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Ben Johnson Jokes: Flaws in the Canadian Mosaic

The 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul, Korea, were marked for many Canadians by the brief glory of runner Ben Johnson's gold medal and world record, followed quickly by his loss of both when he tested positive for steroid use. The public response to these events – particularly to Johnson's disgrace – included an extensive cycle of topical jokes. Following an analytical perspective suggested by the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas¹, I contend that the linguistic structure of these jokes reflects problems in Canadian social structures, especially with respect to immigrants and other citizens who form the so-called national cultural mosaic². That is, while the federal and national vision encourages cultural, social, and linguistic pluralism, regional and popular views may differ³. Such concerns lead to a cycle of jokes which prominently display an exploration of how Johnson's personal nationality may be represented, and an evaluation of his fitness to be a Canadian heroic figure. The folkloric representations of Johnson contrast tellingly with those pertaining to another contemporary Canadian hero, Marathon runner and cancer victim Terry Fox.

The joke texts I discuss here were gathered in several ways. Initially learning about the existence of Ben Johnson jokes informally in conversational joking interactions with students at the University of Waterloo, I immediately began noting and recording the texts. Subsequently, I collected them more systematically in my classes, requesting jokes and information for several consecutive weeks. One student was kind enough to access Ben Johnson jokes on a computer net, and received several responses. Throughout, I concentrated more upon gathering the texts themselves than on discovering the contexts in which they were used.

¹ Douglas, M.: *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*. London 1975.

² The term 'mosaic', referring to national culture, is used in Canada to refer to an encouragement of cultural pluralism with respect to ethnic and racial minorities. It is often said to contrast with the American notion of a 'melting pot', in which minorities are expected to be assimilated into the mainstream. For a discussion of the concept of the mosaic, and on its effects upon the political orientation towards folklore in Canada, see Carpenter, C.: *Many Voices: A Study of Folklore Activities in Canada and Their Role in Canadian Culture*. Ottawa 1979.

³ Among the many lessons of recent political events in Canada from the failure of the Meech Lake Accord – attempting to include the province of Québec in the Canadian constitution – to the stand-off between native people and others at Oka, Québec and other Canadian locations is the variation of points of view between the federal government, the provincial governments, and groups of Canadians. Federal policies and procedures which are intended to encourage cultural pluralism are not always viewed favourably, especially by groups who see their own interests being undermined.