

## Review Article

## Mending the Mind with Laughter: What Role Do Jokes Play In It

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**Abstract:** If literature has a specific purpose, it is mainly that of entertaining. Jokes constitute an entertainment channel which, unfortunately, has not yet received its due scholarly attention, particularly in the realm of oral literature. The present study is a detailed consideration of the different aspects and functions of jokes selected from the oral literary tradition of a particular African country, Burundi, where recurrent ethnic conflicts ought to have distressed so many souls, but where the almost innate resort to jokes in people's daily lives might have reduced some psychological damages. The ideal data collection procedure would have been experimental, compiling and comparing the different mental states before any conflict, at the peak of the ethnic war (1993-2008), and after the war, but that is practically impossible: one cannot go back in time. That is why the study is purely empirical, with a focus on the psychological and the social implication on users. It aims at repositioning jokes in their special role of mending people's mind, preventing psychological breakdown in moments of stress, the same level as drama, sports, reading, dance, and other relaxation exercises do.

**Keywords:** jokes, relaxation, laughter, Burundi, conflict resolution.

### INTRODUCTION

Although nowadays' literature is mostly known in its written form, oral literature still occupies an important place in Africa. African oral genres comprise, among others, folktales, riddles, proverbs, folksongs, praise songs, praise poetry, pastoral poetry, and jokes. Some genres such as proverbs, folktales, riddles, may be found in majority of African cultures, while others such as pastoral poetry, war poetry, honey harvesting poetry, jokes, exist only in a few cultures.

Talking of jokes as a literary genre is new to many people, who are only familiar with the everyday gist which arises casually from the funny and the ridiculous aspect of life, and which is not attributable either to a given literary tradition or to a given culture. Let us give two examples of everyday jokes which do not belong to the literary genre under study.

a) After a quiz in class, James asked John, his classmate: "How was the test, James? I submitted a blank sheet". "Me too", John replied. "But now the problem is that the teacher will punish us, thinking that you and I collaborated, since our sheets look alike" (Ndayarinze: 9).

b) A woman was washing her husband's clothes. In his trousers' pocket, she found a hotel bill which read: "Room and chicken, ten thousand francs". She went to meet her husband and asked him: "Is it true that you share your room with chicken?" (Ndayarinze: 21). These two jokes not only do not belong to any cultural tradition, but also they lack the other characteristics of African oral genres, which we will see in the lines below.

This article aims at creating awareness on the existence of jokes as a literary genre, and of the social and psychological roles which jokes play. We intend to take the case of jokes from Burundi Republic, where jokes rhythm people's daily lives. We will first establish the distinguishing features between African oral literature and the ordinary daily utterances. Then we will carry out a detailed study of some Rundi jokes. We will conclude with an overview of the common characteristics of Rundi jokes (i.e. jokes from the Republic of Burundi) and the role which jokes play in Burundians' daily lives.

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### ASPECTS OF AFRICAN ORAL LITERATURE

Many scholars have tackled the issue of aesthetics in African oral literature. Those worth mentioning comprise Charles Nnolim, Ruth Finnegan, Isidore Okpewho, Jean Baptiste Ntahokaja, and Helen Chukwuma. The latter's work provides a detailed theory on African oral literature. Her book: *Igbo Oral Literature* cogently highlights the major characteristics of oral literature.

According to her, oral literature is a pleasurable form of communication communally owned and orally transmitted in a face-to-face contact (vii). Saying that it is communally owned excludes the existence of a known creator of a given oral genre. The genre belongs to a culture or to a community, not to an individual. As such, they are transmitted—usually by way of the mouth—from generation to generation. That is why proverbs may start with “our ancestors said”, while folktales are often introduced with “once upon a time” or “there was once”. Moreover, while oral literature may use human characters, it may also use animal characters or objects, which are usually endowed with human faculties, such as the ability to talk. Chukwuma also points out constant mnemonic devices consisting of the use of assonance, alliteration, tongue-twisters, repetition ...which equip the oral genre with a pleasurable mode of transmission, and through which evil can be ridiculed and corrected without hurting the addressee (149).

In African oral literature, characters may look like those encountered in daily life, but they remain unidentified individually. If some characters are recurrent in oral literature, it is mainly because they refer to a group with shared stereotypes. Although a stereotype associated with a character may vary with cultures, some stereotypes are universal. The hyena is a stereotype of stupidity, the rabbit and the tortoise are stereotypes of cunning, and a simple mention of a stepmother foreshadows her cruelty toward her stepchildren. It is also a common characteristic of oral literature that, if there is a conflict opposing two characters, the big-sized one usually behaves like a dupe or a villain vis-à-vis the other who is usually small-sized but smart. Another characteristic of oral literature is that, whether characters are animals, humans or objects; they are usually endowed with human faculties, such as the ability to talk. The jokes which constitute the focus of this study belong to the Rundi oral tradition. They have been passed from generation to generation by the word of the mouth.

### A DETAILED ANALYSIS OF SOME RUNDI JOKES

From the onset, let it be mentioned that it would have been more exhaustive to study Rundi jokes from the point of view of character, style and theme. But, for the sake of time and space, we will focus on the two closely related aspects: character and theme. Rundi

jokes' characters are in two major groups: animal characters and human characters.

#### *Animal Characters and Theme*

Rundi jokes often contrast big animal characters with those who are neither of the big size nor of the strong type. Some of them are even so small or weak that they pass unnoticed by the big-sized species. If Burundians noticed them and made much use of them, it is because of the special role which they play in repositioning wisdom in the animal kingdom. We will illustrate these facts with a few examples.

- *A kestrel caught a cricket, which said: “watch out how you eat me, I have thorns”. The kestrel spat it out and replied: “I caught you not because I want meat, but because the space is narrow”.* Crickets are part of kestrels' food. Although not favored in big size like the kestrel, the small cricket uses intelligence to survive. From inside the kestrel's mouth, it reminds its predator that it has thorns which may jab the kestrel in the jaw. The greedy bird, which catches its prey unselectively, can no longer risk to chew and taste the meat. Is it the first time it catches a cricket to eat it? Certainly no. But here, because of the cricket's warning, it decides to release its prey. Big as it is, it is fooled by a small cricket. But, in an attempt not to look that foolish, the kestrel too, invents a lie – “I caught you not because I wanted meat, but because the space is narrow”. A foolish lie, of course. How can the sky be narrow for a flying bird? It is here that the wisdom of the cricket passes the kestrel's.

- *An ant went to the king's palace. There, they shot it straight inside its wound and it said: “Now I see: the reason why they like the king's court is because it abounds with the ridiculous”.* The listener to this joke is amazed at the ant's loyalty. Small and wounded as it is, it fulfills its civic duty to pay a tribute to its king. There, where love and loyalty took it, they shoot it straight inside that wound. What an irony? Not even at another body part, but only at the spot where it suffers most. But the ant has to conceal its feeling: it knows that no subject has a right to show that he is offended by a king. So, the ant pretends not to be embittered. It takes the treatment as one of the many ridiculous things that happen at the court. But, is it really the ridicules at a king's court that attract people? If that is the case, how important is a palace? That's the point the ant makes: what good thing can be expected from a king's palace? Cruelty and disappointment: that is what a palace has to offer.

- *A male rat fell off the kitchen high table, got its vital organs damaged on the firestone and complained: “things in his place are always misplaced. Look at it now: I am forever parted with my spouse”.* Generally speaking, rats instinctively avoid climbing the high table above the fireplace, because of the danger which fire represents to them. Now, the unwise rat fell off the

high place onto a hot firestone, and got a very vital part of its body badly damaged. And it blames the accident on the house, in which things are never kept at their right place. But everybody understands that the house is not to blame, what should be condemned is the rat's carelessness, which leads to its body damage, which in turn compels it to never have anything to do again with a spouse. And what is this idea of a spouse for rats? Do they celebrate a marriage? Or are they faithful to one partner? Whatever it is saying, the listener understands that there is a need for houses to be kept neat and tidy, if one doesn't want to break the relationships among fragile members of the household.

- *They threw a frog over a fence, and it said: "Being thrown away is an opportunity to move fast, except that it breaks one's back".* The poor frog, violently thrown away like an unwanted stone, turns the violence to its advantage: they have helped it move fast. Indeed, it has never jumped as high as a compound fence before. [One can imagine what would happen to humanity if a new transportation technology adopted violent throwing of human beings, for the sake of speed!] Now that the frog has been violently and unwillingly thrown behind the fence, i.e. toward the unknown (for otherwise it wouldn't have reached there) it is grateful, but has only one regret, which is the funniest part of the joke. It got its back broken. To be frank, where is the back of a frog for it to be broken? An animal as round as a stone, with no neck, no straight legs, where did it get a spinal column from? (We are in jokes, not in anatomy). Or, is the frog's statement not emphasizing the fact that it has no spinal column at all, which, in Rundi appreciation, makes it the least elegant of all animals?

-*A crow spread wings to fly, and it hit heavily its small head against a tree, and crashed down. When it came back to consciousness, it shook the wings, saying: "I am so lucky that I have no brain, otherwise this crash would have turned me mad".* The crow escapes a deadly accident, yet it is grateful not because of its survival, but because it has no brain! If the brain is the centre of intelligence, well indeed the crow lacks intelligence to make a good discernment between the value of things. No intelligent creature would prefer not to have a brain so as never to turn mad. On the contrary, little or no brain at all makes someone behave foolishly, exactly as madness is displaying itself in the crow's statement.

There is also an association, in Burundians' mentality, of the size of the head with somebody's intelligence. Small head is wrongly believed to correspond to small brain and to little intelligence, and big head, to big brain and much intelligence. Conclusively, a crow, which was naturally created with a small head, has no brain. That is why the crow of the joke is happy that its lack of brain prevents it from cerebral crash.

We can now pass to the study of the second group of characters: human beings, themselves divided in two major categories, old women on the one hand, and the duo Samandari - Narunyonga on the other.

### *Human Characters and Theme*

#### *Old Women*

-*An old woman slipped off a ripe banana peel, fell down and said: "This is how we danced traditionally".* We are familiar with old people walking unsteadily, sometimes falling down for no apparent reason. In this joke, there is a more reason for the old woman to fall: she slips on a ripe banana peel. But to avoid that her much advanced age be discovered, emphasized or probably laughed at, she declares that she was not falling down, but that she was simply exhibiting one of the Rundi traditional dances. Of course, even if the elderly are the best keepers of a country's tradition, there is no known Rundi dance which was performed through women's falling down paces. By saying what she said, the old woman is trying to make believe that she masters her condition, that old age has nothing to do with her falling, so as not to become a laughing stock of onlookers.

-*An old woman peed on an ant, which said: "Is it me that you are threatening with your urine, me who survived the April heavy rains?"* The old woman peeing does not realize the presence of the small ant. However, although unnoticed, the ant takes much notice of the woman's presence and her threatening act. Small and fragile as it is, the ant sees the woman's pee as nothing when compared to the April rain floods. April is the rainiest month in Burundi- at least before the new weather change. Yet, the ant was not swept away by those heavy rain floods. Is it simple urine from one old woman which it will fear? It laughs at the woman and seems to be telling her: "you are wasting your time if you plan to kill me or to do me harm, I survived greater dangers, I will surely survive the present one, which is only a bagatelle compared to the hardships already endured".

-*An old woman saw a hyena pulling a dead person's corpse, and she said: "Those who have family members are being lifted away".* It is certain that the hyena was carrying the corpse to a place where it can eat it peacefully. But to the old woman, there is a privilege in being carried away by somebody else – even by a hyena. The legs of the elderly people get easily tired of long walk. Any means of transportation at their disposal would be very much appreciated. Probably the old woman is thinking of how unlucky she is not to have a means of transportation apart from trekking, when she suddenly spots the hyena pulling the corpse, and she envies the corpse. This is out of an error in the woman's appreciation of things.

*-An old woman stumbled and fell at an open tomb, and she said: "You don't need to call me, as I am already coming". Stumbling at an open tomb is interpreted by the woman as a sign that death is ushering her into the tomb because of her old age. But, in high spirits, she challenges death: "you don't need to call me", because she is already aware of her closeness to death. She knows that her old age leads her to nowhere else but to death, and she is not afraid of answering the call, she is already on her way to there, without any coercive force.*

### ***Samandari and Narunyonga***

Some Burundians think that, in a very remote past, Samandari and Narunyonga were real people who lived somewhere in Burundi, while others think that they are only fictional characters. Some of those who hold that the two characters existed are of the opinion that Samandari was Narunyonga's husband. Whatever the duo was, they have given to Rundi oral literature a lot of jokes, some of which are going to be considered below.

*-They asked Samandari: "That cow which the king gave you, how is it doing? (In literal translation: what is the cow doing?). He replied: "It defecates, and it urinates. If your own cows fetch water and firewood, just tell me, so that I slaughter mine as soon as I reach home". When a king gives a gift to somebody, the gift becomes a source of pride to the receiver. To ordinary Burundians, praise poetry over a cow offered by a king would naturally flow abundantly from the receiver's mouth. That is why Samandari's friends, who know the source of this cow, think that Samandari is also doing like the others. But to him, although offered by the king, the cow has nothing really special. It is exactly like all the other cows on earth.*

Burundians, being mainly farmers, attach a lot of importance on whatever can contribute to increasing farm harvest. That is partly one of the reasons why children are valued, because they constitute a workforce to parents. What of cows? Do they work? Not in the Rundi tradition. So, what is the use of showing great pride in a cow offered by the king, which has no extra quality such as being capable of fetching water or fetching firewood? Samandari seems to emphasize, through his observation, equal treatment due to all human beings. Whether king or subject, nobody can change magically the nature of elements just because of his status. A cow always behaves like a cow, whether it is a gift from a king or not.

*-Samandari filled a clay pot with sorghum wine dregs and went to offer it as a gift to the king. When the king's men asked him how he could do that shameful thing, he replied: "The other day when I came to the king's court, it is dregs which they offered me. I concluded that dregs are their favorite food".*

Dreg is the substance which stays at the bottom of a container in which one has prepared sorghum beer. It is not considered as food. If children or pigmies can eat it, it is because nobody laughs at them because of their young age or their low social status. Otherwise, dregs are given to chicken or simply thrown into the dustbin. It is not offered as food to somebody, not even to those children or pigmies, they are the ones who ask for it—if they need it. Thus, whoever offered Samandari dregs to eat, at a king's palace, had sought to show him a disrespect of the highest order. And Samandari got very much offended in his innermost. Without verbally insulting those who treated him so low, he went back home and prepared to revenge. When time came for him to go to pay another visit to the king, he took with him a pot filled with dregs, as a gift to the king. This is simply an indirect remark to them: they should have treated him with respect, so that he, in turn, he respects them. In other words, there is here again Samandari's mischievous emphasis on equality that all human beings deserve.

*-They laughed at Samandari: "Shame on you, you who get beaten by a pregnant woman". To which he replied: "I am rather a brave man, me who can fight with two people". Here again, Samandari has dared do what others cannot do. A man who respects himself does not fight with a woman; talk less of a pregnant woman. And Samandari fights and gets defeated by this woman, who is already weakened by the extra weight in her womb. When they laugh at him, he simply wants to emphasize how hard the fight was: he was fighting with two people, i.e. the woman herself, and the baby she is carrying in her womb. To get defeated by a woman, plus her unborn baby, does it not make of Samandari a super coward?*

*"Samandari was walking through a farm where beans were germinating. They told him: "How dare you"? He retorted: "My feet, I hope you are listening, because they are talking to you". Samandari knows that what he is doing is wrong. If anything breaks the shoots of germinating beans, the beans will rarely have another head from which to blossom into a mature plant. Samandari is still acting foolishly. But he still finds someone else to blame: his feet. As if they were not carried by his body! He tells them to listen and behave correctly, which is nonsensical since only him can take his legs off the farm, if he wants to. Another possible interpretation is that he wants to tell his addressee that the owner of the farm ought to have left a pathway for pedestrians when he was planting.*

*- One day, Samandari told the king: « Your highness, do you know that I can cheat you »? The king replied: « You! If you ever succeed in cheating me, I will give you cows which can fill this whole compound ». Samandari kept quiet and prepared his coup. One day, he put a pot full of vegetable on fire and pretended to be urgently needed elsewhere. So, he*

*begged the king to enkindle the fire while he would be absent. In his innocence, the king did as he was asked to do. A little while later, Samandari entered back. He opened the pot and, naturally, the level of the vegetable soup had gone down. He screamed: « Your highness, why did you eat my vegetable soup? How did you dare eat the vegetable soup of a poor man like me? » The king swore that he had not even opened the pot.*

*-So, who ate it? Was the pot not full when I left?*

*-Yes it was.*

*-Is it not almost empty now?*

*-Yes it is.*

*-So, why did you eat my vegetable soup?*

*The more the king explained that he did not eat the vegetable, the louder Samandari shouted. In the end, the king negotiated Samandari to accept cows full a mountainside, to bribe him to keep the secret. And Samandari enjoyed his newly acquired fortune, at the price of a lie!*

Samandari, the ordinary mischievous Burundian who happens to enter everywhere, seems to have kings as his favorite targets in jokes. He has already noticed that kings do not cook. Kings have never had the experience that vegetable reduces its volume when it is cooked. And Samandari makes a huge profit out of the king's ignorance. That is the fate of leaders who preside over cases which they have no experience about: they end up misleading their subjects, or the latter take command and mislead their leaders.

*-When Narunyonga's husband died, they told her: "Bring a hoe, so that we go to bury your husband". She replied: "Ask him, he is the only one who knows where he used to keep hoes".* It is well known that the dead cannot talk to the living. Narunyonga's reaction seems to be insinuating the dominating nature of her husband; he did not allow his wife to know where he keeps the family's property. And now that he has just died, he becomes the first victim of his domineering attitude; it is not possible to find a hoe to bury him. This joke proves that no matter how one may be wicked toward others, a day will surely come when one will fall a victim of one's own wickedness.

*-Narunyonga saw people who were busy preparing the burial of her husband, and she told them: "Hold him tight, he used to be very bellicose. You never know, he may kick his legs again and hit somebody".* As in the previous joke, the husband was so harsh on his wife that she now seems to be saying: is it true that he has finally been reduced to a quiet life? Is it true that his bellicose attitude died with his physical death?

As a general observation, all the jokes are built around one or two characters that have common features. They are of the weak species in the animal and the human kingdom. So are the cricket, the ant, the rat, the frog, and the crow. It is worth noticing the harsh competition in smartness that opposes the big and the small-sized animals which live in the same environment. The big-sized one leads an ordinary life which naturally is a threat to the small-sized ones. The latter survives mainly through its smartness. He is always the one who is the trickster and gets the other entrapped. In this way, it turns the big one into a laughing stock. Big size and smartness are two aspects which can rarely co-exist in one character. Thus, there is emphasized in these kinds of jokes a need of mutual respect and understanding among those living in the same milieu, since after all physical size and appearance are deceitful.

In the human kingdom as well, old women, old widows, Samandari (against the king) or Narunyonga belong to the fragile social class because of their advanced age, their widowhood or their low social class. Yet, as it is common to all African oral literature, the smaller or the weaker they look, the more they outwit the others. None of those weak characters is doing the normal thing. The old woman falls because of a ripe banana peel, the second is peeing, and the third envies a corpse being pulled away by a hyena, the fourth stumbles at the mouth of a tomb...and many other activities which cannot be listed in this short article.

One may wonder why only old women, never old men, are involved in these kinds of jokes that in the end ridicule human wickedness. The truth is that Burundians were looking for the most sensational information in order to create laughter from the hearer. Old women are among the funniest people in Burundian society. They are believed to behave in a very senseless manner, and easily become the laughing stock of their milieu. Burundians are not alone in this consideration. In her study on "Feminism and Fecundity in Igbo Birth Songs", Helen Chukwuma observes that in Igbo oral literature, old women, together with the barren woman, the cantankerous wife and the step-mother, are among the female characters who have "uncomplimentary exposure as objects of caustic satire". In addition to this, the Igbos in Nigeria have a proverb which says that "when one looks at an old woman, it appears as if money was not used in marrying her". Emphasis here is laid on old women's physical degeneration. Burundians, in their jokes, have added the idea of a parallel mental and moral degeneration of old women. Presumably, that justifies their being specifically targeted by the ridicule in Rundi jokes.

#### **THE FUNCTIONALITIES OF RUNDI JOKES**

It is interesting to realize that all the jokes comprise, structurally, a critical condition likely to inflict loss to the weak character. But the character that

reacts to the critical condition reacts with so much cunning or so much sense of humor that, in the end, one realizes that the one who was feared a victim is rather a master of a situation that he finally masters better than the antagonist.

If the followers of Sigmund Freud, with their theory according to which “patients’ unconscious is betrayed in jokes because of their libidinal, anxious or aggressive content”, were to study the people from whom these jokes originate (Burundians), they might reach the conclusion that jokes are literary means through which Burundians have, throughout the ages, struggled to keep their spirit high vis-à-vis unfriendly circumstances. As a case in point, this spontaneous resort to jokes in various circumstances prevented many Burundians from going mad out of the hardships brought about by the recent civil war in the country. Instead of worrying much over one’s fate, a victim could simply say something like: “I even survived the April rains”, or something like “let me leave this place early enough, since things here are always misplaced” or “I thank God that I have no brain, otherwise I would have gone mad”, or any other similar statement which would warm the situation up, re-create hope, laughter, smile, in the heart of the desperate speaker or the listener.

Another thing worth mentioning is the fact that jokes as a literary genre are so much linked to Burundians’ everyday life that parts of some of them are used almost as adages. The listener of the adage, if he is familiar with the Rundi culture, will understand the meaning being insinuated, whether he knows the whole joke which gave birth to it or not. For instance, it is common for the lowly, the downtrodden or the oppressed to look at menacing circumstances and simply say, like the ant, “I even survived the heavy rain of April”, to mean that they will survive the coming ordeal. In another context, an individual hit by unexpected hardships may say, like the male rat, “things here are always misplaced”, with the meaning that he is not happy with the obstacles. Or, with envy for those who have assistance while one is abandoned to himself out of lack of caring family members or friends, somebody may say, like the old woman, “those who have relatives are being lifted away”. There is misjudgment from the side of the old woman who uttered it for the first time in the joke. There has also been misjudgment in real life in connection with this adage. Let us extrapolate. At the peak of the 1990’s civil war in Burundi, Burundians were looking for asylum anywhere in the world. Those who have connections abroad could see themselves sent a ticket to a safe country. How many poor students, workers, parents, didn’t say with envy: “those who have their own people are being lifted away”. Yet, today those who stayed at home have emerged prosperous in education and business, while those who flew abroad went through the ordeals of not having funds to pursue

their education, not getting jobs, lack of love and care, forcefully joining drug and human trafficking networks...

Like many other oral genres in Africa, jokes are channels through which one can encourage virtue or redress the vices of society without leaving anybody feeling over- praised or over- hurt. The part of the joke which provokes laughter is uttered by the weak, the downtrodden, or the small- in- size character. They turn the oppressor into a ridiculous foolish character; the foolish one turns out to be wiser than his counterpart ...Jokes reposition moral value where vice is threatening it. But, at the same time, jokes do this by putting a smile on the listener’s face. In this way, formerly oppressed women (Narunyonga) have a chance to prove, publicly, their husbands’ foolishness. Jokes demonstrate that nobody is to be underestimated, since wisdom and value do not lie in the size of the character, nor in his wealth, or in his social or political position. Otherwise, a whole king wouldn’t have got cheated by Samandari. Jokes also demonstrate that apparently desperate condition can turn out to be blessings in disguise. In fact, all the animals involved in these jokes have a message to teach to the listeners. As for Samandari and Narunyonga, whom somebody may mistake for clowns or villains, they seem to be the voices of the voiceless Burundian majority. With a great sense of humor, the two characters teach respect of human life, or human dignity, and denounce the abuse of power by the rulers vis-à-vis their subjects, or by husbands vis-à-vis their wives.

Samandari and Narunyonga –but more Samandari than Narunyonga – operate in ordinary circumstances, which they turn into dramatic ones or laughing matters. While Narunyonga may often (not always) look reasonable, she can rightly stand as an advocate for women’s rights. Samandari is the main male character in Rundi jokes. He is an ordinary man of no specific age, but very certainly of a very low social class. His behavior is always awkward. He does what society prohibits and goes unpunished; he sneaks in to reach all social classes especially the rulers and teaches them a lesson by ridiculing or by reasoning them. For him, social and physical barriers cease to exist. He brings out the positive where anti-values prevailed. He is so often remembered in daily lives of Burundians that a person so funny or so mischievous beyond average may be nicknamed Samandari.

Another characteristic of jokes is that they break all the taboos associated with the Burundians’ sense of decency. Jokes look like a privileged channel through which sex is discussed mischievously; the chaste ears which happen to decipher the hidden meaning of some jokes run the risk of becoming deaf. But, is that not exactly the aim of a joke, whereby listeners must laugh?

Considering the place of laughter in affecting individuals, medical practitioners believe that “humor and laughter strengthen your immune system, boost your energy, diminish pain, and protect you from the damaging effect of stress”. With laughter come many physical, moral and social advantages. Among the latter, one can mention the following:

- Laughter strengthens relationships
- Laughter attracts others to us
- Laughter enhances teamwork
- Laughter defuse conflicts
- Laughter promotes group bonding
- ([www.helpguide.org/articles/emotional-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/emotional-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm)).

Among peoples who are afflicted by a recurrence of conflicts and other calamities, as it is the case with Burundi, it is necessary to keep their morale high. Jokes can serve as an antidote to psychological breakdown. Indeed, any work of reconstruction to the benefit of human beings must target first the human mind, and later proceed with other aspects of the needed physical and material reconstruction.

## CONCLUSION

Jokes play a social and a psychological role on individuals, particularly those in pain. They do not only contribute to the healing of certain psychological wounds, they also strengthen the social tissue, at least in a country like Burundi, where jokes are a literary genre. Liz Gunner had rightly observed that “the continent of Africa can be viewed as a site of enormous, long and ongoing creativity in relation to orality as a vector for the production of social life, religious beliefs, and the constant constituting and reconstituting of society, ideology, and aesthetics”(67). Key elements in this quotation are “ongoing creativity” and “constant reconstituting of society”. Jokes are to Burundians what proverbs are said to be in the Igbo culture. They structure society and keep adding value and hope to hopeless or uncomfortable situations. Thus, a war victim who has just lost everything to the civil war, can

still look back and challenge it, like the lizard to whom they cut off the tail but which looked at the whole thing and said: “*If it is only a tail, by tomorrow morning I will have another one*”. With this attitude, he carries the loss with a hope that, surely, the lost goods will be recovered as soon as war is over.

The analysis is not exhaustive. There are many other characters, other jokes and other situations which have not been accounted for in this work. However, the work is an attempt to create awareness and to keep alive this tradition of jokes, which are found in very few cultures, and with which social and psychological life can be made more enjoyable. Neither the modern humorists, nor nights of a thousand laughter can replace jokes in the life of those who have it as a cultural value.

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