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# **The Memory of Laughter: Ethnographic Observations on Humor in the Dersimli Alevi Community**

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Oral culture holds a unique place within Alevi communities as a primary medium for historical remembrance and cultural continuity. Although often overlooked within the oral tradition—which spans from mythological narratives to epics, folktales, and prayers—humorous forms occupy a significant space. Humor appears either as standalone jokes and anecdotes or embedded with ironic and sarcastic nuances within poetic or prose narratives. Beyond being a source of amusement, humor serves as an effective tool in sustaining social structure, constructing collective memory, and transforming identity-based tensions. It provides a healing space particularly for expressing traumatic historical experiences. The community's belief system, rituals, and linguistic practices have enabled the development of a distinct sense of humor.

In the humor of Dersimli Alevis, shaped by the oral tradition, one finds clear traces of historical traumas such as the 1938 massacre, forced displacements, and cultural marginalization. Their nature-based belief system evolved through interactions with Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and local traditions, and this syncretic structure has influenced both the form and content of their humor. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Dersim and Istanbul between 2022 and 2023, this entry focuses on the social functions of humor expressed in the Kirmancki language, the figure of the kuretacı, and the use of code-switching between Kirmancki and Turkish in humorous storytelling.

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## **The Socio-Cultural Context of Humor**

Humor carries the traces of the social environment from which it emerges, including structures of domination and the cultural atmosphere that surrounds it. Although often regarded as a universal mode of expression, Mary Douglas notes that humor does not resonate the same way across societies, and that “humorless cultures” can also exist. Nevertheless, many communities produce humor across a broad spectrum—from taboos such as death and funerals to physical and obscene jokes.

According to humor scholar Henk Driessen, one way to understand a society is by examining its jokes, as they reflect its economic, social, and cultural dynamics (Driessen 2016, 141). Language, belief systems, and cultural specificities directly shape the content, modes of performance, and purposes of humor. Therefore, it is possible to speak of humor forms that are distinctive and unique to each community.

Dersim humor should be understood within this framework. The community's linguistic and religious structures, power relations, and social organization directly shape the form and themes of its humor. For example, its nature-centered belief system, the structure of ocaks (spiritual lineages) and tribal affiliations, and its historical interaction with Islamic Alevi elements all contribute to the aesthetic style and thematic content of humor.

Historical traumas such as the Dersim Massacre of 1938, forced displacements, and cultural marginalization have often been silenced in public discourse. Humor offers an indirect yet powerful means to express these silences. Through irony, satire, and parody, storytellers reframe painful experiences and render them more bearable. In this sense, humor functions not only as a coping mechanism but also as a space for cultural creativity and critical thought.

In Alevi communities, oral traditions—such as laments, epics, folktales, and jokes—fill the void left by the lack of institutional recognition. In this context, humor serves both as a shared emotional language and as a medium that activates collective memory; it stands at the intersection of memory, identity, and resistance.

### **Humor in the Local Language: Kirmancki and Code-Switching**

Language plays a defining role in the emotional and aesthetic quality of humor. In the Dersim region, Kirmancki (Zazaki)—a language widely spoken yet absent from formal education and mainstream media—serves as a particularly potent medium for humor. Jokes rooted in Kirmancki idioms and wordplay often lose their impact when translated into Turkish. Interviewees frequently emphasized that both the language and the content of the joke are essential. As Delil Xıdır succinctly put it: “When it's Dersim humor, if you do it in Turkish, it loses its flavor.”

There are multiple dynamics behind the use of code-switching between Kirmancki and Turkish. These include emphasizing irony, creating layers of meaning, and enhancing effect. Code-switching is also used to establish group privacy, create safe spaces, and evoke feelings of longing, nostalgia, and belonging. It functions as a kind of linguistic play that amplifies the joke's effect. At the same time, it allows for the expression of a repressed group identity and the creation of space for that identity to manifest.

As shown in Jeff Siegel’s research on Fijian-speaking communities, code-switching is not merely a linguistic strategy but also an effective tool in the production of humor and cultural belonging.

## **Kuretacı**

One of the central figures in traditional humor among Dersimli Alevis is the *kuretacı*. In Kirmancki, this term refers to someone who is witty, quick-witted, verbally agile, and spontaneously sharp—a local humorist known for their sharp tongue. Kuretacıs are recognized not only for their ability to tell jokes or provoke laughter but also for their aesthetic mastery of language in all its dimensions. While most are men, female storytellers occasionally appear as well. These figures often engage in social critique, mimicry, and dark humor to challenge authority.

As noted in Mary Douglas’s work on the “trickster” and Sigmund Freud’s analysis of the “wit figure,” jokers possess a unique license to speak within society. Kuretacıs make use of this privilege to direct humor at figures considered sacred within the social structure, such as *pırs* and *dedes*, temporarily suspending their seriousness and sanctity. In Douglas’s terms, they turn ritual into “anti-ritual” through humor, momentarily dissolving its formal power. Gender norms, too, may be subverted, as illustrated in jokes like those told by “Aunt Bese.”

Kuretacıs may critique conflicts arising within the hierarchical structures of *ocaks* (lineages) and tribes in their distinctive style. Their detached yet respected social position grants weight to their words. They may deliver humorous exchanges on trivial matters, or recount misfortunes with humor, performing brief sketches or parodies. Some are known for their use of physical comedy or at times bawdy content, making them both beloved and controversial—such as in the jokes of “Pala Hasan.”

The scope of their humor is broad: from the mundane details of everyday life to the deeper traumas of the community, anything can be reimagined humorously. Humor can evolve into a counter-discourse through dark comedy, challenging mechanisms of oppression and violence from within. Thus, the *kuretacı* figure should not be viewed as an essentialized or fixed character but rather as a flexible representation that is continuously redefined by its context. Often, *kuretacıs* overlap with bards (*ozans*) or dervishes, individuals with melodic voices who play instruments and perform their art in homes, cafés, and especially weddings—spaces where social life is most visibly enacted.

## **Humor as a Cultural Archive**

In the Dersimli Alevi tradition, jokes and humorous stories often serve to preserve collective historical experiences. Stories that focus on bureaucratic absurdities, military checkpoints, or local authority figures simultaneously narrate the community's history of surveillance, suspicion, and marginalization. These humorous narratives can be understood as a collective archive that resists state-sanctioned amnesia. Unlike the conclusive and linear structure of official historiography, humorous memory follows a cyclical logic and retains its emotional texture. Repeatedly told within the community, these stories help keep memory alive through both their content and form.

## Conclusion

Among Dersimli Alevis, humor emerges not merely as a form of entertainment but as a multilayered practice that sustains collective memory, provides ways of coping with trauma, and enables cultural creativity and critique. The form and content of this humor are deeply intertwined with the community's historical experiences, nature-based belief system, linguistic diversity, and social structures. Within this context, humor performed in the Kirmancki language opens up powerful spaces for both aesthetic expression and identity formation. These narratives, enriched by code-switching strategies, also function as tools for articulating a repressed group identity.

The figure of the *kuretacı* embodies this humor practice, combining social critique with irony directed at traditional authorities. By temporarily suspending ritual and mocking sanctity, the *kuretacı* represents the community's distinct oral tradition of humor.

Humor, in contrast to the linear and suppressive frame of official historiography, functions as a cyclical cultural archive that preserves emotional depth. Humorous stories and jokes revive past experiences, keep collective memory fresh, and are transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition. In this sense, humor serves as a vital medium for both resistance and the production of belonging in the Dersimli Alevi community.

## Endnotes

1. This study includes humorous content in both Kirmancki and Turkish; however, it primarily draws on Turkish narratives. Although the number of Kirmancki accounts was limited, interviews were conducted with storytellers proficient in the local language, such as Cemal Taş, Delil Xıdır, Doğan Munzuroğlu, Ercan Gür, Haydar Cemu, Hıdır Eren, and Munzur Ayata. Contributions were also received from family members fluent in Kirmancki. Given that the fieldwork was conducted over a specific time period with a limited number of participants, different forms of humor may emerge in future research conducted in other contexts.

2. Freud, S. (1905). Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. Freud argues that humor transforms painful realities through unconscious processes. This work provides a significant theoretical framework for understanding humor as a defense mechanism, particularly in the aftermath of trauma.

3. Bergson, H. (1911). Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic. Bergson emphasizes the close relationship between humor and language, arguing that elements such as wordplay are embedded in symbolic systems unique to each language and often cannot be translated effectively.

### References & Further Reading

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