

Identity politics and ethnic humour in contemporary Jordan

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Abstract

Following political turbulence and instability in the Middle East, Jordan has become a home for a large number of Palestinians, Iraqis, and Syrians, and now includes a significant number of Egyptians in its workforce. This growing diversity in the population has impacted the country not only socially and economically but quite noticeably in terms of identity politics and ethnic humour (how do indigenous people perceive the other(s) and how do others perceive the indigenous people?). This is explained through the rising tensions between Jordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin in relation to the formation of ethnic humour that is based on the idea of urban and rural division in Jordanian society. The discussion in this article argues that the people of Transjordanian towns, such as As-Salt, At-Tafilah, and As-Sarih, have 'unexpectedly' become the target of many ethnic jokes by the urbanites in Amman and elsewhere, who now make up the majority of Jordanians of Palestinian origin. The people of these Transjordanian small towns and villages have been the target of Jordanian ethnic humour because of their backwardness, lack of discretion, and stupidity, compared to the cleverness, modernity, and high culture of the Jordanian urbanites and their cultural superiority. However, since the 2011 Arab Spring, the people of these Transjordanian towns have developed a counter-superiority tendency to laugh at the powerful in urban centres and make fun of the government and its institutionalised discourse about reform and progress.

Keywords: ethnic humour, identity politics, (im)migration, urban-rural division, Jordan.

1. Introduction

Humour is a core aspect of social life and social relationships. It performs multiple social, psychological, and political functions. It can affect family bonding, personal relationships, and social environments. It also enables tensions to be released and helps to counter depression and mental illness, and support individual wellbeing (Carroll, 2014; Eagleton, 2019). In the context of (ethnic) humour research and scholarship, there are three established theories of humour: (1) the superiority theory of humour (proposed by Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes), (2) the incongruity theory of humour (proposed by Francis Hutcheson, Arthur Schopenhauer, and James Beattie), and (3) the relief theory of humour (proposed by Immanuel Kant, Herbert Spencer, and Sigmund Freud). Although the relief theory of humour may have nothing to do

with ethnic humour, Freud is sometimes important to talk about the role of individual agency and the expression of humour as a result of socio-political repression and economic inequalities between the urbanites and rural dwellers.

The superiority theory of humour is among the oldest theories of humour and laughter. It originates in the classical and philosophical works of Plato and Aristotle, who viewed humour as a pleasure derived from someone else's misfortune or calamity. The 16th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes was one of the main proponents of this theory of humour. In Hobbes' words, laughter "is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly [self-deprecatory humour]" (Hobbes, 1650/1987, p. 20). The Hobbesian "sudden glory" resonates to me with the Arabic word '*shamateh*' (gloating), which denotes the same feeling of pleasure derived from someone else's misfortune or calamity. In one of his politically satirical articles 'Thanks to all corrupted people' (2011), Jordan's most famous socio-political satirist Ahmad Hassan Al-Zou'bi compared his profession to that of a winch driver. He argued that both (the satirist and winch driver) earn their livelihood through the misfortune and adversities of others. Al-Zou'bi's description of his profession is notable here for its relevance to the superiority theory of humour and laughter.

In the context of Jordanian ethnic humour, we might think of several domestic jokes by the urbanites in the capital city Amman, that target the inferiority and stupidity of the people of As-Salt and At-Tafilah in the rural areas in Jordan, as examples relating to the superiority theory. In the view of this theory of humour, Jordanian urbanites laugh at the people of At-Tafilah because they are stereotypically perceived as stupid, ignorant, and backward. They are popularly assumed by the Jordanian urbanites to be simpletons and less clever. According to this theory, humour is derived from the feeling of superiority, which can be best understood in the larger context of 'moron jokes' and binary oppositions: the cunning of the joke teller as well as the listener, compared to the stupidity of a target group (Carroll, 2014, p. 9). Moron is a term that was introduced by prominent American psychologist Henry Herbert Goddard (1866-1957) to classify individuals based on their intellectual disability and scores in the IQ test. Moron jokes (as the name suggests) stem from stereotypical perceptions about others. They highlight the role of stereotypes as a motif for generating humour and satire over the other. The superiority theory of humour has therefore a great capacity to explain the politics of ethnic jokes (e.g., urban-rural tensions), disability jokes, 'lightbulb' jokes and the like. The superiority theory of humour provides therefore a valid perspective to think about humour and satire in the Jordanian socio-political context. This theory combines elements of two social groups: the superordinate over the subordinate people (the more powerful and the more powerless).

Nonetheless, in the country (and region) under consideration in this article, jokes readily explainable by the superiority theory of humour can be considered a form of *elitism*, or a home-grown Arab identity that emerged following the departure of western imperial powers in the mid-twentieth century. People who live in urban centres hold the belief that they are 'modern' and more influenced by western modernity. From this perspective, Guido Rings (Professor of Postcolonial Studies at Anglia Ruskin University, UK) thinks that the Jordanian urban elite reveal in their *urbanised* discourse a tendency towards the idea of 'internalised orientalism' through the assimilation of western views about modernity and progress (personal email communication, 15 May 2013). This has eventually led to a marginalisation of, if not discrimination against, larger parts of traditional Jordanian society in the steppe and the hinterlands. The superiority theory of humour is therefore valid for understanding ethnic joking as well as the urban-rural divide in contemporary Jordan. And with a post-colonial lens, as suggested by Rings above, ethnic humour in Jordan can be understood as theoretically 'political' because it is concerned with identity politics, (im)migration and urban-rural divide and tension. To further contextualise these findings, this article provides first an overview of the past

literature on ethnic humour research and then existing studies into Jordanian humour, followed by discussion on ethnicity and identity politics in Jordan and the perception of different ethnic groups in Jordan, and finally the analysis of the targets of Jordanian ethnic humour: the people of As-Salt, the people of At-Tafilah, and the people of As-Sarih in the northwest of Jordan.

2. Ethnic humour research

Ethnic humour can be operationally defined as a “type of humor in which fun is made of the perceived behavior, customs, personality or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their sociocultural identity” (Apte, 1985, p. 198). This definition suggests that this type of humour is based on the creation of stereotypes about other people who are often perceived as ‘lower’: culturally ignorant and underdeveloped. As far as the definition of ethnic humour is concerned, a stereotype can be defined as a presupposed mental image created often by some powerful people to describe a world that is beyond their knowledge or reach (Lippmann, 1922, pp. 130-56). This suggests how the study of negative ethnic stereotypes sometimes reinforce the study of ethnic humour and jokes around the world.

Jordanian linguists and humour researchers, such as Mohammed Farghal and Abdullah Shakir (1993, p. 18), have acknowledged Lippmann’s 1922 definition of stereotype and argued that some stereotypes are culturally determined in the sense that they can provide a ‘kernel of truth’, but this form of truth is subjective to individual cultural perspective and presupposition. Therefore, stereotypes offer most often factually incorrect interpretation and knowledge. Sometimes, these interpretations have nothing to do with the target group’s reality and empirical truth. Examples of ethnic jokes around the world are myriad: consider English jokes about the Irish, French jokes about the Belgians, Canadian jokes about the Newfies (people from Newfoundland), Russian jokes about the Georgians and Tajik, and many more.

Literature review on ethnic humour around the world is vast and interdependent – what can be said about ethnic joking in one country can sometimes be applied elsewhere in the world with some limitations to each country’s cultural specificities and ethnic groups (To list but a few studies: Davies, 1982; Apte, 1985; Boskin & Dorinson, 1985; Dundes, 1987; Davies, 1990, Draitser, 1998; Shifman & Katz, 2005; Weaver, 2011; Gillota, 2013; Kuipers & van der Ent, 2016 and Archakis and Tsakona, 2021). In his book *Ethnic humour around the world* (1990), Davies expounds that there are three key themes that influence the creation of ethnic humour and jokes around the world: (1) stupidity, (2) canniness, and (3) sexual behaviour. He maintains that ethnic jokes are dependent on three important factors: (1) geography (e.g., urbanites versus rural dwellers), (2) language and culture (e.g., urbanite dialect versus rural dialect), and (3) economy: the joke-teller is often an urbanite and wealthier than the target who is a rural dweller and less wealthy (Davies, 1990, p. 10). The dominant people in urban centres often make jokes about the people who live in peripheral, rural areas by viewing them as linguistically and culturally underdeveloped and therefore less civilised.

In his newer book *Jokes and targets* (2011), Davies develops his ideas about ethnic humour and the role of ethnic stereotypes and focuses more broadly on non-ethnic targets and jokes about sexuality concerning the French and the Jews to extend the validity of his initial ideas about ‘stupidity jokes’ (1990) and stereotypical ethnic targets (1998). By elaborating on his previous works, Davies (2011) argues that stupidity jokes rely on the contrast between the body and the mind. People are more likely to laugh at the more material and earthy over the more ethereal and mental. This is evident in the case of Jordan because ethnic humour was based on the creation of ethnic stereotypes and urban-rural division: Jordanians of Palestinian origin in urban centres make jokes about Jordanians of Transjordanian origin in rural areas for being culturally inferior and backward.

It is also presently observable that the people of Amman have developed for themselves an economic and political ‘aristocracy’ that is based on their fortune and regime favourites, compared to those who dwell in the hinterlands, who are viewed as less fortunate and economically deprived, and sometimes stagnated for their cultural inferiority. Notwithstanding the existence of this self-assured ‘aristocracy’, Jordanian society in Amman can be considered fragmented and culturally diverse. Most of the residents of Amman come from Palestine, and from other multi-ethnic groups from outside Jordan, including Armenians, Chechens, Circassians, and Turkomans. The population of the city rapidly increased after the influx of Palestinian refugees following the 1948 war and the 1967 war with Israel (Alon, 2007, p. 152; Tell, 2013, p. 22). Over time, the city has developed a heterogeneous urban political identity, albeit largely identified with Palestine and with mild opposition to the regime. Of course, one way in which a heterogeneous group can find ‘common ground’ is by opposition, that is, by the identification and mocking of a group from elsewhere.

In his analysis of the Tunisian ethnic jokes that target Libyans, Ibrahim Muhawi (1996) makes observations that are much similar to those in Davies (1990). He shows how the themes of stupidity, canniness and economy have impacted the creation of Tunisian ethnic jokes about Libyans. He argues that the Tunisians’ sense of superiority has not been based on materialistic resources (in this case because of the oil in Libya) but rather on wit, intelligence, and the use of language in the marketplace (Muhawi, 1996, p. 40). Ethnic jokes in Tunisia are based on the supposed ignorance, ill-manners, and inferiority of Libyans, compared to Tunisians who view themselves as more educated and cultured, and too canny to be outsmarted. Ethnic humour seems therefore to be part of political humour because of its relevance to the question of identity politics and power relations (the more powerful make jokes about the more powerless).

On the other hand, existing research into Jordanian humour has tended so far to over-emphasise linguistic and translational points of view. The prior research has extensively focused on the application of two linguistic theories of humour: the semantic script theory of humour, which was developed by Victor Raskin in 1985, and the general theory of verbal humour, which was developed by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin in 1991. In the context of research into Jordanian humour, there have been up to the date of this thesis seven academic studies conducted by Jordanian linguists at various Jordanian universities: Abdullah Shakir and Mohammed Farghal’s (1992) study on the cohesion and coherence of Gulf War jokes; Mohammed Farghal and Abdullah Shakir’s (1993) study of Gulf War jokes in Jordanian streets; Abdullah Shunnaq’s (1996) study on the translatability of Jordanian rural jokes into English; Mahmoud Al-Khatib’s (1999) sociolinguistic study on joke-telling in Jordanian society; Aladdin Al-Kharabsheh’s (2008) study on accidental humour as displayed in Jordanian shop signs; Yousef Bader’s (2014) study on linguistic pun expressions in Jordanian satirical articles, and Kawakib Al-Momani, Muhammad Badarneh and Fathi Migdadi’s (2016) semiotic study of Jordanian political cartoons before and after the Arab Spring. These studies have demonstrated an overarching emphasis on and overriding fascination with the application of linguistic theories of humour to the Jordanian situation. The emphasis on using the linguistic theories of humour with analysis of Jordanian humour is due to first, the researchers’ background on linguistics, and second, due to their relevance and substantial applicability to the Jordanian humorous context. Most Jordanian jokes and humour have tended so far to utilise linguistic and translational points of view to achieve their humorous effects.

In examining the past literature on Jordanian humour, I have identified two main approaches that were used to analyse social and political humour. These two approaches I shall call the linguistic approach and the translational approach. The linguistic approach is concerned with the analysis and use of the language of humour and some linguistic puns, such as polysemy, homophony, in addition to the role of national stereotyping in generating ethnic humour and stereotypes, including local jokes and intrinsic stereotypes about the people of As-Salt, At-

Tafilah and As-Sarih. The studies conducted by Shakir and Farghal (1992), Farghal and Shakir (1993), Al-Khatib (1999), Bader (2014) and Al-Momani, Badarneh, and Migdadi (2016) are among the examples that reflect this linguistic approach. This approach highlights the role and function of humour as a safety valve for expressing unallowable issues and taboos in Jordanian society, whether political, religious, or sexual. The linguistic approach has taken a trajectory and included recently Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival and the carnivalesque for thinking about Jordanian politics and political humour in social media spaces after the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions. Barahmeh (2020; 2023a) has found that Bakhtin's 'marketplace' is no longer the streets and material public spaces, but rather the social media spaces. He provided examples of carnivalesque humour in social media spaces that target the government (but not the monarch) to cope with socio-economic inequalities and the absurdities of political power.

To a large extent, the linguistic approach has supported Freud's theory of release, which views humour as a way of venting for the release of tensions and individual repressions. For example, in their collaborative article 'Gulf War jokes in Jordanian streets' (1993), Farghal and Shakir argued that the Gulf War jokes provided Jordanians with an "escape hatch" for explicitly talking about taboos in Jordanian society and culture (Farghal & Shakir, 1993, p. 15). Jokes that made fun at the then Arab presidents were widely circulated in Jordanian streets as a way to vent anger and frustration about the consequences of the war that ultimately went against their ideological inclinations in supporting Saddam and Ba'athist Iraq at the time of the war. By the same token, Barahmeh (2020; 2023a) has found that political humour in Jordanian social media spaces after the Arab Spring has provided Jordanians with a safety valve to release their tensions because it has provided them with a 'discharge' (to let off steam) for restive views about the government and the parliament without crossing the 'red lines' of criticising the monarch.

The second approach I call the translational approach. This approach is particularly concerned with the study of the language of Jordanian humour and the (un)translatability of Jordanian Arabic and jokes into English. The studies conducted by Shunnaq (1996), Al-Kharabsheh (2008), and Al-Badawi, Sadeq, and Abu Hatab (2021) are three examples that reflected the method and methodology of such an approach. The translational approach has highlighted various problems and challenges in translating (rendering) Jordanian Arabic and Jordanian jokes into English. According to the authors, most problems are due to language and cultural specifications that make Arabic and English not only linguistically different, but also culturally remote. For example, in his article 'Unintentional humour in the translation of Jordanian shop signs' (2008), Al-Kharabsheh demonstrated how the English translations of Jordanian shop signs have infringed some notable linguistic and orthographic rules that have as a result provoked humour and satire among the educated people. According to Al-Kharabsheh (2008), the linguistic violation has not only broken one language maxim, but also evokes humour in translation to the target language.

Whilst undoubtedly insightful, studies like these also tend and understandably so to be focused on very restricted examples of Jordanian humour, and often only from a linguistic perspective of one kind or another. In other fields of social sciences, such as folklore, literature, psychology and sociology, Jordanian humour has not yet received much academic attention. Research in this field therefore remains scarce and the phenomenon of Jordanian ethnic humour continues to be largely unexamined and currently under-researched. The scope and focus of the works cited above arguably reflects an 'over-extension' of the application of linguistic theories of humour to the study of Jordanian humour and satire from the Gulf War period to the present.

Neither the linguistic approach (including the Bakhtinian approach) nor the translational approach suffices as lenses or methodologies to understand the role and function of ethnic humour in contemporary Jordan. This is because the linguistic and translational approaches have understandably focused on the linguistic devices used in humour, such as puns, polysemy, prosody, and sometimes the role of stereotypes in generating humour and laughter. There is

therefore little academic research about (1) how forced displacement and resettlement have affected the way in which refugees begin to comment on and laugh at the indigenous, (2) what strategies migrants can develop in response to the indigenous people in rural areas in host countries, and (3) how ethnicity and the idea of ethnic joking were more relevant in Jordan prior to the start of the 2011 Arab Spring in Jordan.

The contribution made by this line of research is original and without it, attempts to understand Jordanian ethnic humour prior to the start of the Arab Spring would be much less effective and useful. In this article, I argue that the study of Jordanian ethnic humour can be usefully explained through Davies' theory of ethnic humour and ethnic scripts (1982; 1990; 1998; 2011), and Muhawi's (1996) framework, because ethnic humour in Jordan is based on the idea of 'binary opposition' and the creation of stereotypes that target rural dwellers in the hinterlands. In Jordan, as elsewhere, many urbanites in the capital city Amman consider themselves to be canny and smart in comparison to people who live in rural areas, many of whom are viewed by many city dwellers as ignorant and naive. Urbanite ethnic humour in Jordan often targets the people of As-Salt, At-Tafilah, and As-Sarih to create jokes about people in the hinterlands and rural areas.

3. Ethnicity and identity politics in Jordan

Jordanian society can be viewed as a patriarchal, tribal society that is mainly controlled by men. In his book *The social and economic origins of monarchy in Jordan* (2013), Tariq Tell writes about the tribal structure of Jordanian society in the hinterlands and emphasises how the society is made up of various ethnic 'groups' rather than 'individuals'. He argues that "the population of Trans-Jordan was everywhere tribal, and both Fallah [residents of rural areas] and Bedouin recognises the authority of customary law and prominent *shaykhly* houses" who were in control of districts, localities, or even small neighbourhoods (Tell, 2013, p. 31). This explanation suggests that power divided and socially constructed among local, powerful men during Ottoman rule and early Transjordanian period (1921- 1946). For example, in the Transjordanian town Ajlune, Tell (2013) notes that "the villages were organized into defensive communes (*nahiyats*), each headed by the *Za'im* or leader of the locality's most powerful clan" (Tell, 2013, p. 31). This fact speaks of the very tribal nature of Jordanian society in the hinterlands and the communal identity that continues to have considerable impacts on the construction of relationships among groups, clans, and tribes.

In the aftermath of the 1948 Arab war with Israel, Jordan received a significant number of Palestinian refugees (Alon, 2007, p. 152). Most were not in fact considered to be 'refugees', because Jordan annexed the West Bank to its rule after the 1948 war. Rather, they were considered 'migrants' who travelled from one city (or town) to another. They soon became Jordanian nationals through the legal naturalisation of their national identity. Indeed, the 1948 Arab war with Israel dramatically changed the social and political structure of Jordanian society. According to Tell (2013), the war had a "profound impact effects on Trans-Jordanian society – feeding political unrest in the Arab Legion, curtailing migration for work in the Palestinian coastal plain, and transforming cities, such as Amman, Irbid, and al-Salt through inflows of settlers and refugees" (Tell, 2013, p. 22). The population of Jordan was further increased after a second wave of Palestinian refugees at the end of the Six-Day war in 1967 (Tal, 2002, p. 4). This war resulted in a decisive military victory for Israel (Alon, 2007, p. 153). Jordan lost the West Bank. Egypt lost the Gaza Strip, which had been under its control since the 1948 war. Syria lost the Golan Heights. This explanation gives an overview of the tremendous impact of Palestinian refugees on the population of Jordan after the 1948 and the 1967 Arab wars with Israel.

After the 1970-71 civil war in Jordan between the Jordanian army and members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Jordan's national identity discourse became highly contested (Alon, 2007, p. 156). As mentioned above, identity politics in Jordan mainly comprises difference and increased tension between Transjordanian nationals, who are the indigenous people and generally live in rural and nomadic areas in the hinterlands, and Jordanians of Palestinian origin, who generally live in urban centres, in major cities such as Amman, Irbid, and Az-Zarqa.

In the aftermath of the 1970 civil war, the Jordanian government began a process I call a 'national purge' that favoured the employment of Transjordanian nationals in the army and security forces. Jordanians of Palestinian origin were left, however, to create their own business establishments and stay away from political power. This political strategy was part of the government's wider approach that has aimed since then to reunite Transjordanian nationals in opposition to Jordanians of Palestinian origin. Transjordanian nationals have always seen themselves as "one Jordanian family" (Massad, 2001, p. 65). The Bedouin culture of Transjordanian nationals were thereby re-promoted to attain the image of 'Jordanianness' at both national and international levels. The political project to 're-transjordanise' the country as a whole has implications for the humour that is the focus of this article because it demonstrates the relationship between ethnic humour and identity politics and between urban and rural division in contemporary Jordanian society.

4. Methodology

The data collected for this research includes 100 examples of ethnic jokes that target the Transjordanian people in the hinterlands: 40 jokes that target the people of As-Salt, 40 jokes that target the people of At-Tafilah, and 20 jokes that target the people of As-Sarih (a suburb in the outskirts of Irbid in the northwest of Jordan). The data collected for this research were elicited from two primary sources: (1) The internet from various websites and social media spaces, such as <https://arabjokes.net>. This website includes hundreds of thousands of Arab jokes that have been classified by the website editor on a country-base. The Jordanian jokes section in this website include various examples of ethnic jokes that target the people of At-Tafilah, the people of Hebron in Palestine, and a few jokes that target the Bedouin. (2) The researcher's knowledge and background (as someone from a rural area who studied in an urban university in the north of Jordan). It is therefore important to discuss the researcher's positionality. The researcher is a native Jordanian and therefore an insider to the socio-political and cultural context of Jordan. His interest in and motivation for this research topic was influenced by his life experiences having lived and worked both inside and outside of Jordan. This has made him particularly alert to jokes which mocked rural Jordanians and their lifestyles as well as Transjordanian people who live in the hinterlands. That does not mean that he selected jokes that he was best familiar with and found the funniest (or the most offensive). Rather, having identified what he thought were the most popular ethnic jokes in contemporary Jordan. Then, for each target group, a number of jokes was selected based on their circulation and popularity to be put in the dataset, regardless of theme or the researcher's personal taste. The selected examples were therefore analysed through Christie Davies' work on ethnic humour (1982; 1990; 1998; 2011) because ethnic humour in Jordan, as this article argues, is based on the idea of 'binary opposition' and the creation of stereotypes that target the Transjordanian people in the hinterlands.

The criteria for selecting these two sources to create dataset are based on the availability and retrieval of data from online sources. The website <https://arabjokes.net> includes a large number of Arab jokes about the people of Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Lebanon,

Palestine, and Jordan. It also includes villainous jokes, marriage jokes, stoned jokes, and other historical witty anecdotes. The selected jokes were categorized into three major themes: (1) Jokes that target the people of As-Salt, (2) Jokes that target the people of At-Tafilah, and (3) jokes that target the people of As-Sarih in the northwest of Jordan. These jokes have been analysed in terms of identity politics and the recent theoretical orientations of ethnic humour research to illustrate the idea of urban and rural division in Jordanian society. All the data was originally in Arabic, and the translations of jokes into English was done by the researcher himself. The translation technique and explanation of humour and jokes from Arabic is kept as simple as possible so that the analysis can be accessible and readable to Arabic and non-Arabic speakers.

5. Targets of Jordanian ethnic humour

There are three targets of Jordanian ethnic humour: the people of As-Salt, the people of At-Tafilah, and the people of As-Sarih. The people of As-Salt are stereotypically perceived by the urbanites in Amman as stubborn, savage, and tactless, the people of At-Tafilah as stupid and lacking discretion, and the people of As-Sarih as naive and primitive. Examples of this type of urbanite humour are to be considered later in this section. Before, I present in Figure 1 below a limited-scale Google map of Jordan, which shows the geographic locations of As-Salt and As-Sarih in the northwest of Jordan, and At-Tafilah in the southwest. These three areas are the targets of urbanite humour because they are rural and peripheral areas, if compared to urban areas such as the capital city Amman.

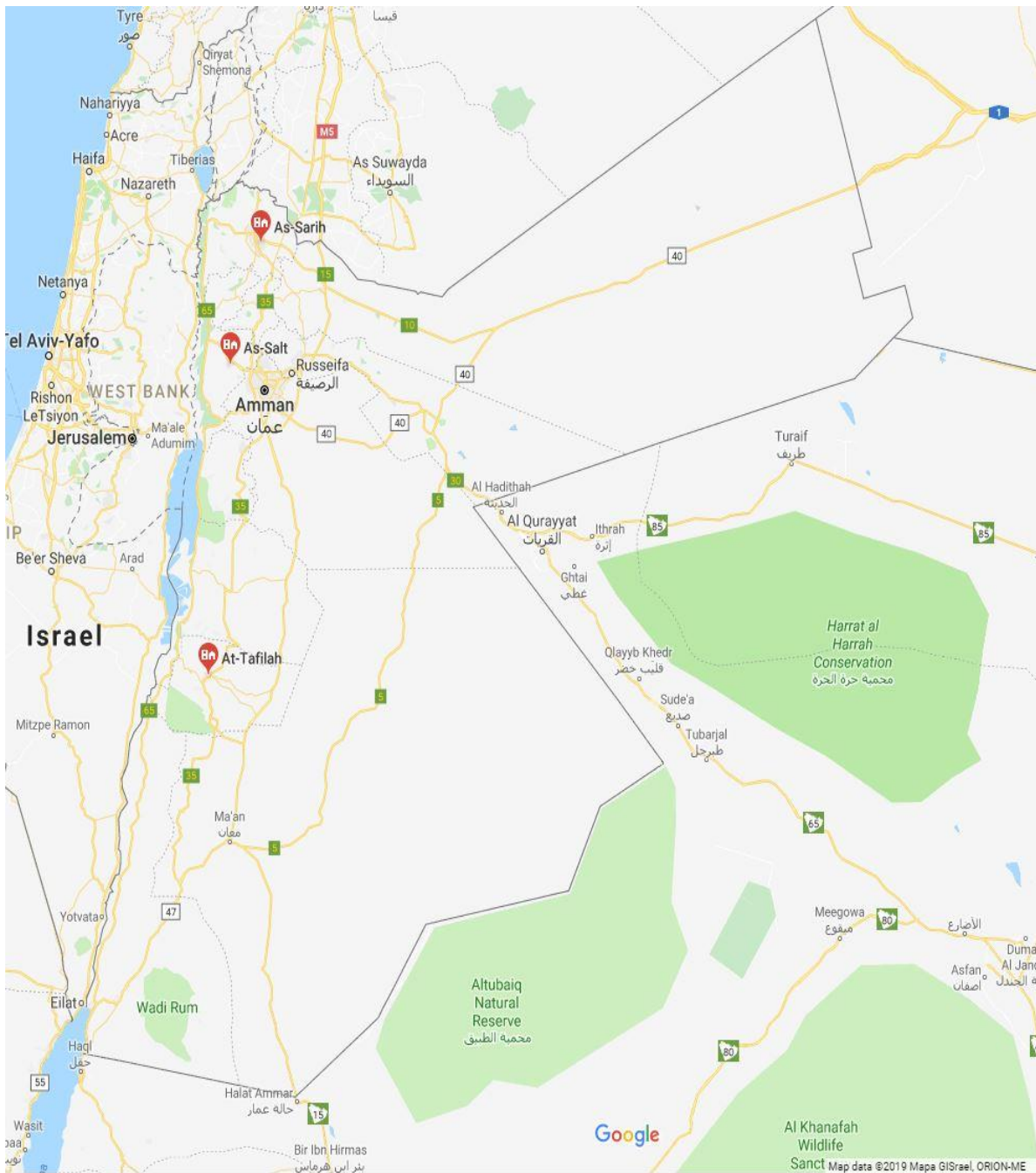


Figure 1. Map of Jordan showing the localities of As-Salt, At-Tafilah, and As-Salih (the targets of Jordanian ethnic humour). Source of map: <http://middleeastvisit.net/>.

The Transjordanian area in the 19th century was a kind of political and economic periphery in the region. The 1921 naming and subsequent growth of Amman as the capital (instead of As-Salt) has begun a dramatic transformation in the political geography in the Transjordanian region and gradually deprived As-Salt of its privilege as being at that time the largest Transjordanian town (Schwedler, 2022). As-Salt was the home of the first secondary school in Transjordan, founded in 1923. In their analysis of the emergence of Ammani dialect, Abdel-Jawad (1986) and Al-Wer (2007) have argued that the urbanites who live in the capital city Amman did not have an indigenous dialect and population to speak of. Rather, they have developed for themselves a dialect that is largely influenced by Palestinian Arabic and Palestinian dialects. These observations about the formation of the dialect of Amman are

important to the study of ethnic humour in Jordan because they have created new fault lines and cultural differences between urban and rural dwellers.

It is therefore important to argue that ethnic humour in Jordan is related to regional division in order to reflect politically cultural ideologies, geographic origins, and regional identities. I have noticed that some urbanites in Amman make jokes and laugh at the Bedouin and the dialects of rural areas and use them as a source for their urbanite humour and jokes. In his analysis of the linguistic practices used on contemporary Jordanian radio stations, Jona Fras (2017) found that Jordanian urbanites tend to laugh at the coarse pronunciation of the affricate consonant letter *Č* in the rural dialect instead of *K* as in the refined urban dialect in words, illustrated in words such as *Ča 'āčīl* instead of *Ka 'ākīl*. This word refers to a traditional Jordanian dish that is made of fermented yoghurt and groats (Fras, 2017, p. 183). The humour in the rural pronunciation of the word *Ča 'āčīl* designates an element of *Jordanity*, which refers to the original Jordanian culture and identity that is being viewed by Jordanians of Palestinian origin in urban centres as backward and unrefined.

In his book *The Jordanian satirists* (2013), the Palestinian-Jordanian writer Jamil Swais, who writes under the pseudonym 'Nazih Abu Nidal,' provides a (relatively short) analysis of urbanite ethnic humour and about the creation of stereotypes in Jordan. He found that the people of As-Salt are among the key targets of Jordanian urbanite ethnic humour (Abu Nidal, 2013, p. 11). He demonstrates that throughout the last few decades, the people of As-Salt in Jordanian ethnic humour have been mockingly viewed as 'culturally backward' and 'ignorant.' They eat Mansaf (the Transjordanian traditional dish that is made of rice, meat, and fermented yogurt), 'attack' with their heads (a metaphor to describe their savagery and inconsiderate social behaviours) and often die of strokes as a result of their stressful and hostile temperaments.

For some Jordanians, ethnic stereotype has a 'kernel of truth' in Jordanian local cultural politics, which considers the people inhabiting the mountainous areas, such as As-Salt and Ajloun, to be stubborn and hard-headed. They are often perceived to have an oak-like constitution because of the hardness of the tree and its numerousness in the Jordanian mountainous areas. The residents of these mountainous areas in Jordan are believed to be strongly opinionated, if compared to the easygoingness and cultural familiarity of the residents of urban areas, such as the residents of Amman. This assumption is based on the impact of mountainous environments and wildlife on culture, everyday life, and social interactions among the residents of these areas. Jordanian ethnic humour seems to be a part of earlier Jordanian political humour that emerged after the country's 1989 political opening (a period of political opening and a return to democracy and liberalisation as stipulated in the 1952 Constitution). This form of ethnic joking reflected a new kind of humour that acted as a tool for social and political commentary about the rural people from the Jordanian hinterlands.

5.1 Jokes that target the people of As-Salt

In the case of the people of As-Salt, there is a widespread urbanite witty belief that portrays the people of As-Salt as savage and often dying as a result of stroke due to their overly rich diet (Mansaf). They are sometimes stereotypically perceived as uncivilised and tactless in their relationships with others. Here for example are some urbanite jokes about the persistent stupidity and stubbornness of the people of As-Salt. These examples show the stereotypical notion held by the Jordanian urbanites about the people of As-Salt for being stupid and stubborn, despite the fact that As-Salt as a city has a long and more established history than Amman.

- (1) A too intransigent man heard there is another person in the town of As-Salt who is more stubborn than he. Feeling curious, he headed to the Salti's (a person from As-Salt) home of residence and knocked at the door. The Salti asks the man "who are you?" The man said, "it's me." The Salti said, "No, it's not you!"

- (2) A Salti's father has been asked by his own son about a few questions in life. "What do you know about pluralism, father?" "I do not know, son." "What do you know about email, father?" "I do not know, son." "What do you know about reincarnation?" "This is the first time I heard such a term, son." At this time, the Salti's wife interfered and asked her son not to bother his father anymore. The father replied, "No, wife, let our son develop his "No's" in life!"
- (3) A Salti was seen smoking two cigarettes at the same time. When he was asked about the reason, he replied 'I have lit up a cigarette for me and one for my friend who is now in prison.' After a period of time, the Salti was seen smoking only one cigarette and people thought that his friend went out of prison. He said, 'No, but I was the one who quitted smoking!'
- (4) A Salti businessman built a mosque and after he saw many people coming into it, he transformed it into a restaurant!
- (5) A stoned Salti has been late for work. His mother woke him up very quickly, and by accident he wore his brother's military uniform. When he arrived to his work, he realised that he is in a military uniform. He said to his colleague at work 'It seems my mother has become crazy because she wakes up my brother, not me!'

5.2 Jokes that target the people of At-Tafilah

In the case of At-Tafilah, there are many urbanite jokes that target the people of At-Tafilah in the south of Jordan are also mocked by Jordanian urbanities for their presumed stupidity and lack of discretion. Although urbanite jokes about the people of As-Salt are more prominent and widespread in Jordanian jocular discourse, jokes about the people of At-Tafilah have grown in number in the last few decades. Urbanite jokes about the people of At-Tafilah focus on the indigenous people's ignorance, lack of discretion, and stupidity that sometimes overtakes that stereotypically held to be true of the people of As-Salt. Consider the following examples of urbanite jokes about the people of At-Tafilah.

- (6) One Tafili's salary statement showed a deduction of 20% to the people of Gaza in Palestine. Feeling outraged, he decided to donate his entire salary to the Jews in Israel!
- (7) A Tafili was sitting with his beloved at a public space, and after seeing her father from afar, he told her "Listen, tell your father I am your brother."
- (8) A Tafili heard about the death of 100 people during the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia and hoped if they were Jews!
- (9) A Tafili has a toothache. His dentist told him you have tooth decay and there is a possible infection. To express his anger, the Tafili asks the dentist to remove all his teeth and let his decayed tooth alone like a dog!
- (10) A Tafili bought a new mobile and asks his brother to write messages for him because his brother's handwriting is better than him!

Jordanians at urbanite centres also laugh at the lack of discretion of one Tafili who was sitting with his beloved at a public space, and after seeing her father from afar, he told her "Listen, tell your father I am your brother." This joke utilises the element of 'stereotype' about the stereotypically held notion in Jordan about the people of At-Tafilah being stupid and having poor discretion in various social situations. It also reveals an element of incongruity when the Tafili proposes a stupid solution for his girlfriend's feeling of embarrassment. This joke highlights some social codes about male and female as well as the social construction of gender in Jordan. These examples show the stereotypical notion held by some Jordanian urbanites about the people of At-Tafilah for being stupid, naive, and non-discretionary.

Interestingly, jokes that combine the people of At-Tafilah with their counterparts (the people of As-Salt) were also widespread in Jordanian urbanite humour after the 1989 political opening. These types of jokes often resonate more strongly and achieve a greater audience impact and engagement than one single joke about the people of At-Tafilah or the people of As-Salt. Consider the following two jokes: the first joke proposes a hypothetical situation where one Tafili meets another Salti in an unknown train station, while the second joke resides in the polysemous Arabic noun 'Zayy' which can mean in the first instance as a small village in As-Salt, and in the second instance (as the Tafili understands it) 'to resemble someone or something.'

- (11) One Salti and one Tafili were heading to a train station. Upon arrival, they both started chasing the train. The Tafili outran the Salti and got in the train. When asked why he laughed hysterically, the Salti indicated that the Tafili was supposed to give him a lift!
- (12) A Tafili went to As-Salt and he saw a bus sign that reads 'As-Salt – Zayy – Amman.' When he returns to his hometown At-Tafilah, he wrote on a bus sign 'At-Tafilah Zayy Amman and even better!'

5.3 Jokes that target the people of As-Sarih

Urbanite jokes that target the people of As-Sarih in Irbid have become the subject of a considerable number of Jordanian urbanite humour and jokes over the last few decades. As-Sarih is a former village and now suburb, located in the outskirts of the city of Irbid. The people of As-Sarih are therefore the suburbanites to the city dwellers of Irbid in northern Jordan. The people of As-Sarih are stereotypically perceived by the urbanites in Irbid to be naive and ignorant. Consider the following urbanite jokes about the people of As-Sarih that manifest the stereotypical notion held by some urbanites in Irbid about the people of As-Sarih for being naive and ignorant.

- (13) Why do the people of As-Sarih put their beds outside and sleep inside during the summer? Because, in this way, they can conceal their presence, and get away from the mosquitoes.
- (14) A Sarihi (a person from As-Sarih) once cancelled his wedding party because the invitation cards had been leaked.
- (15) A Sarihi was informed by his friend that tomorrow will be Valentine's Day. The Sarihi asked his friend if there is a special prayer to be performed with reference to prayers performed by Muslims on Eid day!
- (16) A Sarihi called reception and asked about the emergency number. The receptionist said, 'Dial 999.' The Sarihi said 'I have only one 9 in the telephone I am using.' The receptionist said, 'Are you Sarihi?!' The Sarihi replied 'Yes, but how did you know my own identity? Do you have a caller ID display?!'
- (17) A Sarihi fell off stairs. He went to a doctor, and he gave him an ointment so he can use to treat the affected area from where he fell off. The Sarihi rubbed the gel on the stairs instead!

6. Discussion

Jordanian ethnic humour is based on the idea of identity politics and urban-rural division. People who live in urban centres, such as Amman laugh at the people who live in the Transjordanian rural areas, such as As-Salt, At-Tafilah, and As-Sarih. The people who view themselves as 'elite' in Jordanian urban centres have tended to accept the stance of orientalism and influence from

Western modernity as a form of power that has enabled them to stereotype, whilst rural dwellers lack the power to challenge that stereotype. Jordanian ethnic humour can therefore be linked to power relations (Jordanian urbanites feeling superior to rural dwellers), politicisation of the Jordanian society and the existence of stereotypes about the people in rural areas. In the same vein, the Jordanian socio-political situation after 1989 shows evidence of the existence of ethnic humour that took advantage of the country's political opening and freedom of speech and expression.

After 1989, some Jordanian urbanites who are mostly Jordanian of Palestinian origin view the people of neighbouring Hebron in Palestine as a target for their urbanite humour and ethnic jokes. The people of Hebron (in Arabic, the people of Al-Khalil) are stereotypically known for their greed, avarice, and poor discretion. For the last few decades, they have been the subject of an increasing number of urbanite jokes in Jordanian-Palestinian jocular discourse. Indeed, the emergence of these jokes gives a clear indication to the role of national stereotyping and other regional influences in generating Jordanian ethnic humour that targeted the people of Hebron in Palestine. These indications reflect some key moments of diversification in Jordanian society and its reception of humour, and how humour has been both reflective of and participative in this complex of cultural forces. This discussion matters because these jokes have later influenced, in ways explained in Barahmeh (2020; 2023a; 2023b), the development of Jordanian political humour from the 1989 political opening to the 2011 Arab Spring.

The nature and especially the targets of Jordanian ethnic humour were significant for the development of Jordanian political humour after the 1989 political opening. This is because it focused more on the role of socio-political agents in the formation of political divisions and alliances between Jordanians in rural areas and Jordanians of Palestinian origin in urban centres. Instead of engaging in regime-based cultural politics, many Jordanians of Palestinian origin in Jordan have targeted the Transjordanians in rural areas and in the hinterlands in order perhaps to promote their own political interests. These resistance movements can be best seen through the government-opposing actions and dissenting voices of Jordanians of Palestinian origin and Palestinians in refugee camps. Jordanian ethnic humour seems to have grown as a tool for urban-rural divide, but this development was not accelerated until 1989 when Jordan launched its political opening and economic liberalisation.

7. Conclusion

This article has attempted to study ethnic humour and work with a corpus that has not been studied before in an understudied socio-political territory – Jordan in terms of its social role and relationship to socio-political events, such as the 1989 political opening, 1991 Gulf War, and most recently the 2011 Arab Spring. It has argued that ethnic humour in Jordan was predominately politically motivated. It is based on urban-rural divide and tensions: Jordanians of Palestinian origin in urban centres and Jordanians of Transjordanian origin in rural areas. It is also based on the three most recurrent scripts of ethnic jokelore: stupidity, canniness (in relation to money, wealth, and power), and language distortion. It has also found that this type of ethnic joking sheds light on the nature of political humour in Jordan after the 1989 political opening: the powerful make jokes about the powerless. This type of political humour (ethnic) is highly politicised because it sheds light on cultural stereotypes and sense of superiority over the rural dwellers who comprise the majority of Transjordanian people in As-Salt, At-Tafilah, and As-Sarih. These people are 'original' Jordanian nationals who often work for the military and for the security services. They are the bedrock of the regime.

Jordanian ethnic humour can be considered an earlier type of Jordanian political humour, where urbanites in the capital city Amman often make jokes about the people in the Jordanian

steppe and the hinterlands and view them as culturally inferior and less civilised. In this article, I have argued that this type of ethnic humour can be highly politicised because it is connected to the ideas of postcolonial elite, class struggle, political polarisations and the tensions between urban and rural dwellers: the urban who are largely composed of Jordanians of Palestinian origin and the rural people who make up the majority of original tribal nationals. Such ethnic humour, I found, emphasises the political notion of ‘internalised orientalism’, with its in-built notions of ‘the other’ and superiority over that other. It has also shed lights on several socio-demographic and linguistic variables that are political, including, most importantly the idea of identity politics amongst Jordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin. I have also found that Jordanian ethnic humour has some relationships with the rise of the Gulf War jokes and political humour in Jordan after the 1989 political opening. For example, the people of the Transjordanian town of At-Tafilah in the southwest of Jordan have been constantly used as a target for humour and laughter by the Jordanian urbanites in many Gulf War jokes.

Ethnic humour, where the urbanites in the capital city Amman make jokes about the people who live in the steppe and the hinterlands, is therefore an older type of Jordanian political humour and satire. The urbanites in Jordan, as it is elsewhere in the world, often reinforcing their cultural advantage and sense of superiority over those who live in rural areas and those who dwell in the Jordanian steppe and the hinterlands in small towns or villages in the periphery. Jordanian ethnic humour is (and always has been) ‘political’ because it concerns with power between different groups. It is used by a more empowered (or wealthier or better educated) group to create a collective sense of superiority over the ‘other.’

Ethnic humour, where the urbanites in the capital city Amman make jokes about the people who live in the steppe and the hinterlands, is an older type of Jordanian political humour and satire. Jordanian ethnic humour is (and always has been) ‘political’ because it concerns power between different groups. It is used by a more empowered (or wealthier or better educated) group to create a collective sense of superiority over the ‘other.’ This is important in the sense that the street protests and resistance since the 2011 Arab Spring have enabled the dis- or less empowered rural people in the Jordanian hinterlands to develop a *counter*-superiority tendency and laugh at the powerful in urban centres. The Transjordanian people have become since 2011 more engaged with acts of popular resistance against power and government. The social media platforms have offered them with a platform, an arena, for expressing taboos, whether political, religious, or sexual, in Jordanian political humour. Because of the newly enlarged comedic arena, which now embraces national politics and (most of) its actors, the former victims of ethnic jokes have found themselves newly empowered by culture and technology to ‘joke truth back to power.’ The rise of initially gentle and later more subversive political humour has, in other words, also permitted the previous ‘victims’ of an earlier-established kind of humour (ethnic humour) to ‘shout back’ in a larger and only recently *politicised* arena at the very powers that used (and use) humour to ridicule them in what was formerly a more restricted *cultural* arena. The expansion, literal and metaphorical, of the Jordanian comedic arena – its size and scope – seems to underpin and at least partially explain the trajectory of political humour and humour more generally in contemporary Jordan in the last thirty years.

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