

PUNCHING UP IN STAND-UP COMEDY

Punching Up in Stand-Up Comedy explores the new forms, voices and venues of stand-up comedy in different parts of the world and its potential role as a counter-hegemonic tool for satire, commentary and expression of identity especially for the disempowered or marginalised.

The title brings together essays and perspectives on stand-up and satire from different cultural and political contexts across the world which raise pertinent issues regarding its role in contemporary times, especially with the increased presence of OTT platforms and internet penetration that allows for easy access to this art form. It examines the theoretical understanding of the different aspects of the humour, aesthetics and politics of stand-up comedy, as well as the exploration of race, gender, politics and conflicts, urban culture and LGBTQ+ identities in countries such as Indonesia, Finland, France, Iran, Italy, Morocco, India and the USA. It also asks the question whether, along with contesting and destabilising existing discursive frameworks and identities, a stand-up comic can open up a space for envisaging a new social, cultural and political order?

This book will appeal to people interested in performance studies, media, popular culture, digital culture, sociology, digital sociology and anthropology, and English literature.

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Speaking Truth to Power

Edited by Rashi Bhargava and Richa Chilana

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THE HISTORY OF MOROCCAN STAND-UP COMEDY

From Storytelling to Charged Humour

Mohamed Bassou and Rebecca Krefting

In Arabic, the term *kahlouch* means to be black or blackish. If used by a white person the word may be extremely offensive, but people of dark skin commonly use it affectionately among one another. Sounds familiar? In November 2018, a young Moroccan comedian named Abdellah Barkaoui known by the majority of the public through his YouTube channel by the pseudonym *Kahlouch* used the same word to self-identify as a Black person while performing during a comedy competition aired on Moroccan national television. The use of this word caused unending debate and viewers expressed criticism following the broadcast of the episode. Despite the comedian self-designating as Black, many considered the use of the term gratuitous and unacceptable. When asked in an interview why this incident would spark outrage, Barkaoui states: "...although I am Black, I am not permitted to address myself as a Black person because I am not the only one." Put differently, Barkaoui may label himself in this way in other mediums with impunity because it is clear, it is self-appointed. Used on television, the comic may be misunderstood as reaffirming negative aspects of such an epithet and/or exploiting a term for professional gain. Stand-up comedians use their own identity to forge connections with their audience. On television in Morocco when you cannot control the interpretation of inflammatory labels, the public can easily misinterpret a subversive move like the one made by Barkaoui to reinvest power into his own identity using a derogatory term like *kahlouch*. The misinterpretation of this joke extended to Black fans watching who expressed offence. While impossible to control for reception, a cause célèbre like this can shape and potentially shift public opinion both in ways that strengthen and maintain social inequalities and in ways that call injustices into question. The incident makes clear the ways the majority of the public may reify cultural norms informing behaviour and social interaction even when those norms aren't codified by laws

governing social organisation and activities. The word is not outlawed and yet the *de facto* ruling based on public reaction was that Barkaoui crossed a line by using the term.

While Barkaoui doesn't consider himself to be a comedian, what happened to him is not unusual for entertainers working in comedic contexts. In Morocco, there is a small but growing group of professional comic actors and comedians, some of whom perform charged humour, a kind of humour intending to combat social inequalities and injustices (Krefting 2014). Because charged humour strives for equity—in resources and among social identities—and how we construct identities varies across cultural and national contexts, is it possible that a concept developed in US contexts applies in Moroccan contexts? Our answer: absolutely and here's why. First, identities share commonalities across nations. How we structure and organise identity varies from one nation to another but all cultures construct identities through which we derive meaning (Solomon et al. 2015). Regardless of national comedy trends, performance venue, or audience make-up, comedians use their identity as the basis upon which to forge connections with their audience—geographical, religious, ethnic, or otherwise. Shared identity offers means to connect and comedy reflects one's positionalities, thus it is possible to connect across identity categories; indeed, humour scholars have long cited a comedian's "role as our comic spokesperson, as a mediator, an articulator of our culture and as our contemporary anthropologist" (Mintz 75). Second, all societies establish laws and cultural norms to which members are accountable. The social contract is predicated on nations conferring rights and, in return, citizens have responsibilities to their nation. Comics have public license to deviate from the agreed upon norms using the available arsenal of linguistic and rhetorical instruments to persuade the public. But only to the extent broader political and social forces allow. Comedians across countries do not work in the same social and artistic circumstances. For example, Americans revel in breaking taboos and vehemently protect freedom of speech whereas Moroccan culture restricts that same freedom such that comics must find innovative ways of using humour to challenge the multifaceted forces hindering and monitoring artistic creativity and cultural critique. They usually do that through adopting characters on stage (a mimicry of someone else doing the complaining) or via verbal scorn carefully crafted so as not to roil listeners. Third, charged humour hinges on addressing grievances wrought by inequalities exacted upon specific social identities, calling attention to social injustices. This remains consistent across cultures and nations; however, the social injustices and the identities upon which they are enacted will vary. A comedian may use the stage to skewer cultural biases, religious hypocrisy, and avaricious leaders but they may also lead their audience to celebrate communal heritage—an act that proves radical if the nation marginalises that heritage. The ability to stand in for a community to speak on behalf of a larger body of people makes comedians powerful and effective advocates for social change.¹ They are additionally empowered by the form itself which deploys laughter to help dull the sting of social and political critique.

The point is that charged humour knows no national boundaries. According to professional comedian Mohamed Bassou, "the public needs comedians and public figures in general to be the voice of the voiceless community...to be organic intellectuals...to establish a counter ideology that is capable of fighting the dominant one."² Morocco may benefit from comedians performing charged humour but not all Moroccan comics elect to do so. If the people have an appetite for this socially just and community affirming comedy, comedians will provide it. Consumer demand is the key ingredient for charged humour to flourish in any country or culture but other considerations must include how various cultures construct identity and the environment in which the comic operates, namely the customs and mores shaping performances.

Societies construct identity differently yet there are three similarities in the ways in which we devise, organise, and contend with identities. According to Kwame Anthony Appiah, one commonality is that "every identity comes with labels, so understanding identities requires first that you have some idea about how to apply them" (2018, 8). Regardless of the ethnic diversity embedded in Moroccan society, comedians are rarely classified in terms of a specific race or ethnicity (Almeida 2016). Formal use of terms indicating someone as Black or white, for instance, rarely happens in Moroccan stage humour because of the sensitivity that surrounds the terms. This explains why Abdellah Barkaoui sustained the wrath that he did. Hysterical public response following Barkaoui's use of *kahlouch* is just one example of the public dictating a collective will about how the word *should* be used in public speech—that is to say, not at all and certainly not in a defiant act of ethnic self-identification. Another commonality among identities is the importance we place on them across cultures. Appiah argues that identities "matter to people...because having an identity can give you a sense of how you fit into the social world. Every identity makes it possible, that is, for you to speak as one 'I' among some 'us': to belong to some 'we'" (9). In Morocco, comedians identify in terms of the geographic region to which they belong—either with the nation's central regions or as belonging to peripheral and more rural regions. In comedy competitions and other variety shows, emcees introduce comedians to the public leading off with regional information. Comics usually open their monologues by referring to their geographic origin; they are far less likely, unlike Barkaoui, to reference ethnic or racial belonging. The third commonality among identities, and this will come as no surprise, is that identities affect social treatment. Appiah clarifies that "the most significant things people do with identities is use them as the basis of hierarchies of status and respect and of structures of power" (11). Because social identities are constructed in hierarchical ways, charged humour has a great deal of fodder in any country or nation-state. To continue with the example of geography in Morocco, it is not just that geography shapes the individual but that geographies are ranked and the ranking determines treatment of the individual. In this case, Moroccans regard those living in the central regions of the country as superior to those living in the regions peripheral to Morocco's centre. These regional hierarchies exist, in part, due to histories of imbalanced

industrial/cultural development and economic growth. There are modern efforts aimed at regionalisation, national initiatives to make all regions independently prosperous and resourced, i.e., self-sustainable. Charged humour can work to remedy sources of disenfranchisement by rendering regional biases visible. That said, stand-up comics seeking to do that work must still operate within the restrictions placed on speech in Morocco, whether by law or social policing.

Public squabbles over political correctness exist in all cultures though it may be called something else like breaking cultural norms, social boundaries, or taboos. The socio-cultural context in Morocco presupposes that comedians respect public restrictions regarding language in all performances. For example, in 2019, young comedian Zohir Zair mentioned Elqadi Ayyad, a well-known Moroccan religious figure, in one of his sketches on Moroccan television. The context in which he used the name was entirely benign. Nevertheless, this sparked public outrage among viewers. Regardless of the fact that many Moroccan comedians are themselves Muslims, the public regards as sinful any implicit or explicit mentioning of the names of prophets or any other religious symbols. A scan of the majority of the comments responding to Zair's religious gaffe illustrate the intense anger stoked by his joke. The public denigrated him as ignorant, refused to accept his apology, and called for him to be jailed (Zair). When the content of humour is provocative, at times *because* it addresses sensitive issues such as sexuality, ethnicity, or religion, responses to the comments are a barometer of just how far the comedian has gone. As spokespersons, comedians are highly attuned to political and social regulations. Certainly, these regulations vary depending on audience composition and on media format (pace: Barkaoui who used the term *kahlouch* without consequence on YouTube). Actress Latefa Ahrar describes Moroccan comedians as prisoners surrounded by dozens of linguistic and cultural restrictions to which they must attend to, before and while performing, so much so that comedians practice self-censorship. Indeed, Zair was pushing back against this rhetorical mandate and public comments made clear that, as a Moroccan, he should have known better. He believes he has a right to reference religious leaders but audience response indicates that he violated the norms of his national and religious identities. Censoring oneself makes charged humour all the more difficult to achieve, yet Moroccan charged comics deftly navigate political and cultural minefields in order to weaponise humour. And, as the rebellious US comics Lenny Bruce and George Carlin illustrated when they continued to use illegal profanity and criticised the government in their performances, refusing to censor speech in order to advance critiques of powerful institutions and people is itself an act of defiance, a challenge to the status quo and another way of deploying charged humour.

This analysis of comedic performance traditions accomplishes two important things: we offer a cultural history of Moroccan stand-up comedy and the early cultural forms giving rise to stand-up; and, using ethnography—interviews and participant-observation with six high profile comic performers—we contemplate Moroccan charged humour, its practitioners, critiques, and challenges. Charged

humour is a form of comedy that targets social injustices and seeks to empower the disenfranchised by offering solutions, albeit silly and preposterous at times. It is a kind of humour meant to create community and engender cultural citizenship when existing in a society that eclipses the history and accomplishments of certain groups of people—whomever is designated as inferior. Because inequality exists everywhere, charged humour arises wherever comedy proliferates though it is not always profitable for a comic to speak truth to power—and in some national contexts, as we see with Zair, neither is it safe. After two days of intense public pressure, the comedian apologised: “It was a mistake. I direct my profuse apologies to all Moroccans. It was not my intention to insult our great religious scholar. I am sorry” (Zair). Lucky for Moroccan comedians, most comedy performances don't end in apologies but in laughter. With a rich tradition of laughing over the centuries, many performance traditions shaped stand-up comedy but none so much as the pedestrian wordplay of *al-halqa* performers, the humorous crooning of musical troupes, and the witticisms and horseplay emerging in comic theatre.

Early Comedic Cultural Forms

The tradition of Moroccan stand-up comedy draws from an array of cultural forms—some humorous and some not. Documentation of Moroccan theatrical and comedy practices dates back to the 17th century and includes performance traditions such as *Labsat* and *Sultan Talba*. *Labsat* was an extravagant performing arts festival celebrating the monarch. Performers presented the first shows of this kind inside the King's palace during the reign of Sultan Mohammed ibn Abd Allah (1757–1790). *Sultan Talba* (translation: King of students) were theatrical celebrations associated with the students of University of al-Qarawiyyin, a seasonal festival during which a student played the role of the king for a week. The origin of this celebration goes back to the era of Sultan Moulay Rashid's reign, the founder of the Alawite Empire (1666–1679) (Hamdaoui). These popular pre-theatrical practices were the cultural precursors to the art of the more modern *al-halqa*. *Halqa* means circle and so *al-halqa* involves storytellers surrounded by their audience (Sehlaoui). Early nationalistic performances gave rise to *al-halqa*, which in turn contributed to and shaped other performance practices with elements of humour such as music troupes and comic theatre.³

Morocco was colonised between 1912 and 1956 and after decades of French colonial dominance over artistic practices in the country, *al-halqa*, musical troupes, and comic theatre emerged as distinct comedic cultural forms post-independence in the mid-20th century. This post-independence period in Morocco is known for social instability, political corruption, and class disparity. Because of this, it took Morocco about a decade following independence to prioritise cultural production at the federal level, which had been merged with education. In 1974, a separate and permanent position was created to support the cultural arts: State Minister in charge of Cultural Affairs (Adam). Comic theatre and performance

traditions did not have the same support that later cultural forms including stand-up comedy would enjoy. Despite this, talented comic actors managed to give birth to the first generation of stand-up comedians who commonly worked in comic duos in the 1970s. There was finally a clear trajectory to success as an early stand-up comic. Before working independently as performers of stage humour, early solo comedians were required to have stage experience, and this could only be possible through being recruited by one of the many music or comic theatre troupes flourishing in the country at that time. With new technologies came a rise in venues for performance that catapulted comedy from theatres and on to television as well as various social media platforms. So, too, the capacity to circumvent the theatre circuit and to speak to a growing national audience eager to laugh.

Al-halqa

Al-halqa performances offer a way of connecting and entertaining people with their own culture. *Al-halqa* varies in substance and style though it always draws from folk tales and cultural myths passed along via oral traditions for centuries. If you were to happen upon an *al-halqa* performance in a public square of Marrakesh (which is still possible), you may find that the performance includes: “proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, songs, and other dramatic performances” (Sehlaoui 194). Performances take place throughout Morocco, but the western region Doukkala-Abda and province Al Haouz are regions rich with many *al-halqa* performers. People there are known for a sense of humour and savvy use of language and wordplay. Not unlike stand-up comedy today, *al-halqa* delivers a performative documentation of history. Researchers in the fields of linguistics, sociology, and cultural studies have mined this rich performance archive to understand the underlying structure of Moroccan culture. Abdelilah Salim Sehlaoui argues that *al-halqa* performances are responsible for “transmit[ing] knowledge, values, collective memory and play[ing] an essential role in the cultural vitality of Moroccan society” (194). Some of the practitioners have inherited the art of oratory and storytelling from their ancestors and others have learned it from watching local veterans of the art form. A few of the pioneers and long-standing practitioners of the art of *al-halqa* include: Ibrahim Iagholimi, Mohamed Doukali, Mohamed Lekrimi, Mohammad Jabiri, and Weld Qerrad.⁴ Nowadays, Moroccans are aware of the significance of the ancient practice of *halyqi* to the rich history of popular culture, even as they are becoming a dying breed (Simons).⁵ Their tales of battles, religious stories, and cultural lore reflect and celebrate national heritage—contemporary and ancient. The tradition of *al-halqa* created a cultural appreciation and fascination for entertainers telling stories about their lives. Stand-up comedy as a performance tradition would seem familiar to Moroccans used to hearing skilled orators weave comical tales in the main squares of cities across the country.

Music Troupes

In the 1970s and 1980s, popular music troupes contributed to the emergence of other young comedians, particularly comedy duos. Each comedy couple performed with a particular music troupe; comedians usually initiated the show with jokes before the troupe sang. Troupes like Messsnawa and Tagada would feature young comedians from Casablanca like Abdelilah Ajil, Hassan Foulan, Abdelakhaleq Fahid, and Mohamed Dahera. Comedians Ahmed Senoussi, El-houssine Beniaz, and Baji Abdelkarim hosted performances for popular music groups like *Lmchaheb*, *Jil-jilala*, and *Nas-ighiwan*. Successful comic performers opening for music troupes went on to establish careers as members of the first generation of stand-up comics in Morocco. The popularity of these troupes among the public made for high stakes for the comedians opening for them, who were constantly jockeying for respect from their fellow performers and audience. This was a time when impressing the right people could gain someone entrance into a premiere music troupe that would help catapult performers on to solo careers as stand-up comedians. As comedian Mohamed El Khyari attests:

In one of the shows, I had to go on stage and present jokes alone because my partner was sick. I attracted the attention of Laarbi Batma, leader of Lghiwan’s group, and it was a new beginning of my career as a solo comedian... I worked with Batma for many years; he was not just a musician, he was a poet and a playwright. We performed many of his plays and he is the founder of the popular theatre troupe Masrah Alhay.

Masrah Alhay goes on to become wildly successful combining musical numbers with comic theatre. This and similar models served as training ground for future stand-up comics. El Khyari’s career offers a valuable blueprint for how comedic performers moved between and among the cultural forms.

Comic Theatre

In the 1980s, in part spurred by public enthusiasm and exposure to musical troupes, comic theatre emerged as a response to rising cultural interest in humorous real-life concerns. In a typical show, performers regaled audiences with comedic plays ranging in length from one to two hours. The plays followed recognisable narrative conventions of introducing characters, establishing conflict, and working towards a resolution. The content could be light-hearted while also introducing salient social issues. In the cosmopolitan cities of Rabat and Casablanca, young professionals flocked to the theatres. There the shows used humour and cultural critique to entertain while also connecting with real-life experiences—certainly a precursor to stand-up comedy. Theatre troupe *Masrah Alhay* became the new model in Moroccan theatre because of its focus on the daily matters of the masses. Its popularity soared and thousands of people would

gather in front of theatres to buy tickets on opening day. The troupe managed to bring the audience back to theatre halls, releasing many successful plays such as *Hassi Messi (Without Noise)*, *Charah Mellah (Well-Explained)*, and *Hab Otben (Mission Accomplished)*.⁶ Abdelilah Ajil, Hassan Foulan, Norddine Bekr, and Ibrahim Khay are among the notable comic theatre practitioners contributing to this genre of theatre that paved the way for young comedians to embark on solo careers. Though it did not have staying power, comic theatre saw immense popularity for about twenty years and along the way morphed in ways catering to audience demand for stand-up comedy.⁷

Moroccan Stand-Up Comedy

In Morocco, the success of traditional humorous performance traditions like *al-halqa*, music troupes, and theatre comedians made cultural space for comic duos and later stand-up comedians. Early comic duos were the first pioneers of stand-up comedy in Morocco who managed to crystallise stand-up comedy as a new comedic orientation in the 1970s. They and a smattering of comic performers in music and comic theatre troupes constituted the first generation of stand-up comics. By the 1980s, the form had grown in popularity enough to be recognisable across the country, modelling its comic play after the physical humour and wordplay of US comedy dynamos Laurel and Hardy (Gehring 1990).⁸ Oftentimes, Moroccan duo sketch comedy drew on humorous juxtaposition between the cultural customs of city dwellers and country residents, addressing various social topics such as poverty, family conflicts, rural exodus, and relationships between men and women. Most comedians at this time recycled earlier sketches instead of writing original comedic material, a habit that would shift as stand-up comedy evolved alongside audience expectations for content reflecting the zeitgeist.

Duo comedy became even more popular when street performers (like *al-halqa* performers) and entertainers of wedding parties recorded their performances on LP records and cassettes. New communication technologies ushered in the ability to distribute entertainment widely to a fan base increasingly hungry for comedy. The beginning of the 1980s witnessed an unprecedented demand for and production of duo comedy recordings sold by vendors in markets all over the country. Famous comic duos constituting the first generation of stand-up comics include: Mohamed Bechar and Ali Bechar (known by Qechbal and Zeroual); Abdeljebbar Lewzir and Mohamed Belqas from Marrakesh; Abdelhadi Tiqar and Mohamed Tiqar (known by Tiqar); Ithami Lhnawat and Mohamed Lahnawat (known by Lahnawat); and Ahmed Senoussi and El Houssin Beniaz (known by Baz and Bziz), to mention just a few.⁹ Perhaps none were more famous than Qachbal and Zeroual, who started their career in the big *souks* or markets of the Chaouia region in the 1960s inspiring other duo comics in the country. From music-loving parents, singing the *malhoun* they carved out a presence in both *al-halqa* and television by poking fun at people's behaviours and cultural practices,

as well as differences between urban and rural lifestyles (El Miftahi).¹⁰ In the early 1970s, Qachbal and Zeroual were the first duo comics to perform on television in the comic musical tradition of the first years after independence from France in 1956. Widespread visibility would help to endear stand-up comedy to the public. Another comic duo popular at the time, Baz and Bziz presented a distinctive urban style of humour in a time when the majority of humour production stressed the rural. Unlike earlier comic actors in the theatre who fell into monotonous repetition of rural-based humour, Baz and Bziz were able to redirect the audiences' focus towards the city evoking modern issues such as technology, transportation, administration, and progressive political orientations (El Fad). This is a crucial era in the history of Moroccan comedy that pushed the coming generation of comics to document their own escape from the rural space into a more modern one rife with incongruities. Baz and Bziz also used comedy to subvert by directly criticising highly-ranked politicians in the country, including the monarch at that time, King Hassan II. Their televised sketches attracted a mighty following but in 1998 were suppressed by the state and banned from all media channels in Morocco; later the two comedians decided to work independently.

Despite censoring agents, Ahmed Senoussi (Bziz) maintained the same style of charged humour and controversial political satire in his stand-up comedy, moving into the role of solo comic and performing outside the country. With most other comedians joking within parameters of social acceptability, Senoussi was an exception in Moroccan comedy as well as the whole Arab region. He dominated the Moroccan comedy scene during the 1970s and 1980s. Armed with black humour, sarcasm, and a love for the incongruous, his famous audio sketches were full of thought provoking remarks on politics and social inequalities. He believed in the right of artists and activists to advocate their own views as the primary condition for any social or economic progression in the Arab world (Al-jazira). He would go on to become one of the biggest names in stand-up comedy and one of the most articulate purveyors of charged humour. In the late 1980s, comedy fans ardently supported comic duos and a second generation of single comedians began to emerge. Also, known for his political and social commentary, Baji Abdelkarim, another solo comedian from the southeast of Morocco, was one of the most influential comedians of the 1980s. A variety of humorous performance traditions (like *al-halqa* and comic theatre) offered opportunities to move across mediums, broadcasting to bigger audiences whose children would come of age and demand more laughter in the 21st century.

Stand-up comedy was booming in the United States in the late 1980s for many of the same reasons it was in Morocco: cheaper transportation costs, access to televisions, plus the demand for comedy generated a rise in venues and opportunities for performance and higher wages for comedians who could earn a living wage. All of these factors laid the foundation for the second generation of comics to emerge. Spanning the 1990s and 2000s, those talented notables include: Mohamed El Khyari, Abdelkhalek Fahid, Hassan El Fad, Hanan

El Fadili, and Said Naciri. Said Naciri was arguably one of the most famous comedy stars of the 1990s, producing several stand-up comedy albums and sitcoms.¹¹ Once televisions became a standard feature in Moroccan homes, there was typically a spike in comic programming and movies during the month of Ramadan. The surge in content led to increased demand for new comic material throughout the year and not just one month. Moroccan television channels 2M and Alaoula hired famous comedians like Naciri to attract bigger audiences. His popularity as a stand-up comic segued into producing and starring in comedy films. His was a prolific career as comedy filmmaker that inspired and established the genre of comedy films in Morocco.¹² He and others listed above were the chief pioneers of Morocco's second generation of stand-up comics performing in the nineties and early aughts. Importantly, this generation of Moroccan comedians has managed to find professional success for more than three decades, presenting a tremendous number of televised, theatrical, as well as cinematic contributions.

By the time the second generation of comedians established notoriety and success, stand-up comedy was officially an industry in Morocco. In the 2010s, enter the talented third generation of contemporary Moroccan comedians who were able to emulate successful models in the industry and reap the benefits of an entire country excited to see how these new comics would make them laugh next. Popular contemporary comics include: Mohamed Bassou, Driss Chalouh, Mehdi Azkri, Abdelali Lamhar, Youssef Yassar, Rachid Rafiq, Said Halim, Wadea Er-raji, Abderrahman Eko, Zohir Zair, and Ayoub Idri. Contemporary Moroccan comics benefiting from relaxed media censorship are more eager to disclose the socio-cultural transformations that the country undergoes. Other comedians do not care to broach such issues. Hassan El Fad criticises contemporary Moroccan comedians who, according to him, don't tackle the chief concerns of the audience in part because they don't know their society well. The implication is that comedians have responsibilities to their audience—ethical and otherwise—though not all comics or fans see it that way. This latest generation has benefitted from an unprecedented rise in demand for stand-up comics to perform in national and regional arts festivals, television and radio programming, and comedy films. As comics have been able to do for quite some time, they migrate from theatre to other forms of entertainment, like situation comedy and movie acting, achieving considerable success in multiple cultural forms. While early Moroccan humour associated the rural with exotic folklore, contemporary Moroccan stand-up comedians focus less on emphasising regional folklore and more on lived experiences shaped by social and political institutions. This new breed of comics broaches new content and experiments with new styles. Innovative joking has brought in even more fans, increasing incomes for jokesters. This, alongside less rigid speech restrictions, created the space to accomplish what El Fad and younger third-generation charged comedians believe should be the ultimate goal of comedians: “diagnosis of the group of merits and/or defects within a given society.”

Moroccan Charged Humour

Comic speech that points towards social injustices does so in whatever manner acceptable within the restrictions placed upon public speech. Thus, charged humour will be specific to the culture in which it is produced. For example, American comedians of different backgrounds have successfully inspired social, political, and intellectual debate and so have Moroccan comics, but with differing approaches and to different ends. Aesthetically speaking, Moroccan and US comics are doing their best to be funny but when it comes to cultural clout and political authority, US comics are granted greater allowances for politicised comedy than Moroccan comics. This does not mean that the history of Morocco was without satirical literature and art. Satirical writers like Miloudi Shgoum, Driss Khori, and Mohamed Zafzaf, for instance, used the pen to offer philosophical and intellectual critique of Moroccan culture and politics. Regardless of the socio-political climate fraught with repression and fear, satirical writers were able to make fun of rulers and of authority with strategically comedic approaches.

In the 1970s, Morocco witnessed the emergence of charged comedy led by early comedians like Ahmed Senoussi (Aarras). Similar to American comedians Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor, Senoussi was the first Moroccan comic to inaugurate a genre of comedy criticising systemic failures and corrupted institutions (Aarras). For his troubles, he was banned from all media in 1998. A decade later, in one of few televised interviews with Senoussi on Faisal Alqasm's talk show on Aljazira channel, he explains that in Morocco: “talk show comedians and journalists are granted this liberty to criticise their politicians and comment on their decisions. Contrarily, in most of the Arab and developing nations everything is under control and most artists and journalists are mere agents of the State” (Aljazira). He goes on to argue that the existence of democracy in any nation necessitates more freedom of speech for artists, journalists, and media agents. In other words, media censorship is a pervasive aspect in non-democratic states. Senoussi's nomadic movement between comedy forms as well as his penchant for charged humour became common amongst stand-up comics emerging in the second and third generations in Morocco but censorship continued to contour humorous critique. Rarely were charged comics able to capitalise on the television boom as a pathway to long-term success as a stand-up comic but the third-generation comics meeting with success increasingly use charged humour. In the 21st century, new programming offered a unique opportunity for comedians. Reality television and competition programmes featuring stand-up comedy ascended in popularity among Moroccan viewers. According to Latefa Ahrar, “It was an opportunity for young Moroccan jokesters to go on stage and tell funny stories to an audience who is eagerly thirsty to experience this new genre of laughter on national channels.” Given strict legal, religious, and cultural mores, the remaining question, according to Ahrar, is how to accomplish this task of performing charged humour. In other words: how can one be an agent of change under such circumstances? She identifies the handful of comics

successful throughout history *in both ways*—performing charged humour and having a knack for navigating myriad comedy forms and entertainment mediums that restrict speech:

Regarding the socio-cultural and the political role of the Moroccan comedian, I think that, with the exception of Senoussi, Lkhyari, Naciri, Bassou and few others, who were able to touch sensitive topics due to the nature of their humorous texts and their provocative attitudes, almost the rest of other comedians were unable to tackle the main concerns of the oppressed masses or socially create any meaningful debate. (Ahrar)

As comedians interviewed attest, it is difficult to carefully craft charged humour amidst the cultural and political rhetorical minefields in Morocco. Yet, charged comedians became increasingly adept at exhibiting sensitivity to social restrictions while also making political statements.

Comedy seeking to create positive social change varies from one nation to another depending on legal allowances and cultural norms. In Morocco, charged humour takes as its target beliefs and ideologies that maintain inequalities or impede justice. This could be suppression of speech or criticism towards authority figures, particularly those who have the capacity to use their position to make positive changes but opt not to. For example, national projects are more oriented to the metropolises (Casablanca, Rabat, Tangier, and to a lesser degree Marrakesh) assuring these areas economic growth and cultural progress. These are the most important hubs for regional and international connections, commerce, and communication. Accordingly, in these regions, industry and opportunity thrives and occupants are granted greater prospects for economic security than other Moroccans in rural and southern areas. Mohamed Bassou hails from the rural south of Morocco and uses the stage to critique regional economic disparities. When asked to describe his own charged humour, he answers:

The majority of my jokes on stage tackle this area of socioeconomic inequality and compare the centre of the country to the remaining peripheries. The public is calling for well-educated artists to represent them and speak for their concerns because in people's imagination the discourse of an educated person is more convincing. Comedians can repaint the image of a particular society by combating socio-cultural stereotypes. (Bassou)

Not always easy or rewarded, still comics like Bassou use the stage as a mouth-piece for pointing towards social ills and political inequalities. Hanan El Fadili is one such comic performer who illustrates the varied concerns charged humour can tackle across multiple entertainment forms.

Because comedians are typically visible to the eye, comedy is always gendered. In other words, audience members work to interpret the gender identity and presentation of everyone they meet which is expected to be consonant with

one's biological sex. In the United States, the discourse that men are funnier than women proliferates and does so because of the way femininity is socially constructed as passive, quiet, deferential, etc. Nevertheless, female stand-up comics can make a living wage and represent approximately 20–25% of professional comedians in the US. Though they don't have to nor always do, many women use the stage to fight gender discrimination and sexist representations of women. For women to make these strides in the comedy industry, it took a great deal of advocacy (male comics vouching for their lady peers), targeted training (creation of female-only spaces for performing comedy), and cultural shifts in beliefs about women (this coincides with the rise of third and fourth wave feminisms). In Morocco, like early US stand-up comedy, venues and performance opportunities are seldom available to women and cultural conditioning reinforces that men are natural purveyors of humour, not women. The absence of an alternative female comedy scene that can effectively compete with the other sex was and remains a way of restricting female comedic voices in Morocco. Cultural allowances are not made for women to perform humour; they do so in opposition to social constructions of Moroccan femininity. Having not been acculturated to women as funny, there are far fewer professional female comedians and, as in the United States, Moroccans believe that women are less funny than men. Regardless of the growing number of theatre practitioners who offered solo performance and stand-up comedy in the 1980s, Hanan El Fadili is the only female stage comedian in the second generation of comics who managed to compete with the pioneers of stand-up comedy at that time. Technically, having not performed traditional stand-up comedy, she is more of a comedic actress and performance artist than she is a stand-up comedian. But she is the only female performing in ways analogous to the male-dominated performance tradition of stand-up comedy. This gender imbalance reflects deep-seated beliefs about who is allowed to evoke laughter. Despite being one woman in a sea of men, she has produced numerous one-woman shows and appeared in many sitcoms. Her charged humour uses imitation and characters to draw on political and cultural incongruities.

Born into a family of artists, El Fadili was allowed to start a comedic career at the early age of eight by imitating Moroccan stars. El Fadili's father, Aziz El Fadili—artist, comedian, and writer—was a public figure recognisable to many. She grew up steeped in her father and grandmother's antics:

Even my grandmother was a big lover of personification. When women are alone in the house my grandmother used to imitate a man's character, wearing a beard and man's clothes and talking in a man's voice in order to scare other women. At the age of seven, I was already able to imitate dozens of people either in the family or TV actors and actresses. (El Fadili)

When she was seven, El Fadili joined Tayeb Seddiki's theatre troupe for a role in a play called *We Are Made to Hear Us*. She went on to enrol for two years in theatre training at Cours Floren, France. Upon completion of her training, she

returned to Morocco in 2006 to present a series of sketches, showcasing her skills in impersonation and acting that charmed and amused audiences.

In 2018, she made her return to the stage after stepping away for eight years. She presented the highly successful *Hanane Show*, an amazing spectacle in which she plays the role of more than ten characters, transforming herself for the duration of the whole show into a car keeper, saleswoman, cook, singer, and model. She trusts her characters will convey the intended political and social messages. Her selection of female characters illustrates that there are few Moroccan women in leadership and positions of authority and charges the audience to support better treatment for all women. Her depiction of an illiterate woman, for instance, champions the rights of rural women to education and opposes social and political discrimination against them. She uses charged humour to confer value to women's domestic contributions and as vital to the socio-economic development of society, while problematising the limited roles available to Moroccan women as mother, wife, cook, and housekeeper. Channelling myriad characters and never sacrificing comic appeal, El Fadili deftly delivers critiques of female disenfranchisement through means of exaggeration, irony, and incongruity.

El Fadili is fully aware of the expectations and responsibility of Moroccan comedians to convey the concerns of people. She is up to the task but blames Moroccan social media and journalists for neglecting to amplify the voices of comedians when they do speak out:

I certainly believe that Moroccan comedians are able to create change inside and why not outside their environment...There should be well-structured media coverage and a strong press that echoes their voice to the large audiences; otherwise their works will be limited to a restricted number of people and places. Social media and journalists contribute to the visibility of comedy and artworks, in general. Unfortunately, nowadays no one [journalists] is interested in meaningful content [from comedians]. (El Fadili)

This lack of media support disallows important messages from reaching broader bases. El Fadili's assertion illustrates that the muting of Moroccan charged comedy is not related to a lack of talent or expertise. It is, rather, due to the socio-cultural and political forces silencing certain discourse. No matter how intelligent and insightful those comedians are, El Fadili argues, if there are limited mediums and means for their voices to reach the public, let alone decision makers and leaders, then it remains impossible to change mentalities or create any kind of debate among people. In the 2010s, as the third generation of comedians emerged, some female comics sought to disarm audiences with their jokes. None of them managed to capture audience interest and garner invitations for acting work or comedy gigs.¹³ Sadly, today Hanan El Fadili continues to be one of the few female voices in the comedy scene serving as a model to young women aspiring to use the stage as a pulpit for challenging inequalities, gender and otherwise.

Comedy offers a window into people's history and charged humour unmasks social inequalities, making it a valuable tool for social change but a tricky one to wield in Morocco where censorship and public backlash can effectively gag comedians who criticise the government or defy religious mandates. Despite controversy about the political efficacy of comedy, we know comedy can introduce meaningful debates so long as the public is willing and able to engage with those debates. Hanan El Fadili and scores of other women have the intellectual and creative capacities to generate charged stand-up that combats gender inequality but as long as a dominant majority rejects women as comedic spokespersons, she must continue performing according to the ways Moroccans structure and organise identities. El Fadili's careful weaponisation of comedy illustrates that the challenge of Moroccan comedians resides in how to be brave and provocative while not shocking. Brave in the sense that they are able to touch on sensitive and serious issues and not shocking in the way they use language to broach this sensitivity. This complex double function affects not only the artistic creativity of comedians but also their relationship to an exigent audience who want to laugh and to think, but do not necessarily desire to be shocked. Crafting charged humour can be difficult and as great a challenge as being heard. As Mohamed Bassou says:

Our mission is not that easy, we want our comedy to be well developed, but we are asked to take into account the particularities of our conservative society. We need to respect the group of accumulated principles and ethics because families are still watching TV together and we have to give them inclusive and easily digested products. Every country has its way of thinking and behaving, ours is special in the sense that history and religion are of paramount impact on our perceptions. I craft humour in an intelligent way taking into consideration all the variables mentioned before. I usually tackle serious issues and political subjects in a smooth and acceptable way because it simply rests on how you approach things and not why. Finally, I am sure that we are able to create change and debate in our society. We just need to be more educated and endowed with the sufficient courage and talent on how to exploit language and humour in the service of human values.

Bassou is not alone in seeking to use comedy as a platform for stoking social change. Members of this generation of comedians are participating in this rhetorical dance unique unto the culture from which it hails. This is true across the world. The current uptick of consumers clamouring for stand-up comedy—whether in Morocco, the United States, Nigeria, India, Australia, and the list goes on—signals the growing platform comedians have to shape worldviews, identities, and behaviours while forging connections within and across communities: national, racial, political, or otherwise. There exists plenty of demand for humour that heaps humiliation upon communities less powerful. That isn't likely to change. But well-informed, socially conscious people make up a sizable portion of consumers. Global demand for charged humour may challenge religious

and cultural conventions and herald a relaxing of restrictions. For Moroccan women that could allow safe entry into stand-up comedy. Moreover, worldwide proliferation of charged humour can offer evidence for the ways that this humour—deployed respective to a society's laws, norms, and organisation—can instigate measurable change in the service of social and economic justice.

Notes

- 1 Comedy/humour studies scholars have long attended to subversive comedy and this moment is no exception. Two impressive examples focus on comedians who integrate activist and social justice sensibilities like combating white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and gender violence into their stand-up performances: *A Comedian and an Activist Walk Into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice* (2020) by Katy Broum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman; Katleyn Hale Wood's *Cracking Up: Black Feminist Comedy in the Twentieth & Twenty-First Century United States* (2021), which explores the "highly skilled and diverse Black feminist comedic artists as shapers and critics of US citizenship, history, and social justice movements" (21).
- 2 One of the co-authors, Mohamed Bassou, performs in two distinct roles in this exploration of Moroccan stand-up comedy—as a highly successful, established comedian and television personality and as a humour studies scholar. In order to acknowledge these two roles and the different information they bring to bear on this analysis, quotations from him come from personal interviews and conversations reflecting on his professional comedy career.
- 3 It is beyond the scope of this article to offer comprehensive detailing of early performance forms and its practitioners. For additional information on the history and traditions of Moroccan performance, see: Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson. *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia: Performance Traditions of the Maghreb*; Daniel F. Chamberlain and J. Edward Chamberlin, editors. *Or Words to That Effect: Orality and the Writing of Literary History*; Aicha Rahmouni. *Storytelling in Chefchaouen Northern Morocco: An Annotated Study of Oral Performance with Transliterations and Translations*; *Al-Halqa: In the Storyteller's Circle* (documentary).
- 4 Because *al-halqa* took place in public areas rather than formal venues, there are limited records of performers. As such, this list does not accurately capture all or even many of those skilled in this art form.
- 5 *Halyqi*: plural for *halqa*; *halyqi* refers to multiple performances and/or a group of performers practicing the art of *al-halqa*.
- 6 The titles of these plays are common Moroccan proverbs and translated literally will not accurately convey their meanings. The supplied translations capture the closest denotation of these idiomatic phrases.
- 7 Full exploration of this rich performance tradition is beyond the scope of this work. For additional information on Moroccan theatre, see: Hassan Manai. 1974. *Abhat fi Al-masrah Al-maghrebi* [Studies in Moroccan theatre]. Meknes: Matbeat Sawt Meknes; Abdelouaheb Ouzri. 1997. *Le Théâtre au Maroc: Structures et Tendances*. Casablanca: Les Editions Toubkal; Hassan Bahraoui. 1994. *Al-masrah Al-magrebiy Bahit fi Al-usul As-sosyu Taqafia* (Moroccan Theatre: A Study of the Socio-cultural Roots). Casablanca: *almar-kaz althaqafiu alearabiu*.
- 8 Stan Laurel (1890–1965) and Oliver Hardy (1892–1957) were famous comedians in the early-to-mid 20th century.
- 9 Instead of referring to a comic duo by saying the names of both actors, performers billed themselves with a single name, often a shared surname.
- 10 Also known in Morocco under the name of *qasida* (meaning a poem), *malhoun* is a traditional music that is based on poetry that first emerged in the regions of Tafilalet in the south east of the country before its popularity spread in the rest of the Maghreb.

- 11 Said Naciri's comedy shows include: *Tetanos* (1995), *Mes Amis les Ministres* (2003), *100% Marocain* (2007), and *Do You Speak English* (2014).
- 12 Said Naciri's movies include: *Lbandia (The Bandits)*, 2003), *Laaib Maa Diaab (Game with the Wolves)*, 2005), *Abdou Inda Lmowahidin (Abdou among the Almohades)*, 2006), *Sara* (2013), and *Lkhtaf (The Transporter)*, 2015).
- 13 Without records of these performances, we do not have names for these brave funny women who attempted to break into stand-up comedy.

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