“Make yourself uncomfortable”
Joking relationships as predictable uncertainty among the Trumai of Central Brazil

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This article explores the shapes taken by joking among the Trumai Indians and other groups of the Xinguan Indigenous Park (Mato Grosso, Brazil). This social practice often opposes persons who are in open-ended relationships, and can thus be defined as the default mode of relation: while it occurs prototypically between male cross-cousins, it is also common with Indian or non-Indian outsiders. Contrarily, one demonstrates both shame and respect toward real affines. Identifying this system of attitudes gives no account, however, of either the pragmatic properties of joking, nor its specific social efficacy. Joking, in particular, is remarkable by its inescapable ambivalence, both moral and functional. This characteristic is closely linked to the frame of interaction that joking is built upon, which manages, in the same time, to both follow highly conventional patterns and produce deep destabilization. This paper thus tries to explain the paradox of what could be called a predictable uncertainty and convey, partly from my own experience, what it is like to be part of such a play where the opposition between the failure and success of an interaction becomes blurred.

Keywords: joking, laughter, affinity, uncertainty, Upper Xingu, Amazonia

“No, I really think I should stop. This is the tenth joke I’ve told from my country and no one is laughing at all. I’m starting to feel ashamed.” This was the very first thing I said that provoked laughter from the assembled participants in this peculiar joking session during which I tried to introduce my Trumai hosts to selected examples of French humor. Up until then, each joke had been met by a severe silence, followed by my painful attempts to make the joke more explicit, and then by a laconic response from the village chief: “Yes, it was indeed funny. Tell us another one.” Apart from showing—fairly predictably—that blonde jokes don’t fit into Amazonian cosmology, this situation (both the insistence that I continue and finally the laughter when I confessed my shame) allows us to address interesting questions regarding joking in the Upper Xingu, the multilingual society to which
the Trumau belong. This anecdote is, of course, symptomatic of the endless gringo-bashing that characterizes the socialization of Euro-Americans in the region—a process that I will have the dubious privilege of exploring further over the course of the article. But why should laughter, rather than other forms of communication, be the principal tool of such socialization, and why is it so systematic and intensive in the Xingu? In other words, the overrepresentation of the ethnographer in the data about joking is precisely the proof that he occupies a perfect position to document this social practice and inquire into the wider scope of Xinguanian sociality.

Joking activity in the Upper Xingu is closely linked to the cross-cousin relationship (amipine in Trumau), which perfectly fits Radcliffe-Brown’s famous definition: “a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence” (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 195). According to his theory, institutionalized joking occurs as a way to stabilize relationships that combine elements of disjunction and conjunction. Some authors have tried, by dint of wide-ranging and systematic comparative work, to test his hypotheses in a Murdockian frame of analysis (Brant 1948, Alford and Alford 1981), but such functionalist approaches are widely criticized today. As Dan Rosengren has noted (2010: 104), other classical works on joking or laughter also tend to reduce it to a single or, at most, a few functions, be they social (Radcliffe-Brown) or psychological (Mary Douglas’ Freud-inspired anti-rite, Clastres’ anti-fear defense mechanism). Recent works have shown how joking might allow one to negotiate or comment on political relations (Canut and Smith 2006), inequalities (Morton 2008), and how laughter can be seen as linked to power (Lagrou 2006). Its ambivalence is also nowadays commonly accepted. In the introduction of a special issue on joking in the Anthropological forum, John Carty and Yasmine Musharbash insist, for instance, on the close link between laughter and social rupture: “Laughter is dangerous. Laughter is a boundary thrown up around those laughing, those sharing the joke. Its role in demarcating difference, of collectively identifying against an Other, is as bound to processes of social exclusion as to inclusion. Laughing ‘with’ some people usually entails laughing ‘at’ others . . . ” (Carty and Musharbash 2008: 214).

In Amazonia, the opposition between the positive and the disjunctive side of laughter also appears when comparing authors. Claude Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of myths that address the theme of laughter takes the side of those being laughed at. Its link to revenge makes it a potentially dangerous form of expression and therefore something that has to be controlled (1964). In contrast, more recent work on laughter in Amazonia has underlined the central role of shared laughter in conviviality, and therefore in processes of kin making (Overing 2000). Even Rosengren’s paper (2010) on absurdity among the Matsigenka—though it begins by underlining the polyvalence of laughter—ultimately reduces his analysis to a single episode that expresses conviviality. The aim of this paper is to give a wider ethnographic account of the social lines that both circumscribe and are drawn by joking, to look into “the intimate and ingenious play of individuals with and within the structures of their social world” (Carty and Musharbash 2008: 215). This implies drawing connections between social relations organized into a structured
system of shared terms, proscribed forms of behavior, and actual interactions in all their complexity.

The complexity of joking interactions stems first and foremost from the specific relationship they establish between communication and metacommunication, which is common to what Gregory Bateson defines as the “play” frame. Watching two monkeys playing, he observed that for him, as for them, what they do looks like combat but is definitely perceived as “not combat.” Therefore this phenomenon “could only occur if the participant organisms were capable of some degree of metacommunication, i.e., of exchanging signals which would carry the message ‘this is play’” (1972: 139). He further noted that this message creates a paradoxical frame of the Russelian or Epimenides type, which he gnomically glosses in the following terms: “these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote” (ibid.). Thus the playful act both refers to and differs from its literal version. Erving Goffman, through the notion of keying, significantly improved our understanding of how participants in an interaction define their attitude toward such a “primary frame” (1974). With specific regard to joking, Don Handelman and Bruce Kapferer (1972) have shown that it corresponds to two different frames: setting-specific and category-routinized. While the former relies on local resources found in the setting itself and is highly fragile, the latter is firmly rooted in social conventions and is therefore more resistant. In both case, their aim is to understand how participants establish, maintain, subvert, or destroy the joking frame.

However, their analysis takes for granted that one always identifies the situation as a “joking” one, which is not always the case in the Upper Xingu. On the one hand, it is true that the notion of stable behavior, once stripped of its functionalist or teleological connotations, is a good description of frequently predictable and routine-like joking interactions between cross-cousins. But, on the other hand, it does not do justice to the tension that appears no less frequently between certainty and uncertainty, prediction and surprise. As we will see, the explicit intention of these interactions is precisely to embarrass and destabilize the other. For this purpose, they mobilize a more complex frame, also mentioned (but only in passing) by Bateson, which “is constructed not upon the premise ‘This is play’ but rather around the question ‘Is this play?’” (1972: 141).

This significant change makes room for variety, strategies, and pragmatic modulations within an explicit and rigid system of attitudes. To say it “leaves room,” however, is not really to do justice to the shift involved, which takes as its frame the very lack of an obvious frame. In so doing, as I shall show, it places uncertainty at the core of the social productivity of joking.

Shame and respect

The Trumai live along the tributaries of the Xingu river (Mato Grosso, Brazil). The area was first described by Karl von den Steinen toward the end of the 1880s (von den Steinen 1886, 1894). After a period of relative isolation, it began to be visited with increasing frequency, notably by the Roncador-Xingu expedition guided by the Villas-Boas brothers. They created the Xinguian reservation in 1961, access to which was restricted to anthropologists and medical officers. The “Xingu Indigenous Park” is divided into a northern and a southern area. While the former offers no cultural unity, the latter, commonly called “Upper Xingu
society,” consists of ten groups representing four linguistic families: Kamayura and Aweti (Tupi); Kalapalo, Kuikuro, Matipu, and Nahukuá (Carib); Yawalapi, Wauja, and Mehinaku (Arawak); and Trumai (a linguistic isolate). The Upper Xingu is characterized by a certain degree of cultural similarity, and is doubtless the result of a long and ongoing process of integration, which both links the units (through marriages, economic ties, ritual, and observance of a shared ethos) and preserves them as they are, at least linguistically speaking (Franchetto 2001). Archaeological data shows that this grouping has an Arawakan substrate that succeeded in integrating and transforming (as well as being transformed by) successive arrivals of Caribe, Tupian, and Trumai groups (Heckenberger 2001). The Trumai were the last to arrive, in the middle of the nineteenth century, and, as a unit, they still occupy a marginal position in local society. Culturally fragile since they ceased ritual activities more than twenty years ago, and losing their language, today they perceive themselves as being in a critical situation (de Vienne 2011). Though excluded from the ritual cycle, the Trumai still participate in everyday Upper Xinguian sociality.

Radcliffe-Brown’s insight that one has to consider the joking relationship as part of a wider system of behavior remains valid. In particular, as it is a relationship of “permitted disrespect,” our theorizing concerning it “must be part of, or consistent with, a theory of the place of respect in social relations and in social life generally” (1940: 196). As mentioned in the introduction, in the Upper Xingu, joking and teasing occur primarily between cross-cousins (amipine in Trumai), that is to say virtual affines (see figure 1). This contrasts with behavior toward actual affines, which is characterized by marks of respect and shame. In Trumai these actual affines are even called ha faltit chïk, “those toward whom I feel shame.” This shameful relationship is always mutual and, when it exists between people of different generations, also asymmetrical, as the younger partner shows more shame and therefore more respect than his elder. While in many Xinguian languages, shame and respect are both referred to by the same term, among the Trumai faltri (shame) is different from oxe (respect). If the former involves the latter (shame is a display of respect), the reverse is not true. Some kin are said to be respectable without being treated with shame.

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1. Following Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Carlos Fausto (1993), I call virtual affines people that can actually become affines, reserving “potential affines” for more distant Others.
Shame relationships invariably involve avoiding the other’s name, restraining from laughter and joking and, to varying degrees, physical avoidance. When permitted (between same-sex in-laws) or absolutely necessary (between generations), forms of address must be rendered oblique. This can be done by teknonymy and also—between same-sex in-laws—by the terms of address *inetl ka’am* (brother-in-law) or *inatletl ka’am* (sister-in-law), contractions of “it is to him/her that I am talking.” It is between Ego and in-laws of the opposite sex at G+1 that the shame is strongest. In the past, Trumai men even had to head into the forest when they saw their mother-in-law on the path to the river in order to avoid meeting her. Today they avoid close copresence and eye contact. The Trumai’s comments on these rules are strictly faithful to Radcliffe-Brown’s (1940) theory, according to which institutionalized shame appears as a way to stabilize a relationship that combines both conjunction and disjunction. In their own words: “You can’t argue with someone you don’t talk to.” Shame relationships thus constitute an interaction frame of a special kind: embodied as an emotion, they prevent interaction explicitly to preserve the relationship.

Apart from defining a kinship relation, shame is a key moral value for the definition of Xinguanian identity. For example, Ellen Basso defines the *ifutisu* feeling among the Kalapalo as “respect for one another” (1973: 7) between kin, and more generally as a moral stance that refuses aggressiveness and favors continuous displays of generosity. To publicly accuse someone of stealing, even when true, shows a lack of *ifutisu*, while accepting a bad bargain shows that one possesses this quality to a large extent. Therefore the ideal man is ready to sacrifice his own good for the sake of peace, proof that he has “shame.” Puberty seclusion aims not only to produce beautiful bodies (desirable, which for women are fit for procreation and for men are fit for traditional wrestling), but also to generate this feeling of shame that children lack. Young persons are isolated behind a wall in their house for several months (up to two years for future chiefs who are supposed to possess these Xinganian qualities to the highest degree). During this period, they avoid sunlight, cannot see anyone that is not a close consanguine, and should only talk when absolutely necessary and in hushed tones. These behavioral rules are converted into an actual feeling of shame when they emerge from seclusion. During the emergence ceremony, the secluded adolescent is exposed on the central plaza, in broad daylight, usually during an important intertribal ritual. Women, who have not cut their hair since their first day of seclusion, exhibit a long fringe that hides their eyes. This veil is then publicly cut, an act that gives its name to the end of seclusion ceremony: “the cutting of the fringe” (*puk naha*). Briefly put, shame and respect in the Upper Xingu extend far beyond the sphere of kinship. They are the moral marks of humanity, which are used to define the Xinguanians as opposed to savage (*bravas*) tribes and white people.

Laughing with one’s cross-cousins, therefore, cannot but make constant and implicit reference to these respect and shame relationships. Jokes are funny if only because they are acts of subversion, pragmatic comments upon, or ironic décalage vis-à-vis shared knowledge of what it is to behave properly. Indeed, this is how Murray Garde interprets joking relationships (associated with virtual affinity)

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2. *Inetl ka’am* is a contraction of *in-e-d kain ha ami* (“to him indeed I speak”). *Inatletl ka’am* is a contraction of *inat-etl kain ha ami* (“to her indeed I speak”).
among the Bininj Kunwok in Australia; that is, as “the inversion of constrained behaviours to index pragmatically the absence of actual affinity” (Garde 2008: 237). The driving force of humor is thus defined negatively, as the relief felt at “the breaking of conventions” (ibid.: 248). These considerations, however, imply that joking, though creative and inventive, consists in letting off steam, in following one’s “natural” urges. As illustrated by the systematic references in the literature about joking to invisible lines and boundaries to be crossed (funny) or not to be crossed (improper), joking better appears as a positive performance, somehow perilous, which requires the mastery of certain positively valued skills.

The cross-cousin relationship: How far can you go too far?
The *amipine* (bilateral cross-cousin) category includes a large number of individuals, since in the Upper Xingu everyone in Ego’s generation is, for the purposes of addressing them, either a classificatory parallel cousin considered a brother or sister (*ha pisí* in Trumai, “brother/sister,” or “cousin brother / cousin sister” in Portuguese), or a classificatory cross-cousin (simply called cousin in Portuguese).

The types of behavior associated with this cross-cousin relationship vary significantly depending on gender. It is principally male cross-cousins who engage in joking behavior. Female cross-cousins avoid making jokes at one another’s expense. Cross-sex cross-cousins have, qua potential spouses, the option of flirting with one another, which may take the form of gentle teasing but this largely takes place in the absence of the anthropologist. The ability to joke is also partly linked to age. Adolescents of both sexes who have just emerged from seclusion are too stricken by shame to be able to joke publicly. This ability is only acquired little by little and normally much later for women. Joking, however, remains mainly a masculine activity since it is paradigmatically associated with relationships involving alterity, a domain controlled by men. For this reason, and also because I had less access to the feminine world, this paper focuses primarily on interactions that involve men.

Between male cross-cousins, exchanges involve systematic ribald comments, feigned aggression, horseplay, teasing, and in the past even a form of “goosing” or playful penis-grabbing. The cross-cousin is thus the closest *other*, and this relationship cannot be reduced to virtual affinity as its productivity goes far beyond matrimonial exchange. *Javari* festivities, for instance, involve an important intertribal ritual partly structured around the *amipine* relationship. It involves dueling with spears and insult contests opposing *amipine* from different villages. This relationship is also close to that of friendship, which is evident in reflexive comments about it as well as in the etymology of the term: *-pine* means “friend, partner.” This behavior is reflexively theorized. In Trumai, it is called either *taraíw* or *hopeta*. When joking involves speech, it is called *ami taraíw* (talk joking), though one cannot say *ami hopeta*. This detail aside, the meaning of both verbs is the same: joking or mocking. They can both be used in intransitive as well as transitive constructions, each construction involving a semantic nuance. *Ha a hopeta* or *ha a taraíw* (1Ps dual joke) means, “we both joke,” in order to define the nature of the relationship between the speaker and his cousin. Here joking is reciprocal. *Ha*

3. *Ha a* (both of us) is exclusive. The inclusive form would be *ka a.*
hopeta / taraiw ine-tl (1Ps mock 3ps-acc.), on the other hand, means, “I make fun of him” or “I mock him” and therefore involves an asymmetry. This ambiguity is at the heart of the relationship since its mutual and symmetrical dimension is not given, but results from constant dueling. Officially, one has no choice but to accept cheerfully that one is the target of such mockery, and I frequently heard sentences like “you have to know how to [take a] joke,” “you mustn’t take offence,” or “this is what cross-cousins do,” and so on. Perhaps the paradoxical nature of the joking relationship frame should be clearly underlined. On the one hand it is shared by everyone and completely explicit, and involves to a large extent conventional patterns, themes, and lines. As noted by William McGregor, many writers have insisted on the fact that jokes tend to become conventional, and ultimately involve “extremely formulaic exchanges” (McGregor 1989: 86). On the other hand, the content of the explicit frame contradicts the very notion of frame, saying more or less, “Do what you want and be ready for anything, but don’t get mad.” In what follows, I explore the nature of the uncertainty produced by this duality by showing that it rests less on invention or creativity than on daring and the dissimulation of intention.

Ribald wordplay is extremely common, often relying on the combination of more or less standard tropes. On one notable occasion, an elder described his mistress as “my sperm’s clothing.” Nowadays, however, humor tends to be derived from exposing the other to shame by setting him up for and then highlighting a (homo)sexual double entendre. This is mainly done in Portuguese—the dominant language in intertribal interactions—and between men. Traps are frequent—for example, “you like to suck?” (speaking of fruits), to which one carefully avoids giving a positive answer. This form of joking is so automatic among young people that they carefully avoid the verb “to give” (dar) because it has the figurative meaning of accepting sexual intercourse with a man. These examples can be examined according to classic theories of humor, as summed up by William Beeman (2000). Humor always implies the setting up of a surprise or a series of surprises, among which the most common is “incongruity,” defined as follows:

A communicative actor presents a message or other content material and contextualizes it within a cognitive “frame.” The actor constructs the frame through narration, visual representation, or enactment. He or she then suddenly pulls this frame aside, revealing one or more additional cognitive frames which audience members are shown as possible contextualizations or reframings of the original content material. The tension between the original framing and the sudden reframing results in an emotional release recognizable as the enjoyment response we see as smiles, amusement, and laughter. This tension is the driving force that underlies humor, and the release of that tension—as Freud pointed out—is a fundamental human behavioral reflex. (Beeman 2000)

Humor then consists in a double framing, laughter arising when the audience grasps the new contextualization of a previous utterance. If someone says, “I gave it to him,” somebody else might respond, “then you gave [put out], huh?” The pragmatic indicators (pause, smiles, blinking, and glances to others) allow to reframe the verb “to give” in its sexual meaning.

Wordplay, however, is not the primary resource for joking. Since the main goal is to embarrass the opponent, one can use other ways to reach it. There will still be
a process of double framing that generates tension and release, but it will concern
the interaction itself, not a particular linguistic content.

Cousins frequently play with kinship terms. The idea is to imply by the use of
such and such false kinship term either that the addressee is older than he is
(grandfather, uncle) or that one of his female consanguines is attractive (brother-in-
law when it is his sister, father-in-law when his daughter, etc.). This is a pragmatic
reference to other possible relationships and it underlines the openness of joking
relationships, although such mockery is not really unsettling.

Infidelity, on the other hand, provides an endlessly rich and destabilizing vein
of humor, which is the driving force behind one of the most conventional and
efficient embarrassment techniques. It occurs when two cousins meet in the
presence of one of their spouses. The unaccompanied cousin will almost inevitably
begin to relate his cousin’s infidelities to the latter’s spouse. All the actors involved
recognize this as hopeta, and indeed most of it is pure invention, and is seen as
such. Most of it, because the trick is to slip in actual examples of infidelity. Cousins
frequently travel together in the park or to the city for political meetings, healthcare
or school seminars, and so forth. During these stays away from home, they may
mutually confess their good fortune with this or that Indian “cousin” or white nurse.
They may also go to brothels together. Cousins, then, are frequently yutta, a term
used to describe people (male or female) who have or had a common lover. The
wife’s attitude when faced with these revelations must conform to the local ideal of
emotional control. Jealousy, even with good grounds, is seen as improper behavior.
This is why, most of the time, she says nothing and shows no reaction beyond
raising her eyebrows, which might equally mean, “I am no fool, I know perfectly
well,” “I don’t care,” or “I don’t believe a word of what you are saying.” The
consequences, however, can be serious. The calmest wife, once she finds herself
alone with her husband, may unleash her rage. A young Trumai told me for
instance: “I used to joke with X and his wife, since he is my cousin. But I
completely stopped. Once, I did that brinca deira (joke), you know, I said that he
went with me to visit Y in Morena, I revealed everything, but not seriously, you
know. I heard that soon after I left, she took his 22 (rifle) and pointed it at him,
loaded, saying ‘you cheating bastard, I’ll kill you.’ I was shocked when I heard that
[laughing]. He almost died because of me. Since then I’ve keep quiet.”

The fun of the situation, even if conventionalized, is that uncertainty surrounds
how far the teaser is prepared to go, how the victim will control his reactions, and
whether the wife will say anything at all. As for the victim, one can well understand
that the interlarding of true stories and false ones makes it all the harder for him.
So long as they are false, he feels relatively safe, but when the speaker inserts a true
story into the mix, he must make sure not to react differently than before, despite
fear of his wife’s reaction and anger at his friend’s betrayal. Frequently there are
more than just these core participants present. Joking is better with an audience,
the idea being to expose the victim as much as possible. Observers are not passive,
at least those who are not in a shame relationship to the core participants. They
join the teaser in frantically blinking, with both eyes, as a sign of connivance,
encouraging him to continue. They also refrain from laughing but in a conspicuous
way, and eventually they enter the game. The goal is collective laughter, which
breaks out when the husband, or his wife, finally reacts. The public act of
denunciation is nothing more than the patient construction of an emotional
tension, during which expectation grows and collective attention gets focused with more and more intensity on the target couple. The man may ultimately lose his temper in an exaggerated manner (though while still smiling or laughing) or he may vigorously deny the accusations. The wife may calmly state that she knows how worthless her man is or explain in a sad tone that he indeed wants to abandon her. In any case the reaction is the signal of a collective release. The session can proceed further following the same pattern, or shift toward more serious subjects.

The role of the audience in this precise case is emblematic of joking or teasing events in general. The public obeys what we might call a “nonassistance clause” toward the victim. For the sake of the joke, even close consanguine refrain from helping and will eventually become accomplices. The motivation for this relentless mockery is rarely cruelty. These interactions have nothing to do with bullying either, since they do not intend to create recurrent scapegoats. Alliances are highly fragile and temporary. They can change in the blink of an eye, and the audience will apply the same rule of mute or active participation against the new target. It is true, however, that repetitive successful joking on the same theme and with the same people can have a strong impact on the victim’s reputation. I witnessed many cases where a joke ultimately morphed into gossip.

Uncertainty about the joker’s intentions is also at the core of practical joking. During my most recent fieldwork in July 2011, an old Trumai told me about some of the good times he had had with an amipine who had died a couple of months before.

AMATI: The guy who died was a great amipine. Kamayura. One day he invited me to fish: “Hey makra [cross cousin in kamayura], let’s go fishing, you never ate something I fished or hunted.” I said, “Yes, true, nor did you eat something I killed. Let’s go.” “I think you never kill anything, that’s why.” “You never saw me, and I never saw you, that’s all. We are even then. Let’s go tomorrow, we’ll see.” So we went the day after. He asked: “who is going to fish, to kill fish with arrows?” I said, “You will, I will steer the canoe.” “Just because you suck when it comes to killing fish!” he answered. “No, if you appear to suck, we’ll switch places.” “Ok then.” There was a lot of “turtle’s food,” you know [name of a plant that grows in the water]. When the first [turtle] appeared, he missed it. Later, downstream, he missed another one. Pa! He missed three. They were really big! I was just watching in silence. He missed one more, then I said, “You are so bad at it, get ready to fall in the water!” “Don’t do that!” he answered. He missed and missed again. Then I saw the water was shallow. When he missed it, [he enacts the brutal paddle move he did] Tsum! He fell in the water. . . . “You are right, I keep missing, I deserved to fall,” he said. “Step in,” I said. He killed four or five then. . . . Then we made fire and ate turtle. When he finished he told me: “Amati take my arrows and my gun to the canoe.” “I am not your servant,” I answered. “No!” he said. “It is just to help me!” “Just this time then,” I said. I took them. He stayed behind to defecate. “You won’t be long?” “No I won’t.” Waiting for him I decided I wanted to test him, see how he would react. I said: “Man! “Yes?” “Bye bye! You can

4. He uses the Portuguese indeterminate term fulano, “Mr. So-and-So,” because it is prohibited to pronounce the name of a recently deceased person.
go back by foot! I am leaving.” “Don’t do that! I am just finishing!” “It is too late, I’m already on my way.” Then he shouted: “Amati! Amati!” “Yes?” I answered from downstream. “Don’t do that! Come back!” “No, you can walk or swim back,” I said. “Oh, I don’t know why I didn’t keep my rifle. I would have shot you in the ass!” Then I remained silent. Then I said just “Ciao!” “Don’t do that or you’ll see, as soon as I get there I will beat you up!” “We will be even then, since if you beat me I’ll beat you as well, ciao!” Then he cried: “Amati! Amati!” [He imitates a tearful panicking voice and obtains laughter from his audience, two of his grandsons and me] Then I felt pity for him. “You shit in your pants out of fear, so I won’t do that to you.” “I really thought you were going to leave me. Just because you are amipine I won’t fight with you now. We came to fish, not to joke.” “You’re right.” It is like that. Poor him, he died.

This narrative offers a good illustration of the mix of rivalry, mockery, and friendship that characterizes the amipine relationship. It consists precisely in demonstrating the opposite of kind and proper behavior: Amati acts offended when the cousin asks him to help him with his equipment, impatient when he is supposed to wait for him, angry when his cousin misses fish or turtles. The point is clearly to bring things just to the point where the other begins to take the other one seriously. This is especially the case when Amati pretends to leave his cousin on the bank. Only when the victim cries and shouts does he decide to stop the game and relieve the tension. The narration of his cousin’s panic is the high point of the tale, showing that the joke was a success, at least from Amati’s point of view.

Joking interactions with cousins, in sum, could be described as composed of three steps. The first is a given, it is shared knowledge about the nature of the relationship: a joking one. The second is the utterance or gesture that manifests hostile intent (betrayal, offense, aggression, etc.). Teasing somebody about his infidelity must necessarily call into question the idea that the joker is “only” joking. He might actually want to betray you and tell your wife the truth. Mock aggression, feigned offense, and anger tend, in the same way, to break the joking frame itself. The third moment is metapragmatic. It consists in reframing the intention as fake, through laughter or explicit reference to the initial frame. This can be done by the offended, in a laughing tone (“You call that being a friend, eh?”) or more frequently by the offender (“I was just kidding”). In short, joking amounts to trying to convince the other you are not joking before saying that you were.

The social performativity of joking

The idea of a stable or conventional set of jokes linking a precisely defined set of persons according to kinship is, then, quite far from doing justice to the flexibility of the system. As for the content of the jokes, we have seen that even the most robust patterns can generate both good, clean laughter and deep embarrassment. On the participants’ side, one must acknowledge that joking is socially performative, and not merely a peripheral attribute of prior relationships. Pushing the inversion to its logical conclusion—and at the risk of exaggerating—one might say that cousins don’t joke because they are cousins, they are cousins because they joke. Of course, actual affinity and to a lesser extent consanguinity constitute objective limitations, but there is plenty of room for pragmatic manipulation.
This manipulation is also present in relations between cross-cousins of opposite sexes. In such cases, the concerned parties can choose to think of themselves as sharing a sibling relationship or, alternatively, as remaining cross-cousins. This choice often boils down to a question of sex and refusals often take the form of kinship terms (“no, brother”). It is even possible to temporarily transform a consanguine into an affine, as one man intimated when he explained to me that one of his regular mistresses was “sister by day, cousin by night.”

But to return to relationships between men, it is worth noting, first of all, that not every person considered amipine is equally fit to be a joking partner. As we saw in Amati’s narrative, some are “great cousins,” whom one especially enjoys laughing at or with. Some others are treated like siblings. Therefore the ideal amipine relationship can be produced to varying degrees. Second, joking is not limited to cousins. Within one’s kin circle, consanguines from Ego’s generation, and even from a different generation (to whom one ideally shows respect) can also be teased or mocked but in a milder manner. This, however, is not officially recognized, as can be seen in this brief exchange with Amati:

*ME.* One only jokes with amipine?

*AMATI.* Exclusively.

*ME.* With one’s father, too?

*AMATI.* No,

*ME.* Come on, as if you’ve never joked with your son . . .

*AMATI.* Which one?

*ME.* Pedro.

*AMATI.* Ah, yes, we do joke. Some joke. Some joke; others don’t.

As a matter of fact, the triangle formed by Amati, his elder son Pedro, and myself very much respected the pattern of the cross-cousin relationship. When one of us confessed some embarrassing anecdote to another, it was fairly certain that it would be revealed to the third person when we were all present.

Even joking between brothers-in-law is possible, under specific conditions. A Trumai woman married a Kayabi man—Kayabi is a northern tribe that is not part of the Upper Xingu society, and has a different system of attitudes. Kayabi, unforgivably, joke with their in-laws and say their names out loud. This particular man, however, decided to show respect to his wife’s family and applied the Xinguanian rule. One of his brothers-in-law, however, was failing to reciprocate, and so one night, after a couple of drinks, he decided to address the problem. The brother-in-law in question reported the conversation:

I really like him. He is really funny, I knew him before, we joke a lot. . . . One day he came to me, he was a little drunk. He said to me: “Hey, why do you always use my name? You don’t respect me! I don’t know why. None of your brothers use my name! Leandro doesn’t use my name, Edilson doesn’t use my name, Renato doesn’t use my name . . . ” And at the same time, he was using all their names [he smiles]. “But you keep using my name! Why so? You don’t like me?” Then I kept serious. I looked at him and I said, “No I don’t like you.” [he makes a serious face]. He was stunned. He asked: “But why? Did I
do something?” Then I said: “I am no boiola [gay, deprecative] who likes men. I like women.” Then he laughed, “Ka ka ka ka! You got me!”

We joke a lot, I like him.

This anecdote confirms the reflexive nature of joking: what is funny is to play around with whether or not the participants are joking. It also shows the openness of the system. This in-law was at once too distant to be respected (he couldn’t, in spite of his efforts, avoid his in-law’s names) and too good a joking partner to be dismissed as such. His wife’s brother thus decided to confirm him in this status of cousin-like brother-in-law.

At the other end of the social spectrum, joking appears as a systematic interaction frame with native or nonnative outsiders. It is used in particular as a means of integrating the other. As we saw in the introduction, the anthropologist, in particular, may be submitted to severe treatment. Since Buell Quain, the American anthropologist who did fieldwork in 1938 among the Trumai, five researchers have worked or are working with them, a number that is sufficient to identify some regular patterns and to account for idiosyncratic behavior. The anthropologist, in addition, is only one of the faces taken as otherness for the Trumai. Joking with him or her is similar to joking with a Brazilian neighbor in the city, a doctor or nurse in the Park, an NGO employee, etcetera. In these cases, embarrassment and teasing rely primarily on the absence of shared knowledge, in particular regarding myths and language.

The first type of joking consists of making the other repeat in Trumai sentences he cannot understand. As a consequence, the first lexical domain a foreigner will learn is the anatomy of male and female genitalia, the adjectives to describe their textures and smells according to age, and the metaphoric forms they can take in insults. What is seen as comic in these interactions is that the outsider says something embarrassing for himself like “my penis stinks.” After a few variations, when the laughter loses its intensity, someone else may intervene to help him. They communicate defensive lines, in a low voice, though clearly audible to everyone, that involve turning the line back on the offender with necessary alterations (e.g., “your vagina stinks”). Embarrassment ceases to be the only trigger of laughter, and is replaced by insult dueling that is very likely to escalate.

Giving the stranger a Trumai name is also a systematic joking resource. The nicknames (which may last only as long as the utterance or which may become definitive) usually make reference to a mythical character via behavioral or morphological similarities. Here, the comic effect relies on the reframing of the situation through mythical knowledge. My Trumai name, Walatu (“frog”) was given after a couple of nights during which I stayed up late reading with my head torch. Walatu is a mythical character who similarly put glow worms on his eyelids in order to hide the fact that he was sleeping. He thus avoided being killed by Jaguar, who was waiting for him to fall asleep. The fact that the addressee does not know the cultural reference allows for efficient and effective humiliation. When the name is particularly inglorious, they try to make the fool think it is a proper Indian name. It usually works the first time, as the anthropologist can hardly resist this symbol of acceptance into the native social world. Only later is he or she informed of the meaning. This was the case for me with Ororok, a mythical character famous for his physical weakness and therefore systematic defeats in wrestling. Sometimes nothing motivates the choice of the name but its infamous or
obscene connotations. Thus a nonnative female visitor was once given the name Werap, protagonist of a myth about female sexual frustration and frantic masturbation. The episode is still recalled with nostalgia.

Mockery of strangers, then, relies on the same process of transformation of embarrassment into collective laughter that we saw with same-sex cross-cousins. Indeed, in the multilingual crucible of the Upper Xingu, the possibilities of linguistic incomprehension are also exploited in intertribal exchanges, and not only in those involving whites. That said, there are still a number of significant differences. The feigned hostility proper to cross-cousin exchanges cannot, for instance, be replicated in interactions with whites, at least not early on. Instead, one exploits the humoristic potential of integration and rapprochement: giving the outsider a local name, as we saw above, or touting the possibility of unlikely sexual liaisons. For example, a young female anthropologist spent last February in Canarana working with Amati, now aged over 60. She used to appear around noon in his house, a time when he had usually just got up and bathed. But one day, he was still in the bathroom and she had to wait. Amati’s son Pedro and sister Kumaru started to tease both her and Amati. They urged her, when Amati finally appeared, to say certain sentences to him in Trumai. She accepted the game. Pedro first taught her: “Are you up, my tender one?” (Aya hi lakida, ha pudits chïk?). Then Kumaru added a new version: “Are you up, Amati my lover?” (Aya hi lakida, ha el Amati?), which was finally transformed into: “Are you up, Amati’s pubic hair?” (Aya hi lakida, Amati honkos?). This last ribald comment illustrates the logic of gradation common to a teasing session. The plan was successfully executed. It was both a comment on this researcher’s constant desire to spend time with Amati, and on Amati’s tendency to sleep late in the morning. Even though I was in France at that time, I was roped into this session. Knowing that she was planning to contact me on Skype, they never told her the meaning of the lines, so that she would have to ask me. This would recreate, even in their absence, the discrepancy of knowledge and thus the slight embarrassment that characterizes Trumai humor.

Humor involving non-Indian visitors, then, revolves around the performance of a sort of integration or rapprochement, but in such a fashion as to suggest that such a rapprochement is in fact impossible. Indeed, it is not possible to joke about a sexual liaison between an outsider and a Trumai of the same age, precisely because such a thing is possible. Similarly, the Trumai names given to anthropologists are never authentic anthroponyms, which are cognatically transmitted via alternating generations. Here, the humor integrates and draws the anthropologist in, but also maintains a minimal distance that can never be crossed.

This is not to suggest that these two types of joking relationships (between male amipine and between Trumai and outsiders) are in fact radically different in nature. Rather, they constitute two poles of a continuum. Indeed, it is only a matter of time before the joking frame gets established with the stranger. Afterward, if he appears to “know how to joke,” they may push the cursor toward the “great amipine” level and pretend to take his belongings and leave him behind when traveling, or mention greeting him with a club for a cannibal ritual. Joking is thus a powerful tool of social integration. One observes whether the visitor is ready to accept cheerfully ironic comments and teasing, ready to learn how to reciprocate in order to create “sweet” laughter (tsi pom). The opposition, frequently noted, between
laughing with and laughing at—the former being convivial and the second dangerous—is therefore unable to seize the dynamics of Xinguanian joking. The aim is precisely to accept both laughing with and being laughed at, and at the same time.

The second reason the line between *amipine* and outsiders should be blurred is that the Upper Xingu is an open system, which incorporated former enemies and “made them human.” This transformation took place through ritual, trade, marital alliance, but probably also through humor. The Xinguanian cross-cousin is then the proximate and partially pacified incarnation of a form of generic alterity that can take many forms and that is thought of in terms of affinity.

This is a common characteristic of Amazonian sociality, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has shown. In many societies, affinal terms are used to describe relationships that go far beyond actual affinity, such that affinity can be seen as the “given dimension of the cosmic relational matrix” (2001: 21), which Viveiros de Castro proposes to call “potential affinity,” “in order to distinguish affinity as a generic value from affinity as a particular type of kinship tie” (ibid.: 22). Conversely, consanguinity is not seen as given: it must be actively produced by stripping away the initial part of affinity that was embedded in the relationship. Affinity, even when it stops being virtual, thus always remains ambivalent. For example, in Tupinamba *tovajar* means both “brother-in-law” and “enemy,” and it “expresses friendly alliance as well as mortal enmity outside, and certainly the other way around. It approaches and opposes in the same movement ” (2002: 408–9). In Trumai, wayar, which is of Tupian origin, designates both enemies and the parents of one’s son-in-law or daughter-in-law. A recent paper by Carlos Fausto (2012) explores the friendship relationship (*pajé*) among the Parakaná, and shows how it is “defined by the very fact of containing contradictory connotations,” such as hostility and intimacy, self and otherness. The friend, as he sums it up, is “the nearest enemy, the prey closest to hand,” and it is indeed possible to actually kill one’s best friend. Even if the Xinguanians rarely reach such extremes, one finds just the same duality in the cross-cousin relationship. What I aim to show is how it is established in the here and now of interaction. Even the closest cousin is reestablished as a stranger during the joke. What is important, apparently, is not the absence of enmity; it is the moment enmity is transformed into friendship. The dominant joking pattern—that of feigned hostility—expresses the constant enactment of this process of familiarization. Friendship is defined negatively, as the discovery that the other, surprisingly, has no hostile intention. Laughter is more than release; it is relief. Amati and his Kamayura cousin offer one last striking example of this dialectical move:

Another day, this guy who died, he said to me:

“Let’s have a pee, don’t you feel like you need to pee?”

“Let’s go.”

“I have a story for you,” he said.

“Ok.”

So we went outside. He started telling:

“I heard that the Trumai who live in Diawarum are intending to kill all the Kamayura. But the Trumai are nobody,” he said. “How could the Trumai finish off the Kamayura? They are not men enough to do that. They aren’t. It’s the Kamayura who are real men.”

He was peeing all the while. When he was peeing I pushed him, “tuf!”

“It is the Kamayura who aren’t men!”

I pushed him like that.

“Wait a second! I’ll beat you up!” He slipped. “Tchuk tchuk tchuk!” He almost fell, stood up again, saying, “Wait a second! Wait a second!” [He laughs]. This was the last joke I had with him. It was in Pavuru.

If co-peeing between men can be given as proof of intimacy, what we witness here is two intimate enemies joking about their enmity. The Kamayura are, for the Trumai, their “true enemies” (wayar pi’tsi), which also means their “true affines.” These two sides of the relationship are equally historically important. Systematic marriages over the last 150 years (many of them through intimidation) and episodes of coresidence have even had significant effects on the Trumai language, which has incorporated many Tupian words, including, ironically enough, wayar. In the same period the Kamayura repeatedly tried to “exterminate” the Trumai, threatening to attack and sometimes actually attacking their village, a process the Kamayura would describe as retaliation for witchcraft attacks. The perfect setting for a good laugh . . .

One can now clearly see that joking with amipine and joking with outsiders are logically linked. In the first case, closeness is a given—because of the existence of real genealogical ties, actual intimacy, and a relationship stretching back to childhood. Indeed, they could have elected to consider each other as siblings, a safer but far duller course of action. The point then is to destabilize the relationship and reaffirm its inherent alterity by feigning enmity. In contrast, in the second case the starting point is radical difference and the humor, as we saw in the case of Amati and the young anthropologist, relies on suggesting an impossible alliance. In both cases joking preserves distance at the same time as it negates it. It is simply that depending on one’s point of departure, one either feigns to sunder so as to unite or feigns to unite so as to sunder.

Joking, precisely because of the uncertainty it generates, is the means by which one establishes the “proper distance”—it is a pragmatic tool for bringing closer or distancing as the case may be.6 With the Kayamara, we have a situation of real affinity that is constantly transformed into ambiguous enmity, and with the anthropologist, we have a relationship of mistrust that can be overcome by aping an improbable affinal tie.

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6. Here the uncertainty is precisely what makes the joking socially productive, as is the case in the love affair described by Matthew Carey (this volume).
Moral ambiguity

It is not surprising if this ambivalence is reflected in reflexive moral comments on joking. On the positive side, joking skills are highly valued. The collective laughter they can produce is, just as anywhere else, a powerful tool for conviviality and social bonding. The inscription of successful joking events in the individual and collective memory, however, has not frequently been remarked upon in the anthropological literature. The first example given above, in which Amati recalled his best tricks with his late *amipine*, offers a good example. The beginning and the end of the narrative are references to his recent death (“poor him, he died”), and define it as a special type of eulogy. The fact that Amati (at least according to his memory) always gained the upper hand over him certainly contributes to his regret. But I noticed on numerous other occasions that a particularly successful joking session constituted a sort of hallmark of the relationship between its participants. It was endlessly reenacted and voluntarily recalled in later encounters, always accompanied by declarations of nostalgia.

Old Kumaru was a dedicated joking teacher for me and this greatly contributed to my integration into her family during the very first weeks of my fieldwork in 2003. In 2011, during my most recent stay, our reunion took the particular form of retrospective teasing. It was around 11:00 PM, shortly after I arrived in the city of Canarana with three Trumai men from a distant village. We came to her house, where she lives with her daughter and two grandchildren. Her older sister Muchatari, the oldest person in the Trumai community, was also present.

KUMARU, *to the audience, in Trumai*. He was scared of me. He was always scared.

MUCHATARI, *in Trumai*. Scared that you would rape him, the little boy.

KUMARU. Yes, scared I would rape him.

MUCHATARI. Scared you would cut his growth. [During seclusion, young men are not supposed to have sexual intercourse, otherwise they will stop growing. End of seclusion is even called “cutting the growth.”]

ME, *in Portuguese*. I did not understand that part. Would you translate for me Karu?

KARUWAYA, *in Portuguese*. They are saying she used to scare you, and she keeps laughing. “Walatu was frightened, thinking I was really going to grasp him.”

ME, **laughing, in Trumai**. That is true. [*This confession causes a collective outburst of laughter.*]

MUCHATARI, *in Trumai*. See!! He was scared. See, he’s telling you—

KARUWAYA. [*at the same time*] Waaa! He said it!

KUMARU. That’s right, he was scared.

ME, *in Trumai*. “Does she really want to have sex with me?” I was thinking.

PEDRO, *in Trumai, in a serious tone*. It’s true, she wanted to hunt him. [He uses the verb *lax*, which describes the act of lying wait, ready to pounce.] [*Big success. Someone says “atsï!” or “yuck!”*]
KUMARU, in Trumai. Each time, he leapt to his feet.

MUCHATARI, in Trumai. You should have grabbed him, you’re crazy.

KUMARU. He would have had a fit . . .

MUCHATARI. You could have kept on scaring him.

KUMARU. I used to creep up on him and say: “Walatu!” [Impersonating my reaction] “What? What?” He jumped up with a start.

MUCHATARI. You should have grabbed him!

KUMARU. He leapt to his feet saying, “You woke up?” He was lying [i.e., my polite question was a way to act normal], since he was scared. [Everyone laughs.] [After a pause] Only when I die, I will forget.

As this last comment testifies, these feigned acts of sexual aggression generate a feeling of both joy and nostalgia. This combination can be compared to the happiness provoked by collective rituals, which are all designated in Portuguese as festas, “parties.” There too, social bonds are embodied as intense feelings of joy and happiness, which are later carefully recalled.

There is, however, more to it than that. The very family that so often praised my “knowing how to joke” also complained about it to other villages. I “joked too much” and therefore showed a lack of respect for the Trumai. This denigration, at the time I was staying in a village other than theirs, was part of the complex political game between the different Trumai factions, where the anthropologist sometimes appears as a stake. Nevertheless, the fact that joking could be mobilized as an argument in such a context pleads for its inescapable ambivalence.

Another indication lies in the drastic differences between people toward joking. Some people are known as masters, while others claim not to joke at all. For instance Wayaku, a grandmother in her sixties, asserted:

WAYAKU. I don’t joke.

ME. You don’t like to?

WAYAKU. Some Indians tease their cousins, and then they insult each other, [in Portuguese] they insult [each other].

ME. Really?

WAYAKU. That’s why I don’t like it. . . . I am no joker, Walatu, [with] my cousins, I don’t joke. Even if I have a lot of cousins, a lot of female Kamayura cousins, I don’t joke. I only discuss properly with them, only properly I discuss, only properly we joke about this exclusively. [hesitation]

ME. Why?

WAYAKU. I really don’t like to. I only talk properly to people. I don’t joke. I don’t say foolish things.

ME. Oh really?

WAYAKU. I only talk like this, I say proper things. When others joke, when they joke with other people, then I laugh. Then it is sweet for me. When they talk to someone else, to another person, when I hear it I laugh. Then it is sweet for me. But I don’t joke, I just listen.
ME. Oh really?

WAYAKU. When they talk to other people then I laugh. But as for me I don’t joke.

Interestingly, Wayaku ascribes her not liking to joke to moral concerns, rather than to a lack of humor, since she enjoys a good laugh. Her judgment opposes hopeta and taraiw to “proper” or “good” talking (det’a ami), thus implying that the former is ae tak, “bad.” Officially, the chief (called aek in Trumai, “he who is good”) is not supposed to joke in the Upper Xingu, as he represents local moral standards of conflict avoidance and generosity. In this short interview one easily sees the motives behind this condemnation of joking: its possible conversion into actual hostility, manifested by insults (wita wita), and thus its lack of fit with the Xinguanian ethos of control, peace, and shame. The word tsiro tsiro, here translated as “foolish things,” with its remarkable semantic reach, confirms the continuity between joking, ribaldry, and aggressiveness. This word commonly appears in judgments on coarse or gross conversations. For instance, a night when a Trumai man was teaching a Brazilian visitor, with vivid impersonations, the extraordinary variety of women’s reactions to sexual intercourse (according to tribe, race, and age), his wife marked her disapproval by saying:

\textit{tsi\textit{\textls{lah} tsiro tsiro len kain hi ami katsi}}

\textit{thing tsiro tsiro}

\textit{only emphatic 2Ps talk sitting}

You only say vulgarities

Used with the verb tsin (to do, to cause), in the expression tsin tsiro, it can mean to “bother” someone on purpose. For example, the teasing intention is phrased this way, when two friends decide together to play a trick on a common cousin. In Portuguese, its conventional translation is \textit{encher o saco}, literally to “fill someone’s balls,” (i.e., to piss him off). This is seen as permitted and friendly, but the exposure to public attention, the necessity to endure or retaliate in a witty manner is also stressful. Some people avoid particular villages because they “have too many cousins there,” or know that one particular family loves joking too much to guarantee a safe and relaxed visit. The same expression, tsin tsiro, also means to “persecute.” In historical narratives, it is employed to describe the Kamayura’s violent and systematic attempts to exterminate the Trumai. Thus the same term covers every situation from trivialities to genocide by way of mockery, revealing that they are indeed part of the same spectrum.

This woman’s reluctance to joke also has another motive, linked to questions of reputation. She does not, indeed, joke easily. But this is not true of her daughters, who are masters of irony. But she underestimates this, or reluctantly admits that only one of them “jokes a little bit.” The reason is that joking is not only risky for its target; it can also disqualify its agent. Playing with boundaries is necessarily perilous. One adjective very commonly punctuates joking exchanges: ayoar. It

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7. Among the Trumai, however, contemporary chiefs do joke, just as the former great chief who died in 1995 used to do. I don’t know whether this is specific to the Trumai or is just another example of the discrepancy between norm and actual behavior.
literally designates the person in convulsions or epileptic fits, diseases that particularly threaten children. Most of the time, they are imputed to transgressions of couvade prohibitions identified by the shaman. Many animals are supposed to be ayoar and are therefore unfit for children and parents before the former reach the age of five or six. In each time, the Trumai can mimic the particular behavior that justifies the ayoar attribute: uncontrolled head movements of the capucin monkey, the toucan’s rolled-back eyes, the excessive drooling of the razor-billed Curassow (*Mitu tuberosum*), etcetera. One fish (unidentified) has no such strange or improper behavior but is equally ayoar, and therefore prohibited, because it is said to transform into a snake when it gets old. In its wider meaning, ayoar could be translated as “fool” (*bobo* in Portuguese) or “crazy,” with the same spectrum of uses the latter term has in English, (i.e., qualifying serious mental disorders as well as amusing tomfooleries). Thus joking is almost necessarily ayoar in a mild sense. But the boundary between weak and strong uses is fairly porous. For example, it is quite normal to joke about one’s mistresses in a ribald manner, but doing the same about one’s wife is ayoar in the strong sense, and will provoke disgust (*yïkpï*) and embarrassment, as will violations of kinship terminology and proscribed behavior.

In short, ayoar qualifies any behavior that shows a lack of control, either physical (spasms or convulsions) or social (lack of etiquette), any behavior that transgresses ontological or social boundaries.

One then has to make sure not to go too far. But it is also important to not joke too often, on too many occasions, or with too many kinds of kin. Joking might then become a constant property of the individual and not a performance limited to particular contexts. This does not mean that everyone seen as a “joker” **taraiw** among the Trumai is condemned or despised. But some of them are, at least according to some people. Someone too prone to transgression casts doubt on his ability to identify transgression as such. Others might suspect that he no longer has the necessary ironic distance to his joking; instead of acting like a fool he is seen as one.

At this point we are able to identify the boundaries of joking: going too far can degenerate into insults and actual hostility. Joking too much can ruin a reputation. And acting too safely prevents one from being funny.

**Values of laughter**

However, this way of presenting things suggests that failure and success in joking is only a matter of controlling these dangers, as if everyone shared a common desire for social harmony, as if joking was only about laughing, was nothing but harmless fun that adds spice to an otherwise mundane existence. In this final section I would like to briefly introduce another level of uncertainty, which gives some idea of the contextual and teleological range of joking (i.e., when it can be used and what it can be used to do besides provoke laughter).

In the first place, when laughing at someone, one can choose not to offer the victim the opportunity to show his capacity for self-mockery. Joking then indeed becomes exclusionary rather than conjunctive, as I witnessed on several occasions. One was particularly revealing. A woman from a different Xinguanian group

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8. **Taraiw**-k: joke-nominalizer, literally “the one who jokes.”
invited herself to a Trumai village with her six-year-old son. She was there to ask one of the Trumai men to marry her and keep her in the village. She claimed that her son was his. For a couple of weeks, the whole family united in teasing him, urging him in a mocking way to accept her, and seriously evaluating whether the child looked like him and whether he should accept the offer. The situation was one of real uncertainty, at least for the woman and the man’s family. After this phase, however, and bearing in mind the man’s firm refusal and a few slightly inappropriate acts by the woman, they reached the collective conclusion that the boy definitely did not look like him. I then witnessed a mocking session in Trumai, in her presence, that made everyone laugh but her. She could not understand but clearly perceived that she was the subject of the conversation. She left a few days later.

In a similar way, joking can be a way of accusing or deliberately shaming someone to make him actually lose face. One day, upon seeing an alleged sorcerer arriving in a FUNAI post, a Wauja man said to him in front of everyone: “You are here! So you flew? I’d love to do that. Let’s fly together, ok? Let’s fly!” This was a transparent allusion to “animal’s skin,” a sorcerers’ cloth that allows them to fly at night to faraway places. Witchcraft is normally a serious matter, since a reputation as a sorcerer can lead to death. Its target could hardly find it funny. “He just laughed” is the conventional description of someone who lost the interaction, someone who tried not to lose face by this defense mechanism but actually did.

Between these two poles (joking as integrative on the one hand and joking as cruel mockery on the other) there are a few intermediate forms.

For example, even in a “great amipine” relationship, there may be really hidden intentions, that will remain such, as shown in this final account from Amati:

**AMATI, My cousin T. also said to me:** “Let’s go bathe in the river.”

“Ok.” It was early in the morning, around six o’clock. We lit a fire on the riverbank. Then came the women. He said to me, “Cousin you are going to help me.”

“With what?”

“Did you see that man over there, with his wife? Provoke him, and while you provoke him, I’ll have sex with his wife.”

I said, “Ok.”

“You’ll do that for me?”

“I will.”

And it worked perfectly, Walatu! So a few moments later the guy came along playing the flute.

[T. said:] “Go! Go! Go! That looks like him, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know. I will imitate him [this is considered to be a lack of respect], and if it turns out not to be him, you’ll get me out of trouble by saying I thought it was our amipine.”

“Yes, Ok,” he said.

“Well then.”
So I started imitating [the flute] “wa wa wa wa” [The amipine:] “Who is disrespecting me?” Then I started to shout and shout again, imitating him. Then I said: “Play more! Play more!”

“Who isn’t paying respect? I am no child!”

“Yes indeed, you are old, you are mīra [grandfather in Kamayura]!”

“If this is who I think it is, I will drown you in the river!”

“Ok, I am waiting for you!”

Then I jumped in the water and waited, among the other people who were taking their bath. He soon arrived. I stayed still.

“Who was imitating me?” he asked.

T. said: “It’s your cousin, our cousin over there.”

He turned to me: “It was you?”

“Oh! What a miracle, you go to take your bath early!” [This is a comment implying that he is both lazy and old as only elders are authorized to take their time in the morning.] “Jump in quick, you look cold.”

“No, I am fine, but I’ll go right now indeed.”

He jumped. Tsum! Every time he came close, I threw mud on him. “Wait a second! I’ll drown you.” He chased me all around, but he couldn’t grab me, until in the end I climbed out of the river.

“You are no kind of a man!”

“No, you are no kind of a man!”

Then we ran, we ran. After a while I felt tired, I hid in the long-grass [capim]. [The chase goes on, in the banana plantation, and then Amati goes back to the village without his cousin noticing] I went straight to his house, on purpose. I stayed there, and his mother asked me:

“Where is your amipine?”

“I left him by the river, he was trying to beat me up.”

“He doesn’t know that you came here?”

“No, I don’t think he does.”

Then it took a while before he arrived. His family said to him: “You only come now? Your amipine is already there, in his house.” [The family is taking the side of Amati for the sake of the joke.] Others said: “He wanted to beat him, to drown him, to beat him for real.” His mother said: “Joke properly, my son!” [The amipine:] “Ah, I’m tired, I kept chasing him like an idiot.” Then I answered: “Because you are one indeed!—Oh! He is here! Wait!” Then he came close, but when he was about to grab me I escaped and ran out. Everybody laughed.

ME. And meanwhile T. was having sex with his wife?

AMATI. He had already finished! He had already eaten her. [laughs]
A trick might hide another trick. The whole situation, understood by the victim as normal mocking and horseplay between two great cousins, is in fact a diversion. This difference in knowledge between the participants clearly means additional fun for the teasers and for those who hear the story. The intention is not actually hostile but will not be revealed to the victim, who will thus be excluded from the collective laughter. This does not imply a breach in the amipine relationship, at least from Amati’s perspective.

Sometimes intentions are actually hostile. But once some time has passed, it is possible to pretend they were feigned. No one is taken in by it, but this allows everybody to keep up appearances. In 2006, I received an aggressive email. Its author accused me of stealing Trumai culture and, in the end, threatened to “mark [my] ugly ass with arrows.” I was not particularly at ease when I turned up at his village two years later. I was talking with his father when he entered suddenly, with a bow and tipless arrows, and said: “Didn’t I say I would mark your ass with arrows? Turn around.” The three of us forced a laugh and then he turned around and left. The structure is the same as a joking event: demonstration of hostility, a pause, and then requalification of it as a joke. The only difference is the remarkable delay (two years) between tension and release.

Conclusion
This description of one aspect of Xinguanian sociality allows us to contrast two very different interaction frames, both equally explicit, and both paradoxical in that they contradict the very idea of a frame of interaction. The first one, the affinity-shame frame, is extremely stable. It is, when all is said and done, nothing more than a set of rules for avoiding interaction and therefore for shielding its protagonists from shame. In this way, the affinal relationship can continue safely. The second one, on the contrary, sets up rules such that instability is inescapable, and allows for shameless attempts to shame the other. It consists in explicitly giving no limits, leaving to the actors the task of establishing them in the course of interaction, and of gradually building a relationship. The instability lies in the fact that the more stable the joking relationship between two people becomes, the further they must go to make each other unsure of the other’s intentions, which is the driving force of humor. This formulation is exaggerated for the sake of the argument. Not every amipine relationship ends in anger and rancor. But there is indeed a strong tendency to escalate, and as such sad endings exist as a possibility according to the rules of the game.

In such a context of constitutive instability, joking can assume different functions and express a large spectrum of intentions. It is therefore difficult to decide what it is to fail or to succeed in such interactions, difficult to define dysphoria and euphoria when the very idea of a shared construction of common ground is explicitly discarded. It all depends on the teaser’s intentions, which are never, by definition, taken for granted. One might rightly argue that this aspect is not specific to the Trumai and their neighbors of the Xinguanian reservation, and that many examples of teasing given in the course of this paper could be found elsewhere under very similar forms. True indeed. And this is precisely why it is useful to model how uncertainty is built as constitutive of the joking frame, and to show how this can shed light on the culturally specific relationships joking is locally associated to (potential and virtual affinity in our case).
It is now possible to formulate a few hypotheses about my introductory anecdote, and more precisely about why they insisted on me going on, and why everyone laughed when I said I was ashamed. I was assuming that they expected to finally find one joke funny. But they were more eager to maintain and feed my growing embarrassment, derived from this systematic and repetitive failure—which was funny per se. It was but one of many episodes in the joking relationship that was gradually constructed between the chief and me. Declaring my shame was, unbeknownst to me, the best signal for an end. Being metapragmatic, and proving my uncertainty about the situation, it showed that the teasing had already been a success. As a moral value, it was also the exact opposite of joking, and thus, perhaps, a reminder that I was not being treated with respect. But how could I possibly be sure?

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References


« Mettez-vous mal à l’aise » : Relations à plaisanterie et incertitude prévisible chez les Trumai du Brésil Central

Cet article analyse les formes que prend la plaisanterie chez les Indiens Trumai et d’autres groupes du Parc Indigène du Xingu (Mato Grosso, Brésil). Cette pratique sociale semble accompagner les relations ouvertes, et peut être ainsi définie comme un mode relationnel par défaut : quoiqu’elle soit associée d’une manière prototypique à la relation entre cousins-croisés masculins, elle marque fréquemment aussi les relations avec les étrangers, Indiens ou Blancs. À l’extrême opposé, les relations entre affins réels sont définies par le respect et la honte. L’identification de ce système d’attitude ne saurait cependant rendre compte ni des propriétés pragmatiques de la plaisanterie, ni de son efficacité sociale spécifique. On insiste en particulier sur l’ambivalence—aussi bien morale que fonctionnelle—de la plaisanterie, laquelle dérive directement du cadre d’interaction qui lui est propre. Ce dernier est en effet capable d’instaurer des échanges et des formules très standardisés tout en générant un fort sentiment d’embarras et de déstabilisation. On s’efforce donc d’expliquer le paradoxe de ce que l’on pourrait appeler une incertitude prévisible et d’évaluer ses conséquences sur les notions de succès et d’échec dans l’interaction.

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