Humour in Africa - NVAS Africa Day 2025
Kargadoor, Utrecht
Saturday 15 March

Programme

09:30-10:00	Arrival with coffee/tea
10:00-10:15	Welcome and introduction
10:15-12:00	**Panel: Humour and Digital Worlds** Nancy C. Kula Ivan Anderegg Rosemary de Moor
12:00-13:00	Lunch
13:00-13:30	NVAS ALV
13:30-15:00	**Keynote: Gendering Humour: Laughter, Feminism and Relationality in Africa** Laura S. Martin
15:00-15:30	Coffee/tea
15:30-17:00	**Panel: Humour, Politics, and Representation** Oluchi Igili Tanja Hendriks Kaja de Koff
17:00-18:00	Drinks

Keynote

Gendering Humour: Laughter, Feminism and Relationality in Africa
Laura S. Martin

This talk uses a gendered lens to examine the role of humour in everyday life and what it means to and for women in Africa. While humour has been examined in the African context, particularly in what it does (and does not do) politically and socially, and has also been looked at (to some extent) from a gendered perspective, there is little that looks at the gendered role of humour in Africa. By engaging more closely at the ways women's agency translates into humour across different contexts (both in the presence of men and just amongst women), new and nuanced understandings of how women navigate the everyday begins to emerge. Humour is not simply a coping mechanism, but rather serves to communicates different ideas about what being a woman means, how they see themselves relationally and diverse notions of femininity. This presentation draws from extensive fieldwork in Sierra Leone, among other African case studies, but also thinks through what this can tell us conceptually both in Humour and Gender studies.

Dr Laura S. Martin is a Lecturer at the University of Glasgow and is co-author of the book *Humour and Politics in Africa: Beyond Resistance* (Bristol University Press). She is also the author of *Navigating Local Transitional Justice: Agency at Work in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone* (CUP), among other publications. She is currently the PI of a British Academy-funded project entitled "Women's Rites." Her current research explores themes related to gender, violence, humour and agency, primarily in Sierra Leone.

Panel: Humour and Digital Worlds

How can we critique yet accept traditional wisdom? Greeting routines and behaviours with in-laws among the Bemba (Zambia)
Prof. Dr. Nancy C. Kula (Leiden University)

This talk discuss a short Tik-Tok video illustrating expected interactions of in-laws among the Bemba, but which also provides a comedic commentary on these otherwise accepted patterns of behaviour. From a linguistics perspective, honorific language between a son-in-law (SIL) and a mother-in-law (MIL) is expected. This respectful and distancing language where a MIL refers to her SIL as 'father' must also be accompanied by physical distance and deference gestures such as a respectful squat, removal of hats, reduction in height, often also accompanied by hand gestures of either drawing together of hands or placing one hand on the chest (usually for men). In the clip, the requirement to maintain distance with a SIL and not come into physical contact with them means that the MIL cannot come to the aid of the SIL. Ridiculous though this seems, presumably also to the SIL, he too continues to perform his actions of deference and in particular showing that he is a strong man as would be expected of a good SIL. These comedic pieces have emerged as a way of making light of the performance of interactions between in-laws, while at the same time underscoring the expected non-deviance from the traditional practice.

"The (unrealistic) goal is to avoid pedestrians": Some early observations on satire as shared experience in African digital games
Ivan Anderegg (Leiden University)

In efforts to reach a local audience and distinguish themselves, African game developers often style their games around African themes. While sometimes this is through the inclusion of African mythology and traditions, other times it is through drawing on shared modern experiences. These latter games often take a humorous and satirical tone, covering the frustration with traffic, reckless drivers, or the state of civil service; relatable experiences for those living on the continent. The exaggerated, satirical tone of these games allows players (and developers) to engage and live out their frustration with the "intractable problems and circumstances" around them. Rather than focusing on educating or "fixing" issues – as "serious games", currently quite popular with funding agencies, do – these games portray the situation as the shared experience people encounter in their daily lives. In this, they create the space for humor, catharsis, and critique. My presentation aims to highlight some examples

of such satirical games, their themes, and how they communicate them. Through their interactivity, games have the potential of going beyond most other forms of art, by confronting the consumer with their own choices and consequences. By for example casting the player in the role of a civil servant, they ask how one would react to being bribed, and show the consequences of accepting or denying that bribe are. In illustrating how these games address the players' emotions and actions, I hope to elaborate on the unique interactive space in which these satirical games operate.

A critical discourse analysis of memes in the South African digital landscape

Rosemary de Moor and Bouwe Werker

For South Africans, it is not unusual to make jokes about their many problems. From corruption, COVID-19 measures, power blackouts or racial issues, South Africans often use internet memes to make fun of these problems. Internet memes are certainly not peculiar to South Africa, but it is remarkable how especially South African netizens use these internet memes to criticize the new problems. For this (digital) research, conducted in 2021 for the final assignment of the ResMa African Studies course Communication in Africa: Language & Media, we looked at memes that fall under the following topics: President Ramaphosa's mask wearing failure; Eskom and load shedding; and the sensitive though omnipresent racial issues. Our research aimed to reveal the implicit meaning contained in internet memes related to these three topics and we engaged in a multimodal critical discourse analysis of the role of memes in these South African digital movements.
We concluded that memes take up a serious role in South Africa's political discourse. To base this argument, we attempted to prove the following three points: 1) Memes are not a small discourse; but an integral part of the social and political lives of digital natives; 2) In South Africa, memes are a vehicle through which the subaltern can protest, convey opinions, spur dialogues and otherwise exercise political influence (e.g. when a meme goes viral); 3) Memes have contributed to creating a sense of belonging in an otherwise divided country.

Panel: Humour, Politics, and Representation

Dan Bello's comic skits in (Northern) Nigeria: A mere distraction, entertainment or political protest?
Dr Oluchi Igili (University of Amsterdam)

Satiric humor has frequently been employed by artists of various expressions in confronting issues which are ordinarily deemed too sensitive and 'off limits'. This type of humor is often adopted with the objective of subverting the status quo. The playful nature of humor sometimes makes it incongruous for use in crises situations. However, humor and crises share the same fundamental nature of being absurd, hence their concourse, especially in artistic representations. Nigeria, a country currently unarguably embroiled in dark times, despite its claim to 25 years of uninterrupted democratic rule, serves as the focus of this study. While Nigeria's political upheaval might no longer be news, what seems new and therefore worthy of scholarly attention is the manner in which some Nigerians are making light of the dark times in Nigeria's democratic experience. This proposal aims at investigating selected

works of Dan Bello whose comic skits are arguably transforming the political atmosphere of Northern Nigeria. Northern Nigeria has a predominantly Muslim population where the religious leaders traditionally exert significant influence on the political predilection, preferences and stance of the people. However, current happenings suggest a paradigm shift in this regard. Dan Bello renders his skits in the Hausa language; the predominant language among Northern Nigerians. Through a qualitative analysis of selected skits, this research intends to study the way in which Bello's comedy engages with Nigeria's contemporary happenings. The research is invested in unraveling Bello's comedy as a mere distraction, a political protest or simply a means of coming to terms with seemingly intractable situation(s) within the (Northern) Nigerian political landscape.

Between jokes and despair:
humour and state-citizen interactions during disasters in Malawi
Tanja Hendriks (KU Leuven)

As one of the poorest countries in the world, the contemporary Malawi state relies on external funding to cover roughly 40% of its budget, with many state services provided by or through non-state organisations. This situation is exacerbated during regularly recurring times of disaster, when additional humanitarian aid is needed to support its population, but also the state itself, to execute its tasks. The Malawi Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DODMA) is charged with the overall coordination of disaster governance and humanitarian responses, but a large part of the funding and resources to do so are provided by donors and non-state actors. Moreover, the available resources are always far less than what is needed and also much less than what is demanded by (disaster-affected) citizens. Despite this increasingly desperate situation, I noticed that disaster aid distributions are often marked by humorous exchanges. In this paper, I use humour as a lens to explore interactions between DODMA civil servants and Malawian citizens during times of disaster. I suggest that in using humour in these at times tense encounters, citizens are able to criticise the state and the situation they find themselves in, while civil servants are able to acknowledge and express the inadequacy of their work and the arbitrariness of the state's ability to provide care without themselves losing face or authority. This argument is based on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Malawi with DODMA civil servants at both national and district level between 2019 and 2024.

Honoring tradition: A dance of encounters with the Maasai
An ethnographic exploration of the cultural representations of the Maasai in the Arusha region of Northern Tanzania
Kaja de Koff

For years, tourists have traveled around the globe seeking to experience places and cultures significantly different from their own. They immerse themselves in the unfamiliar, craving encounters with foreign traditions and customs. In regions like Northern Tanzania where Maasai communities reside, tourism plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural representations and narratives for global consumption. This research examines the portrayal of Maasai culture in the tourism industry and how the Maasai

navigate these representations to assert their cultural integrity and agency in shaping global perceptions. While ample studies have analyzed the representation of Maasai culture and tourism's impact (MacCannell 1999; Salazar 2009, 2012a; Stronza 2005), little attention has been given to Maasai perspectives and strategies in managing these dynamics. This research contributes to this field by examining how the Maasai navigate the demands of the tourist industry, actively shaping their cultural representation. This thesis is based on the following research question: *How do Maasai communities in Northern Tanzania navigate the ways in which their culture is represented in the tourism industry?* Through ethnographic fieldwork, this research analyzes how the Maasai harness tourist imaginaries to stage an appealing image of authenticity. The central argument posits that the Maasai not only preserve and present their heritage but also exercise ownership and control over their cultural narrative by employing diverse strategies, including humor and playful interactions. Through these subtle approaches, they assert their cultural identity and engage with tourism on their own terms. This strategic engagement highlights their nuanced interaction with the industry and their commitment to preserving cultural heritage amidst evolving tourism dynamics. The study contributes to anthropological discussions on cultural representation, commodification and ownership in tourism by offering novel insights into the strategies the Maasai use to navigate cultural imaginaries. By illustrating how humor and agency are employed by marginalized communities to resist commodification pressures, this thesis offers a fresh perspective on power relations in tourism. It indicates that existing models of representation and agency should incorporate more dynamic, agency-focused perspectives.