



“Only a Third of a Banana”

Dirty Joking as an Attempt to Maintain Dignity

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Abstract. – Anthropologists often stumbled across instances of laughter they could not make sense of, but only a few have tried to analyse that laughter more thoroughly. The aim of our study is to present more detailed material on women’s laughter in the Middle East. Our data were collected among women in a Bahraini village who seemed to have gathered over a feast of merriment. A closer scrutiny, however, revealed that painful experiences were lurking behind their often bawdy joking. In our interpretation, their laughter has to be regarded as a discourse strategy that enables them to voice the unspeakable. [Middle East, Bahrain, laughter, bawdy joking, women]

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Širr al-baliyati mā yudḥak.

It is the worst of disasters that makes you laugh.
(Arab proverb)

Introduction

In her excellent study about Black women living in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Donna Goldstein states: “laughter can open up a world of meanings

about a particular subculture that would otherwise remain hidden and unknown” (2003: 275). These women’s “hard laughter” permeates both their lives and Goldstein’s book. Her study displays a rare vision, because only a few ethnologists so far have dealt with issues of laughter and humour. Women’s laughter in non-Western societies has been even more neglected. In public, non-Western women seldom appear as buffoons or ritual clowns, and they neither tell jokes nor initiate pranks. According to Mahadev Apte (1985), their restrained behaviour reflects prevalent cultural ideals that draw women as quiet, passive, and modest beings. These same expectations lead to the social contempt of those women who show wit and humour in public and thus dare to “make a spectacle of themselves” (Russo 1986: 213). Only in the protected sphere of all-female gatherings women are allowed to laugh out loud and to express their sense of nonsense. Another exception are women of an advanced age for whom gender-specific norms of behaviour are relaxed and who enjoy more freedom in joking and sexual banter (Apte 1985: 67–81).

In the case of Middle Eastern societies, whose degree of gender segregation varies from one country to another and even among different social classes within the same country, several brilliant studies have been published during recent decades that describe these often boisterous and comical-obscene gatherings of women: Makhoul (1979), Dorsky (1986), and Meneley (1996) depict typical afternoon receptions of Yemeni women,