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# The “Rules” of Social Joking Behavior: A West African Illustration and its Implications for the Anthropological Study of Play

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Among the Bachama of Northeastern Nigeria groups standing in particular relationships vis-a-vis others enjoy with these others freedom of behavior of the sort Robert Lowie first termed “privileged familiarity”. Such groups are permitted varying degrees of license to “abuse”, “joke with”, or “snatch from” their counterparts, and they thus exhibit the type of behavior associated with what anthropologists since Lowie have called “joking relationships”.

Every individual participates in a range of “levels” or “degrees” of joking with some others; behavior tolerable within each category may be intolerable, rude, or impudent out of its specified social context. Thus networks of institutionalized relationships of privileged familiarity, conforming to specific culturally-defined “rules”, operate throughout the society. In every case the joking behavior is a manifestation of a pre-existing relationship; the content and context of joking exchanges are indicative of the nature of the relationship.

This paper discusses the several categories within the joking institution, their “rules” and behavioral content. It is suggested that the Bachama case is not at all unique, and that examination of the “rules” governing behavioral manifestations of social relationships should be regarded as significant to the anthropological study of play.

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