many of their conversations were in French, in which I am proficient. Some conversations were in Songhay, in which I eventually developed a working knowledge.
2. Given the history of imperialist writings relative to the African continent and an overemphasis on oral tradition relative to written, I emphasize that I am not attempting to designate unofficial communication as "African communication," nor am I trying to romanticize or orientalize joking as expressed by my Timbuktian interlocutors.
3. The prescribed movements and words followed by Muslims during prayer.
4. Off and on throughout the occupation lighter-skinned individuals were attacked by soldiers, police officers, and civilians (see Koné 2012).