

“Who sharpens the knives in my house?” Belarusian jokes about adultery at the turn of the 21st century

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Abstract

This paper is a tribute to Belarusian folklorist and ethnographer Uladzimir Sysou (1951-1997) whose extensive legacy includes collecting 139 jokes during his field research in southern Belarus in 1995. Due to his untimely death, these jokes and other folklore items remain unpublished and have, to my knowledge, not been noticed by folklorists. Half of the collected jokes focus on family relations, mostly the relationship between husband and wife. One of the most popular topics of these jokes is adultery. The joke texts show an ambiguous attitude of people towards it. While committing adultery is considered improper, not a lot of effort is made to conceal it. If (or rather, when) a case of adultery comes to light, it does not lead to any serious problems for either spouse in jokes. When studying these jokes, it is curious to place them in historical context and compare them to earlier, Soviet-era jokes about adultery. This study discusses why jokes about adultery in Sysou’s collection differed both quantitatively and qualitatively from adultery jokes found in Soviet collections. The study shows that the high prevalence of jokes on the subject in Sysou’s collection and the liberal attitude towards adultery manifested in them result largely from the decrease in self- and state censorship in Belarus in the early 1990s, set against a backdrop of value pluralisation triggered by the collapse of the USSR.

Keywords: family, humour, jokes, adultery, post-Soviet joke collection.

1. Introduction

Family relations have always been one of the most popular joke topics. When Belarusian folklorists started systematically collecting folklore in the 19th century, they encountered and wrote down dozens of jokes about husbands and wives, parents and children, mothers-in-laws and other relatives (see, for example, Romanov 1887: 433; Federowski 1903: 63-84). One of the reasons for the apparent popularity of these jokes (in contrast to political jokes and jokes that challenged the existing social order) might lie in the fact that the respondents (mostly peasants) were reluctant to tell the scholars, who generally had a much higher social status, jokes on more acute social and political issues. Belarusian folklorist Evdokim Romanov, for example, argued that respondents were sometimes reluctant to share “tales”¹ about the tsar

because one storyteller had been reported to the police for doing so (Romanov 1887: XI). Another possible explanation is that the very genre of political jokes became wide-spread only in the twentieth century (Mel'nichenko 2014: 8).

The Soviet period brought even more family-related jokes to the attention of folklorists. At first glance, this joke topic might seem a safe haven for joke books compilers and folklore scholars, at least compared to political jokes, sharing and studying which was a “risky business” (Oring 2004).² Jokes about family relations seem to be much more ideologically neutral. The humorous effect of these jokes is often generated by the natural differences in gender- and age-related behaviour. However, not all of these jokes were deemed appropriate to appear in published sources. The communist ideology, reaching beyond the public sphere, sought to regulate the private life of Soviet citizens as well. This resulted in many jokes about family relations being blocked out from print and remaining only in oral circulation and private joke collections (usually, in manuscript form). For example, jokes about sex constitute a considerable proportion of family jokes. However, jokes that featured sexual intercourse were censored by the USSR authorities (Feinberg 1978: 89) and therefore are rarely found in Soviet satirical magazines and joke collections.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 has deeply affected different spheres of life of former Soviet citizens. One of the key changes that began already in the late 1980s and proceeded into the 1990s was the unprecedented increase in the degree of freedom, including the freedom of speech. The jokes that were collected at that time are therefore of special interest to a folklorist.

In this study I will analyse the jokes about family relations collected in the mid-1990s to establish how family relations were portrayed in these jokes in comparison with Soviet joke collections. The jokes will be analysed through a gender perspective and as part of the universal stupidity script. Background information about the attitudes towards the family and conventions of its representation, as well as the role of censorship in Soviet and post-Soviet Belarus, will be used to supplement and enrich the analyses of the joke texts.

2. Data and methods

This paper is based on the field notes of Belarusian folklorist and ethnographer Uladzimir Sysou. He was primarily interested in traditional Belarusian rituals (especially funeral rites) and published several books on Belarusian folklore (1995; 1997; 2006). His extensive legacy also includes collecting 139 jokes during his field research in southern Belarus. Sysou carried out his fieldwork in Kalinkovichi district (Gomel region) in 1995. The time and place were not accidental. That year Kalinkovichi district hosted the first Folk Humour Festival which took place in the two neighbouring villages of Malyja (Small) Auciuki and Vyalikija (Big) Auciuki. The fact that the festival started in the early 1990s was not accidental either. Following the collapse of the USSR, this was a time when Belarus was experiencing a national revival, which in turn resulted in the increasing interest in national history and folklore. Creating a Humour Festival in Auciuki was a part of the larger trend of promoting Belarusian folklore.

This festival is a curious phenomenon itself and may serve as a good example of an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1992: 1). The villages that are now called “the Belarusian capital of humour” even by official state media (for example, Vesyalukha 2017) in fact began to be associated with humour fairly recently. Even though Belarusian ethnographer and folklorist Isaak Serbov described Auciuki as a distinct ethnographic group as early as the beginning of the 20th century (Serbov 1914: 51), he noted only the peculiarities of their inhabitants’ appearance and speech, making no note of their distinct

sense of humour. Nor were Auciuki mentioned among ethnic jokes targets in the documented 19th-early 20th century jokes (although a broader ethnic group of southern Belarusians, Poleshuks, was often targeted). Auciuki gained their reputation only at the end of the 20th century thanks to the efforts of Belarusian writer Uladzimir Lipsky, who published several books featuring jokes and funny stories of “kalaski” (men from Auciuki) and “kalinki” (women from Auciuki) (see, for example, Lipsky 1995; 2008; 2012). Uladzimir Lipsky is also the creator and the chair of the jury of the Folk Humour Festival in Auciuki.

Going back to Uladzimir Sysou’s field trip to Kalinkavichi district, it is important to mention that his fieldwork was mostly among the participants of the first Folk Humour Festival. Arbitrary as the choice of Auciuki as a venue may have been, the fact that Sysou’s informants were among the festival participants meant that they were readier to share jokes and funny stories with the researcher than “average” informants who often struggle to come up with a joke on the spot.

Due to Sysou’s untimely death, these jokes and other folklore items remain unpublished and to my knowledge, they have escaped the attention of folklorists. The data collected during the field trip are now available at the Archive of the Institute of Art Studies, Ethnography and Folklore, which is affiliated to the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. The field notes consist of three files that contain jokes, folk songs, ethnographic descriptions and other forms of folklore. Each item is accompanied by a short comment about the time when it was noted (only the year is mentioned), the village where the item was noted (this element is not always present), the interviewer(s) (Uladzimir Sysou alone or sometimes together with one of his colleagues) and the informant(s) (often the name is omitted, see section 5 for more details).

Out of the 139 jokes collected during the field trip, 58 focus on family relations, mostly the relationship between husband and wife. Some jokes mention the relations between children and their parents, mothers-in-law and their sons-in-law, or just use the family setting to make political jokes. The rest of the jokes deal with political, ethnic, and other topics.

This paper will focus on a particular subset of the family jokes collected by Sysou: jokes that deal with the issue of pre- and post-marital affairs of one (or both) of the partners. Out of 45 jokes that revolve around husband and wife relationship, 24 (53,5%) mention adultery in some form. The proportion itself distinguishes this collection from the joke books published in Soviet times. Yet it is not only the quantity of adultery jokes that differs from the ones in the previous period; the form and content of the jokes is different as well.

The form of the jokes in Sysou’s collection is somewhat less typical than the form of the usual canned jokes. As far as it is possible to judge from the jokes’ textualisation, Uladzimir Sysou tried to keep the written texts close to their oral presentation. This is evident from the sometimes excessive use of interjections and other filler words and the language peculiarities. Some words and phrases are grammatically incorrect. This may in part be attributed to Sysou’s intention to capture the local dialect. Many other “mistakes” result from his informants using *trasyanka* (a mixed form of the Belarusian and Russian languages). Nevertheless, Sysou’s notes are not exact transcripts as he did omit some extra-verbal data such as pauses, repetitions, etc., possibly in order to make the texts easier to read.

Grammatical imperfection and elements of spontaneous oral speech are not the only features that distinguish Sysou’s collection from the more “polished” joke books. Another important characteristic is the length and structure of the jokes. Some of the jokes that can be found in the archive neatly fit under the definition of jokes as “short narratives with punch lines that generate mirthful laughter” (Attardo 2014: 187). Others, however, are more extended narratives that have some features of a folk tale: structurally, they have an exposition, a conflict, a climax, and a denouement. Sometimes a side plot is also present. These texts are longer and more detailed than a typical canned joke would be. Even though

they do somewhat push the boundaries of the classic definition, Sysou himself still classifies them as canned jokes (anekdoty), presumably due to their humorousness and the presence of what can be seen as a punchline.

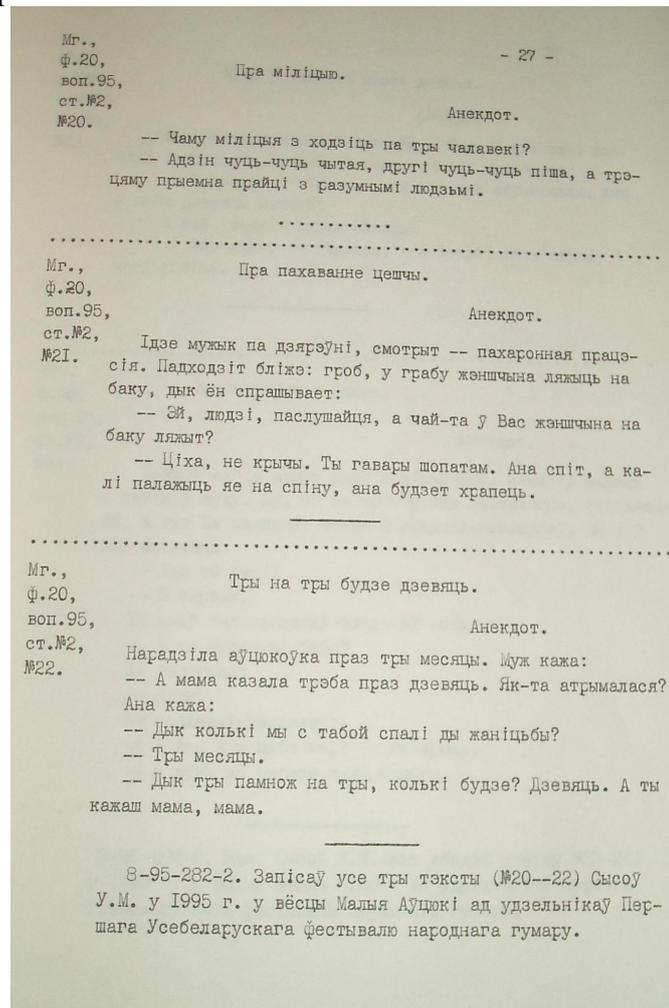


Figure 1. A page from Sysou's field notes. Source: Archive of the Institute of Art Studies, Ethnography and Folklore (National Academy of Sciences of Belarus).

In this paper, the texts of adultery jokes from Sysou's collection will be subjected to qualitative content analysis. They are compared both synchronically and diachronically to other jokes dealing with similar subject matter. The diachronic comparison will show in what respect jokes about adultery that were published in Belarusian joke books and magazines in Soviet times differed from the ones that can be found in Sysou's collection. The synchronic comparison will trace the connections Sysou's jokes share with those from popular joke cycles and jokes that circulate outside of Belarusian folklore.

Apart from analysing the jokes proper, I will provide some background information about how family life was regulated and how family jokes were handled by folklore joke collectors and publishers in Soviet and post-Soviet Belarus. As Christie Davies put it, jokes are social facts and therefore they should be studied in context of other social facts (2011: 7). The existence of some jokes and the absence of others at a given moment in a given society is tightly connected with the norms, regulations, and values in that society. Thus, in order to extrapolate meaning from joke texts and plots, a consideration of their context of origin is a necessary prerequisite.

3. Regulating family life and family jokes in Soviet and post-Soviet times

As mentioned earlier, the Communist party sought to regulate the private lives of Soviet citizens in addition to the public sphere. While the early years of the Soviet regime witnessed a liberal attitude towards family, in the 1930s the government started to tighten its grip on family life (Gavrov 2009: 94). The family was often referred to as “the basic cell of society”. Accordingly, strong families were deemed a prerequisite for the Soviet society to prosper.

What it meant for Soviet citizens in practice is that their private and family life could have an impact on their public personae and status. Adultery was actively denounced in Soviet society (Schuchinov et al. 2006: 174). It was especially crucial for Communist party members and those whose professions and popularity attracted public scrutiny. A divorce (regardless of its circumstances) was one of the indicators that a person can be politically unreliable; a divorcee could find it difficult to go abroad even in the 1960-80s, when trips to foreign countries became more accessible to Soviet citizens (Kon 2010: 144, for a more detailed case description, see Lebina 2014: 93-94).³ And while the process of divorce was gradually simplified legally, the practice was viewed as a “relic of capitalism” (Khachatryan 2010: 81-82).

Industrial enterprises (factories and plants), which were “the hubs of Soviet social life”, were used to control people’s family lives through voluntary organisations such as women’s councils, comrades’ courts, etc. (Zhidkova 2012). As the Soviet state imposed its precedence over the family as the locus of Soviet citizens’ loyalty, it took much of the responsibility for family well-being that had formerly been the husband’s domain (Cohen 1969: 662; Zhidkova 2012). This resulted in a discrepancy between traditional family patterns and values and the new social reality. On the other hand, the fact that in the years following World War II there were twice as many women in Belarus as men, meant that women had to comply with men’s ideal of a perfect wife, which was inspired by the traditional family model, in order to have a chance at family life (Varonich 2010). In other words, women had to be humble and submissive and dedicate themselves to their family, while at the same time they were required to work alongside men to fit into the Bolsheviks’ model of society. This was true not only for the period immediately after World War II but also for several generations following it (ibid.). This situation often provoked tensions in family lives, resulting in quarrels, adultery, and divorces.

Often, the state portrayed instability in the family, adultery, unwillingness to have children and other “deficiencies” in family life as rudiments of capitalist values (see, for example, Kopelyanskaya 1954: 8). Righteous Soviet families were presumably free of these flaws. Oleg Kharkhordin explains it within the framework of “saintly standards” in family life which were adopted by the Bolsheviks and then imposed on the wider society (Kharkhordin 1997: 354). Such an attitude permeated even academic research at the time. Natalya Ivanova, for example, points out that Soviet psychologists were reluctant to study the psychology of adultery until 1988 (Ivanova 2008). Sociologists displayed this tendency as well. For example, “adultery” was not included as an option in the 1961-62 survey of the reasons for divorces (Lebina 2014: 84).

In some studies, however, it was impossible to overlook adultery as an important issue in family life. Soviet researcher Anatoly Kharchev, who dedicated most of his attention to the sociology of family life, claimed that 28% of all the divorces were caused by adultery (1964: 212). Kharchev and Boguslavskaya also cited a study conducted by neurologists and psychotherapists, who claimed that around 80% of psychological disorders had their roots in family life, mentioning adultery among other psychotraumatic factors (Kharchev & Boguslavskaya 1982: 101).

We can see thus that adultery was an “elephant in the room” in the Soviet academic world. It was mentioned when omitting it would create an obvious lacuna in the data; however, scholars tried to avoid focusing on it too much. An alternative explanation for this state of affairs was put forward by Kharchev himself. He claimed that it was difficult to study adultery as a sociologist, since many respondents were unwilling to confess that they committed it (1964: 100). While respondents’ reluctance to discuss their own indiscretions does not seem unreasonable, it is worth pointing out that the same period saw the publication of numerous sociological and psychological studies on adultery in the West (see, for example, Neubeck & Schletzer 1962; Neubeck 1969; Cohen 1969), including studies of consensual adultery, i.e. swinging (Denfeld & Gordon 1970), which was a nonexistent subject in Soviet academic discourse. The fact that such studies were possible beyond the “Iron Curtain” but highly problematic in the USSR points, in addition to obvious discomfort with discussing sensitive personal issues, to respondents’ self-censorship, which was a pervasive social force and exerted comparable influence on Soviet public discourse to that of state censorship (Jones 2005: 398; Stelmakh 2001: 144).

In this context, it is interesting to look at the representations of adultery in art, for which adultery has always been an important source of dramatic conflict. The Soviet time was no exception: adultery was a common plot trope in many literary works and films (*Anna Karenina*, the 1967 film adaptation of the classic novel by Leo Tolstoy, being a prominent example). In film in particular, adultery began to emerge as a subject at the time of the Khrushchev Thaw, when the Communist party’s grip on art and society in general loosened somewhat (Lebina 2014). Art was thus afforded somewhat more leeway to explore potentially controversial issues, although the boundaries of what could and could not be done remained firmly in place and those who transgressed them were persecuted (see, for example, Kozlov 2015 for a discussion of political censorship in the Belarusian cultural scene during the Thaw).

There was also definitely a whole body of folklore revolving around the topic of adultery. Mikhail Mel’nichenko, who relied mostly on private (and thus less censored) joke sources, lists dozens of humorous items that touch upon the topic of adultery in a special section of his book “The Soviet joke: plots classification” (Mel’nichenko 2014: 730-752). However, since the jokes listed in Mel’nichenko’s book came from a variety of sources across the Soviet Union, it is impossible to verify whether and to what extent they circulated in Belarus specifically.

On the other hand, official joke books and satire magazines published in the Soviet period in Belarus, approached the matter much more carefully. A number of differences can be identified between the jokes in Mel’nichenko’s collection and the ones in the joke books and magazines published in Soviet Belarus. Three of them are particularly conspicuous. Firstly, no jokes about adultery that involved leaders of the Communist party could appear in print. Secondly, the jokes in the printed collections did not hint on the widespread nature of adultery in Soviet society. Finally, the official jokes were very discreet and refrained from explicitly mentioning sexual intercourse. This was in line with the general censorship of sexuality from Soviet public discourse (Rotkirch 2000: XI).

Consider the following examples of adultery jokes that appeared in print:

“My husband is so stingy!”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, yesterday, when he came back home at night, I found a present for me in his pocket: a lady’s sock, but just one and a worn one at that!” (Byaspaly 1970: 81.)

An anxious man runs into his neighbour's house and declares, stuttering:
"My wife is hugging your Ales' [husband's name]".
"Why would you care? Let's not only hug each other, but also kiss", replies the neighbour.
(Vozhyk 1969, cited in Fiadosik 2004: 292.)

As we can see, the situation with jokes about adultery in Soviet joke books and magazines mirrored the attitude towards adultery itself in public and academic discourse. Joke book compilers and magazines' editors could not ignore such a fruitful topic altogether, but they did their best to represent it as indirectly and innocuously as possible.

The collapse of the Soviet Union had a profound effect on all spheres of Belarusian life. The changes that it brought played an ambiguous role in joke collection and publication.

On the one hand, the number of academics and overall amount of research sharply declined due to the scarcity of funding. That meant there were not only fewer field trips but also fewer academic publications, including folk joke collections. A point in case: while it is easy to find joke collections published by Belarusian folklorists in the Soviet time and in the 21st century, the National Library of Belarus does not list a single academic joke collection published by any Belarusian university or the Academy of Sciences in the 1990s.

On the other hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union saw, for the first time in decades, the emergence of privately owned publishing houses. As their main goal was to gain profit, these publishing houses responded to popular demand. With jokes being one of the most popular folklore genres, the 1990s saw a great number of non-academic joke books published in Belarus. Even more crucially, the level of censorship decreased dramatically, resulting in previously forbidden or restricted topics (including sex and adultery) occupying an important place in these joke books. Unfortunately, due to the nature of these publications it is not possible to determine from whom and how they were collected; moreover, it is difficult to judge whether these jokes were widespread in Belarus or if they were just reprinted from Russian or other post-Soviet joke books. In order to see what jokes were definitely told in Belarus (or at least in one of its regions) it is necessary to look closely on folklorists' field collections – the legacy of Uladzimir Sysou being one key source.

4. Jokes about adultery in Uladzimir Sysou's collection

Jokes collected by Uladzimir Sysou are much more explicit than their Soviet predecessors. Many of them deal with the issue of sex which was previously a taboo topic in (Soviet) Belarusian society; adultery is primarily associated with sexual intercourse and/or its consequences. This is not unique to the jokes about adultery: a considerable number of other family- and non-family related jokes in this joke collection also mention sexual intercourse. Here are some examples of how sex is represented in these jokes:

A woman from Auciuki gave birth to a child three months after her wedding. Her husband says:
"Mother told me it normally happens in nine months. How come it only took three?"
The wife replies:
"How long had we been sleeping together before the wedding?"
"Three months."
"So multiply three by three, what do you get? Nine. See? And you keep saying: 'Mother this, mother that...'" (Archive, file 2, #22.)

While this joke is ostensibly set in Auciuki, it is in fact an appropriation of a known Jewish joke (see, for example, Grinberg 2013: 206). Several other jokes in Sysou's collection are also adaptations of earlier jokes to the local context.

Another joke does not explicitly mention Auciuki but evokes a general village atmosphere:

Ivan the Fool asked for divorce after fifty years of marriage. The judges summoned him to the court and asked:

“What are your arguments for the divorce, old man?”

“Honourable judges, over the fifty years of our marriage she has become cold towards me”.

“Take your seat, old man. Old lady, what do you have to say?”

“Honourable judges and everybody present, this man could not reach the warmth even when he was young. We wouldn’t even have any children had it not been for the good neighbours”. (Archive, file 3, #17.)

Consider also a third joke that does not seem to bear any relation to Auciuki:

Vasily Ivanavich and Anka got married. But Anka was having an affair with Pet’ka. As it happened, Vasily Ivanavich’s and Pet’ka’s flats were next to each other. So Pet’ka drilled a hole in the wall and told Anka to lie near the wall, and he would lie on the other side, so that her husband wouldn’t notice [them having sex]. The night fell. Anka is lying near the wall and groaning “A-ah!”

“What’s wrong, Anka?” asks Vasily Ivanavich.

“There is a draught,” she replies.

“Let me lie near the wall”.

“Okay”.

Just as they are falling asleep, Vasily Ivanavich suddenly goes: “A-ah!”

“What’s wrong, Vasily Ivanavich?” Anka says.

“What a fucking draught, even the blanket is thrusting into my arse”. (Archive, file 3, #58.)

It is curious to note that the latter joke is also a part of the popular Chapaev joke cycle. Vasily Chapaev was a Red Army commander during the Russian Civil War of 1917-1922. He became an iconic figure for Soviet propaganda after his wartime heroism was made the basis of a popular 1934 film. The joke cycle, however, did not emerge until the mid-1960s (Graham 2003: 177) and remained popular for several decades to follow. The joke above follows the general conventions of the cycle: Chapaev’s fictional aides Pet’ka and Anka make an appearance alongside him, and Chapaev himself uses characteristically blunt language (Shmeleva, E. & Shmelev, A. 2002: 83).

The Chapaev cycle is not the only joke cycle represented in the part of Sysou’s collection that deals with adultery. There are also some Jewish and Chukchi jokes:

Haim returns home and sees Sara lying in bed with some youngster. The youngster gets up, hastily dresses and leaves.

Haim asks Sara:

“What was that, you bitch?”

“Oh, Haim, you know young people these days: no ‘hi’ to you, no ‘thanks’ to me”. (Archive, file 3, #51.)

A Chukchi is getting ready to go hunting. Then he sees Van’ka⁴ approaching. So he says:

“Listen, wife, tell him that Chukchi go hunting”⁵.

He then hides under the bed and lies still.

Van’ka the Russian comes in, holding a bottle [of wine or vodka].

“Where is the Chukchi?”

“He’s not here”.

“Well, let’s then drink with you at least”, he says.

They empty the bottle and then have sex. The Chukchi, lying under the bed, says:

“Oh, it’s pity Chukchi went hunting, otherwise I would shoot him”. (Archive, file 3, #68.)

In the following joke the adultery itself does not happen, but there is an allusion to its possibility:

Abram comes home and sees Sara standing there looking uneasy. He says:

“What’s wrong, Sara?”

“Abram, I fucked up [Russian ‘dala makhu’, homonymous for ‘fucked Makh’]”.

“Did you fuck that smelly old Makh?!”

“No, Abram, I lost three roubles”.

“Man, I wish you’d fucked Makh”. (Archive, file 3, #92.)

These ethnic jokes demonstrate the features that are typical of ethnic humour about Jews and Chukchi: the former are witty and stingy while the latter are portrayed as stupid and dominated by the Russians, including domination in sexual matters (Draitser 1998: 86). On the one hand, this means these jokes lack the “local flavour” that could be expected when collecting humorous folklore from the participants of a folk humour festival in an area with a (presumably) exceptional and distinct sense of humour. On the other hand, the existence of such typical jokes in Sysou’s collection suggests that the jokes in his collection were not invented by his informants and can be also found elsewhere. Indeed, a variant of “no hello, no thank you” joke can be found on the popular Russian-language website *anekdot.ru* (<https://www.anekdot.ru/id/-1100619021/>); the “dala makhu” joke can also be found on some humorous websites (for example, <http://live4fun.ru/joke/20108>); the joke about the Chukchi is cited by Emil Draitser (1998: 86). This places the joke collection outside of the narrow context of Auciuki and makes it possible to regard it as representative of a wider body of Belarusian (and to some extent, post-Soviet Russian-language in general) folklore.

By and large, the joke texts show an ambiguous attitude towards the issue of adultery. On the one hand, adultery is considered a vice by those who it is committed against. In the Chukchi joke above, the Chukchi husband expresses his desire to kill his wife’s lover. Here is another joke that also illustrates a husband’s discontent with his wife’s adultery:

Kumau’ya⁶ went fishing. They caught some fish, made a fire and started to make fish soup. A kum tells a kuma:

“Let’s swim to the other side of the river”.

So they swam to the other side of the river. The kum bent his kuma down and they started making love. The other man stood on the other side, watching from across the river as his kum was having sex with his wife.

A ram that had been grazing behind the man suddenly ran into him, hitting him right in the butt with its horns, pushing him into the river, and crying “Bie-eh!” [onomatopoeia for sheep vocalisation]

The man climbed out of the river and addressed the ram:

“I can see that he is fucking [Belarusian ‘yabie’, rhymes with sheep vocalisation] her, but I can’t swim”. (Archive, file 3, #46.)

However, in most of the jokes not a lot of effort is made to conceal cheating on one’s partner. Spouses might even tell it openly to their children:

A son comes to his father and asks:

“Dad, tell me, where did you find me?”

The father replies:

“When I was young like a young goat, and your mother, too, was like a young doe, we were running, and running, and then we ran into you”.

The son then goes to his mother and asks:

“Mum, tell me, where did you find me?”

“What did your father say?”

“He told me that when he was a goat, and you were a young goat, the two of you ran into me.”
“Oh no, my dear, when I was a young swallow, and Petya was an eagle, we were flying, flying and flew into you. Your father, though, was a goat, and is still a goat”. (Archive, file 3, #27.)

Even if the adultery is being concealed, it is done in such a grotesque manner that becomes a joke in itself:

The husband comes home and sees a naked man standing in a corner. He asks his wife:

“What the hell is this?”

“Oh, this is a hanger,” she replies. “I bought it for you to hang your suit, so that it doesn't get so crumpled.”

The husband sits down for dinner. As he is eating borshch, he asks the man:

“Would you like some borshch?”

The man is silent. The husband finishes his borshch, and gets to the main course. He asks the man again:

“Would you like some?”

The man remains silent. The husband takes some cold beer out of the fridge:

“Do you want some beer?”

The man mumbles:

“Mmm... Uh...” and shakes his head hesitantly, as if accepting and declining at the same time.

“What a fool!” the husband exclaims. “I spent three days standing like that at the neighbour's place, and nobody even offered me any water!” (Archive, file 3, #73.)

As no significant effort is put into concealing the adultery, it is often discovered. Nonetheless, if a case of adultery does come to light, it does not lead to any serious problems for either of the spouses. Moreover, sometimes both spouses can even benefit from each other's adultery in an unexpected way:

A man finds a mistress and comes to her place. They begin setting the table and she tells him to sharpen the knives.

As he sharpens the knives, the man thinks to himself: "I wonder who sharpens the knives in my house? I never do, but they are always sharp". (Archive, file 3, #74.)

To sum up, the attitude towards adultery displayed in the jokes Sysou collected seems to be rather lax. Cheating on one's spouse does not lead to any serious family problems and sometimes can even bring certain benefits for both the husband and the wife. Even more importantly as far as the humorous texts are concerned, the spouse committing adultery is in most cases not the one laughed at. In order to determine who is the joke butt in these jokes, it is important to take into consideration the issue of the gender of joke protagonists.

5. Gender considerations

In jokes about adultery either or both the husband and the wife may be cheating. However, in Sysou's collection jokes about an unfaithful wife are much more common than the ones about a cheating husband. Wives also tend to be portrayed as the ones who are more preoccupied with sex than their husbands. One possible explanation might lie in the fact that men normally tell more canned jokes than women (see, for example, Martin 2014: 129) and also more bawdy jokes (Bronner 2015: 765). Unfortunately, in most cases Sysou does not mark the joke teller's gender in his notes. Apart from a few instances when he writes the names or the pseudonyms of his informants, he refers to them collectively as “the participants of the First Belarusian Folk Humour festival that took place in Kalinkovichi district of the Gomel region”. Thus, it is not clear whether these particular joke tellers were male or female, but if

we assume the general tendency of men telling more canned jokes than women to be at play here, it also makes women more likely to be portrayed as the perpetrator. A psychoanalytic explanation for this is that “when one is married and has forbidden wishes to have extramarital affairs, these desires are often projected onto the spouse. ‘She’ll cheat on me’ is often easier to cope with than ‘I am a cheater’” (Strean 1993: 92).

Interestingly, however, a closer look at these joke texts reveals that although the women are the ones who commit adultery, they are not the butts of the jokes. Instead, it often turns out that the one being laughed at is the husband who is deceived by his wife. In some cases, the humorous effect is generated by a wife’s witty attempts to pretend to be innocent. This is clearly the case in the joke about giving birth to a child three months after the wedding and the Jewish joke about an “impolite” youngster in Sara’s bed. In other cases, the humorous effect stems from the fact that the husband himself is too stupid to discover adultery. Here is an example of such a joke:

A man comes home, undresses, has dinner, goes to bed. As he gets in the bed he notices an extra pair of feet. He begins counting:
“My feet, my wife’s feet... And whose feet are these?” He then gets to the other side of the bed and starts counting again:
“My feet, my wife’s feet... And whose feet are these?” He gets out of the bed:
“My feet, my wife’s feet. Okay, everything is fine.” (Archive, file 3, #72.)

As we see, it is not the act of adultery that is laughed at, but rather the stupidity of somebody who has been deceived by it. On the surface of it, this speaks to the “enormous and universal popularity of jokes told at the expense of allegedly stupid groups of people” (Davies 1998: 63), and out of the stock characters of an adultery joke, it is definitely the unwitting spouse failing to notice their partner’s involvement in an affair that lends itself well to becoming a joke butt. What is intriguing, though, is how often it is the deceived husbands that are the joke butt in adultery jokes, even when they are aware of their wife’s infidelity. While it would be difficult to pinpoint a single definitive explanation, we can perhaps trace a link to the findings of a study conducted by psychologists David Frederick and Melissa Fales. Their research reveals that “heterosexual men were more likely than heterosexual women to be upset by sexual infidelity (54 vs. 35 %) and less likely than heterosexual women to be upset by emotional infidelity (46 vs. 65 %)” (2016: 175). Given that the jokes in Sysou’s collection mostly play with the idea of sexual rather than emotional infidelity, we may see them as a way of ridiculing men’s fears. In fact, plots involving and deriding cuckolds are common in other forms of folklore and works of art, where they seem to serve a similar function: Levin (2010: 3), for example, discusses the numerous examples of cuckoldry in medieval English literature and argues that the derision of the cuckold “enabled masculine fears to be approached with ‘the containing function’ of humor”. Mocking the cuckold is thus not only an expression of men’s “secret fears”, but also a therapeutic mechanism helping to deal with them.

The popularity of the cuckold as a joke butt can be also linked to the very nature of stupidity jokes. The deceived husbands fail to control their wives physically, but even more importantly, they tend to fail intellectually and let their witty wives and their lovers to have the upper hand by concealing the adultery or minimizing its negative consequences for themselves. In fact, the cuckolded husband often fails to even recognise he is being cheated on, which is in line with Christie Davies’s observation that stupidity jokes “refer to an inability to comprehend everyday processes” (Davies 2011: 68) that could be easily understood by any common person. Furthermore, the cuckold’s helplessness regarding his wife’s adultery places him in a passive position, which subverts the traditional dynamic of gender relationships in a patriarchal family, resulting in a potentially humorous incongruity.

On the other hand, as Brottman (2004) has pointed out in his analysis of Gershon Legman's work, adultery in jokes always involves a power dynamic between the adulterer and the cuckold, in which dominance over the husband is even more important than the "sexual conquest" of the wife. In this sense, the capitulation of the cuckold is twofold: both towards his wife and her lover, leading Brottman to conclude that adultery jokes are archetypal specimen of joke-telling in general, insofar as their aim is "to make an impression on a triangulated, absent third figure".

Whatever the case, it is difficult to analyse how prevalent adultery jokes were in the USSR and what forms they took. Officially published joke collections were too heavily censored to produce enough insight into the matter, and folk jokes in unpublished manuscripts were selected under very different circumstances, making them difficult to compare with the post-Soviet jokes (we do not know, for example, if the joke collectors specifically sought out bawdy and offensive jokes to counter the nearly sterile humour of printed books). Many of the Soviet-time jokes about adultery in Mel'nichenko's collection, for instance, are closely linked to politics and feature either some particular political figures or the Soviet ruling class in general; these social groups have their own reasons to be portrayed as stupid (for more on stupid dictators, see Davies 2011: 35-36).

One can however surmise that the fall of the USSR had at least some effect on the content and significance of adultery jokes in Belarus that could be and were collected by folklorists. An obvious factor would be the state's abruptly loosened grip on ideology and morality. Books that would previously fail to clear censorship were printed in the thousands, becoming a staple on bookshelves across the country. Western soap-operas, though already available from the late Perestroika years, gained in popularity dramatically in the early 1990s. Broadcast in Belarus since 1992, the *Santa Barbara* television series became immensely popular, depicting attitudes towards love, family life, and adultery that were markedly different from those advocated by Soviet ideologists. Other famous romantic films with an erotic flavour that became popular in the late years of the USSR and shortly after its collapse include *Emmanuelle* (this 1974 film was released in the USSR only in late 1980s), *Intergirl*, etc.

As new attitudes and values were beginning to transform the old ideas and ways of life, discussing sex and adultery was no longer a taboo. Still the norms, values and taboos that had been dominant in the Soviet times were not gone, producing tensions and resulting in confusion amid the increasing pluralisation of values (Pantin & Lapkin 1999). Tellingly, a 1991 cross-cultural study of families found that Russian wives and husbands had the most polarised views on the issue of patriarchal versus egalitarian family values – yet their real-life behaviour showed few signs of such polarisation (Zdravomyslova & Arutyunyan 1998). The same tensions and discrepancy between worldview and lived experience were likely at play in Russia's Western neighbour, Belarus, as well.

This incongruity between the old and the new norms as well as between "traditional" and new demands on family life created a fruitful ground for humour. And the transformations of public discourse – the state's loosened grip on media and the decrease in citizens' self-censorship due to the more liberal atmosphere – transformed joke-telling, as is evident in Sysou's adultery jokes. The fact it was appropriate to tell adultery jokes to a stranger in a public context such as humour festival marked a larger comeback of the folklore tradition, which, with its often sexual, scatological, and subversive imagery had been censored and largely marginalised by the Soviet regime (Kononenko 2001: 422-23).

6. Conclusion and discussion

Jokes about adultery are interesting to analyse because they combine a universally known and understandable subject matter and the peculiar characteristics of a certain place and time where they are being told, collected, and published. If approached carefully, both the form and content of these jokes can tell a lot about the people who tell them.

That being said, it would be too simplistic to assume that jokes mirror reality. Just because jokes seem to display a lax attitude towards adultery does not mean cheating on one's spouse was accepted as a normal part of family life in the society where these jokes circulated. Writing about ethnic jokes, Christie Davies noted that "jokes play with superiority and disparagement" rather than serve as vehicle to communicate it (Davies 2002: 12). If we apply this observation to jokes about adultery, we can conclude that a high number of adultery jokes does not necessarily indicate a high prevalence of extramarital affairs in a particular society, nor does mocking the victim of adultery without condemning the perpetrator mean that cheating spouses are tolerated. What it may point to is a general anxiety about the issue shared by the (probably) mostly male joke-tellers and the fact that a role of a cuckolded husband may be associated with intellectual inferiority. It is possible that these feelings were exacerbated by the moral and sexual liberation of the media space and public discourse brought about by the fall of communism.

However, as I have pointed out earlier, many of the joke texts in Sysou's collections are in fact adaptations of the earlier joke plots. The topic of adultery is also not a new one in Belarusian folklore. So the main change that was prompted by the moral liberation of the 1990s was the fact that Belarusians were willing to share these jokes even with an outsider (in this case, the researcher), and the researcher himself was documenting these jokes in his field notes.

While the texts of Soviet and post-Soviet jokes about adultery are difficult to compare due to the vastly different circumstances of their publication, they are, through those very circumstances, indicative of the general state of society at the time. While the Soviet jokes were heavily censored to avoid any potential affront to communist values and ideology, these considerations seem to have vanished following the collapse of the USSR. Self-censorship, which was also pervasive in the Soviet Union (Stelmakh 2001: 144; Jones 2005: 398) and resulted in the fact that the jokes that were in oral circulation could be very difficult for a folklorist to collect, seems, too, to have diminished after its dissolution. In a sense, Uladzimir Sysou was lucky to gain access to his respondents at a particular point in Belarusian history when people not only were ready to share jokes with a researcher, but were willing to address various "inappropriate" topics, including sex and adultery. This can be seen as a revival of the folklore tradition, which never shied away from such explicit topics but which had been muted under the Soviet regime.

Another telling observation from Sysou's collection concerns the lack of a distinct "local flavour" in his material. The fact that alternative versions of many of Sysou's jokes can be found in other post-Soviet nations' media shows that the dissolution of the USSR did not lead to an instant disruption in the common cultural and informational continuum of the former member states. At least insofar as a common language (Russian) or mutually intelligible languages (such as Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian) were used, this continuum still lent itself to the circulation of the same folk forms. This also means that insights gained from analysing Sysou's collection can apply to a much wider geographic context than the remote villages of Auciuki or even the nation of Belarus.

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Notes

¹ Romanov included jokes and funny stories in the wider category of “tales”.

² This is not to say that political jokes were entirely absent from joke books and periodicals published at that time. In fact, humorous Soviet-era satirical magazines did feature political jokes – but the butts of these jokes were the opponents of the Communist party. This means that the jokes that were in oral circulation and the jokes published in Soviet joke collections were two different sets of jokes; the latter were more literary than folk (Mel’nichenko 2014: 34).

³ One notable exception is Yekaterina Furtseva, a divorcee who built a successful career in the Communist Party and subsequently remarried, going on to become General Secretary of the Party and then Minister of Culture of the USSR. But Furtseva was an exceptional figure who defied the unwritten rules of Soviet politics on many levels, beginning with the fact that she was about the only prominent female member of the Politburo and the Secretariat.

⁴ A typical Russian male name.

⁵ Chukchi jokes typically feature broken Russian on the part of the Chukchi, consistent with his depiction as dim-witted.

⁶ The words “kum” and “kuma” (collectively “kumau’ya”) in Belarusian originally referred to one’s children’s godfather/godmother or the father/mother of one’s godchildren. The terms were also used more widely to refer to one’s close acquaintances.

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