

Transcultural Comedy  
New forms of ethnic joking?  
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# Abstract

I will discuss transcultural humor practices and their relation to social identities taking most examples from German media. In a multicultural society, where identities and affiliations may constantly be at stake (Bierbach/Birken-Silverman 2007) immigrant and native comedians enact 'hybrid' identities and solidarities through new forms of stand-up comedy. I will analyze playful performances of ethnic stereotypes in the new genre of so-called "ethno-comedy" (in Germany).

## Structure:

1. Ethnic joking
2. The spectrum of ethno-comedies
  - 2.1. Humor strategies: word play
  - 2.2. Overdoing ethnic stereotypes
  - 2.3. Formats of a sketch (e.g. Kaya Yanar)
3. Doing culture – overdoing culture
4. Constructions of a public identity
5. Ingroup/ outgroup in humor

## Ter Wal 2002, 82

„Entertainment is an important tool for shaping perceptions of the world in a playful way and can encourage social integration (...). It is most effective when a group itself expresses its own humor.

# Goodness gracious me (BBC)

- One of the more famous sketches featured the cast "going out for an English" after a few lhasis. They mispronounce the waiter's name, order the blandest thing from the menu (apart from one of them, who opts for the safer option of a curry) and ask for 24 portions of chips. This parodies the often-drunk English people "going out for an Indian", ordering chicken phall and to many papadums. This sketch was recently voted the 6th Greatest Comedy Sketch.
- The cast casually drop Punjabi and Hindi/Urdu slang phrases into their speech, in the manner of many British Asians living in the UK. (Wikipedia 2008)

# Knobi Bonbon 1997

- VORSICHT. FRISCH INTEGRIERT !
- **Careful. Freshly integrated!**
- (*Texte: S.Dikmen, M.Omurca, R.Milde*)
- Der "integrierte" Türke verzichtet auf Knoblauch und schluckt statt dessen geruchlose Knoblauchpillen, auch "Knobi-Bonbons" genannt, er grüßt seine Nachbarn nicht orientalisch-gefühlsduselig, sondern klipp und klar, kurz und knapp und ökonomisch: "Morgn!"

# Kaya Yanar



# SHAZIA MIRZA

fun

'CLEVER,  
GROUNDBREAKING  
AND VERY FUNNY'  
Evening Standard

'HILARIOUS'  
Evening News

'RAVE REVIEWS'  
Telegraph

Thursday 8th Feb	DARTMOUTH FESTIVAL	07770 789 264
Wednesday 14th Feb	LEICESTER PHOENIX ARTS	0110 255 4854
Saturday 17th Feb	BASINGSTOKE FORGE AT ANVIL	01256 844 244
Friday 23rd Feb	WINDSOR ARTS CENTRE	01753 859 336
Friday 9th March	LEEDS CITY VARIETIES	08456 441 881
Saturday 10th March	CANTERBURY GULBENKIAN	01227 769 075
Friday 16th March	SHEFFIELD MEMORIAL HALL	01142 789 789
Thursday 22nd March	NORWICH ARTS CENTRE	01603 660 352
Tuesday 27th March	CHELLENHAM PILLAR ROOM	01242 227 970
Friday 30th March	DERBY ASSEMBLY	01332 255 800
Saturday 7th April	COLCHESTER ARTS CENTRE	01206 500 900
Wednesday 18th April	EDMONTON HILLFIELD THEATRE	0208 807 6680
Friday 20th April	ALDERSHOT WEST END CENTRE	01252 330 040
Wednesday 9th May	WYCOMBE TOWN HALL	01494 512 000
Friday 11th May	COVENTRY WARWICK ARTS CENTRE	02476 524 524
Sunday 27th May	MAIDENHEAD NORDEN FARM	01628 788 997
Saturday 2nd June	TUNBRIDGE WELLS TRINITY THEATRE	01892 678 678
Thursday 21st June	FAREHAM ASHCROFT ARTS	01329 310 600



# Fiacra Gibbons met Shazia Mirza

Guardian 2003, August 21

- "These men who tell my dad that it is totally unacceptable are the biggest hypocrites. Because [they] are the men who go smoking, drinking and sleeping with prostitutes."
- So did her family try to stop her? "My father told me to stop doing these 'stupid things' and get married. But he knows he can no longer control me, so he has stopped talking about it. Now he tells them I'm doing research, or that it's only a hobby."

# Sacha Baron Cohen



# Borat

Subtitled *Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, the film *Borat* is a „mockumentary comedy“. Borat's Kazakhstani villages were actually filmed in an impoverished Roma (gypsy) village of Glod, Romania. *USA Today* reports that poverty-stricken villagers were offered between \$3.30 and \$5.50 to bring animals into their houses and perform other acts some critics called humiliating.

# Some representatives of Ethno-Comedy

Knobi Bonbon, D

Django Asül, D

Mundstuhl, D

Erkan&Stefan, D

Ciro de Luca, Au

Unkürrekt, Au

Shazia Mirza, E

Goodness gracious me, E

Sasha Baron Cohen, E

Bülent Ceylan, D

Murat Topal, D

Pamuks Kümmel Klub, D

Lilia Tetslau, D

Nursel Köse und das Kabarett „Die Bodenkosmetikerinnen“, D

Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala, F

# Lilia Tetslau



# Kaya Yanar



Ethno-comedy very often alludes to typically German sorts of cultural knowledge:

## Language Play

- **Aktion Sorgenrind** (campaign for cattle with problems)
- **Aktion Sorgenkind** (campaign for children with problems)

Suleyman

**Suleymann-Suleydog**

# The cop of Tölz/The turk of Tölz





Bülent Cevlan



# Bülent Ceylan, Mannheim

Word plays in the titles of the programmes

- Kebabbel net, 2008
- Halb getürkt, 2006
- Döner for one, 2003
- Produzier' mich net! 2000

- **Kebabbel net**

**Kebab** - „babbeln“ (to talk in Mannheim dialect)

- **Halb getürkt** - half faked („türken“ = to fake)

- **Döner for one** (Dinner for one)

- **Produzier' mich net!** (Provozier mich nicht – do not provoke me)





# die BODENKOSMETIKERINNEN

Kabarett



Schleierhaft – incomprehensible

In Schleierhaft - in prison of veils





# Hakan's ethnolect:

- Imperatives in the form of the interrogative sentence: **rufst du an, kommst du her**
- Overuse of discourse markers like: da tut der (.) DAUernd zu mir RÜberblinzeln **verstehs du; i SCHWÖRS; ey**
- Inappropriate cases (datives): **dem Arsch machen wir platt**
- Coronalization of /ç/ as [j]; ("isch" instead of "ich"; Frankfurter regiolect -> has spread beyond the region and has become a general characteristic of the sociolect.)
- Occasionally the ending /r/ is not vocalized (*mach weiter*) or respectively apically spoken in initial sound clusters, i.e., lingual r (e.g., in the word *Training*),
- Shortening of long vowels (as in [zon] for "Sohn")
- Initial sound clusters of the /ts/ type are reduced to /s/. ("swei" instead of "zwei"; "su" instead of "zu")
- Syllable counting rhythm (among others non-reduction of secondary syllables)
- Omission of articles:
- "isch kam **von trAlning** damals,"
- "**alter** war schon (.) DREISsig oder so,"
- Prepositions (in prepositional phrases those of the direction and place) are omitted, usually together with the article:
- „warn me **unten theAterplatz.**"
- „der is sofort **nächste haltestelle RAUS**gestiegen“
- Other prepositions and local adverbs/prefixes are used than in Standard German:
- „der is sofort **nächste haltestelle RAUS**gestiegen“ (instead of: ausgestiegen)

# Suleymann

„Was geht oder geht nix.“      Line 6 below

Turkish music

- 1 S: hallo folks. its me. Suleymann.
- 2 hallo folks, here is again talk radio Suleymann.
- 3 today from temporary studio,
- 4 naturally with my best friend Suleydog.
- 5 Suleydog come here.
- 6 well first caller. what goes on or goes nothing.
- 7 W: yeah, here is again constable Zöllner.
- 8 with whom do i speak?

- 9 S: eh, well yeah na
- 10 W: so herr yanar. have you seen the suspect
- 11 in the meantime?
- 12 this Suleymann?
- 13 S: eh, just listen, i do not believe that it is this
- 14 suleymann. no crook looks like that.
- 15 you know what i mean. i mean,
- 16 you understand what i mean.
- 17 W: herr yanar, i don't need any suppositions,
- 18 i need facts.
- 19 S: eh, okay, okay, i will see about it.
- 20 next caller. What goes on or goes nothing.
- 21 C: here is claudia from cologne.
- 22 i'm a compulsive cleaner.
- 23 S: one does not notice that in your city though.
- 24 C: but of course just at home.
- 25 and now my husband is also gone.
- 26 S: have you already looked in the non-recyclable trash?
- 27 C: noooo he is not there. actually i don't
- 28 miss him anyway.

# Doing culture/Overdoing culture

Without going into further detail, here again the most important distinction:

- **The level of the general:** It is part of human nature to acquire cultural characteristics (Plessner 1941/1961). Every form of behavior is necessarily in part culturally imprinted.
- **The level of the particular:** Culture is communicated as specific, as a frame that one asserts for oneself or others. Culturality can be brought into the foreground of interaction.

Ethno-comedy works on the level of the particular.

Comedians have to parody elements of music, gestures, facial expressions, interior design, clothing, speech and behavioral codes that we can immediately classify.

## Yanar in Subway Magazin (2001):

- "My type of humor is different. With the impersonations I slip into, I already aim for authenticity. Naturally I play with clichés, otherwise it would not be funny, but the whole is still so authentic because I myself am half Arab, half Turk. And I don't exhaust any figure, but rather jump from one role to the next. There is a constant shifting among Italians, Arabs, Germans, Indians, and that thus produces such a humorous conglomerate."

# Blommaert 2005, 207

„People construct identities out of specific configurations of semiotic resources, and, consequently, just as linguistic and semiotic repertoires are conditioned by dynamics of access, identity repertoires will likewise be conditioned by unequal forms of access to particular identity-building resources. And similar differences between the relative value of resources will apply: status identities will require status resources, the kind of resources associated with mobility, the capacity to perform functions across contexts.“

## Factors which play a role for the acceptance of risky, transcultural humor

- Long-term solidarity with the figures joked about
- Figures performed with sympathy
- High quality of performance
- The costs/butts of the jokes have to be distributed among many ethnicities
- Integration of humor at one's own expense
- Legitimazation of risky humor is negotiated within a discourse history (instead of being bound to essentialist concepts such as same nation/ethnicity or the like)

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# Serdar Somuncu

