Humor in Dersim Alevi Oral Culture

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Summary
Humor in Dersim Alevi oral culture constitutes a distinctive narrative domain shaped at the intersection of language, belief, and historical experience. While this humorous tradition develops in close relation to everyday life practices, it simultaneously comes into being through an indirect yet intense engagement with trauma, memory, identity tensions, and power relations. In the Dersim context, humor is not merely a form of entertainment; rather, it is a cultural practice that sustains collective memory through oral transmission, regulates social relationships, and offers an indirect mechanism for coping with historical ruptures. Within the world of meaning carried by local languages—particularly Kirmancki—together with the belief framework of Raa Haqi, humor emerges as a multi-layered narrative form that moves between speech, the body, irony, and silence. This entry aims to examine the linguistic, social, and historical dimensions of humor in Dersim Alevi oral culture, with particular attention to its engagements with memory and trauma.

Keywords: Alevilik, Dersim, Etnografik Araştırma, Kirmancki, Kolektif Hafıza, Kuretacı, Mizah, Travma Ve Mizah

Introduction [1]

Dersim is a region in which Armenian, Kirmancki (Zazaki/Dımılki), and Kurmancî/Kurdish have historically been spoken at different times and with varying degrees of intensity. In the contemporary period, however, the growing dominance of Turkish has resulted in an asymmetric structure in which linguistic and religious diversity bears the traces of historical ruptures. This asymmetry has directly shaped the forms and narrative content of humor; tensions between local languages and belief systems and hegemonic identity narratives have contributed to the emergence of

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layers of meaning in humorous expressions that are closely intertwined with trauma and memory.

The social world most frequently referenced in Kirmancki humorous narratives points to a setting structured around kinship relations, everyday practices, and oral transmission, within which the belief framework known in Kirmancki as *Raa Haqi* (*Rêya Heq*) occupies a central place (Deniz 2011; Gültekin 2019). In this context, humorous narratives assume diverse and plural forms in social life through their linguistic and religious references. Beyond offering indirect strategies for coping with traumatic experiences and negotiating identity tensions, they also function as practices through which local identity is preserved and transmitted, and through which intra-group conflicts may be articulated.

Linguistic Dynamics and Code-Switching

Language plays a decisive role in shaping the emotional and aesthetic qualities of humor. Humorous production in the region largely draws on the often conflictual encounters between local languages and the official language (Turkish). Jokes based on Kirmancki idioms and wordplay frequently lose much of their effect-or are rendered entirely ineffective-when translated into Turkish. The emphasis on the idea that humor, like poetry, is not fully translatable resonates both with observations frequently voiced during fieldwork interviews with Delil Xıdır and Doğan Munzuroğlu and with Henri Bergson’s argument that forms of the comic rooted in the structure of language itself cannot be transferred intact into another language.

In this context, narrators resort to code-switching in order to generate layers of meaning, preserve intra-group intimacy, and create relatively safe spaces for the expression of suppressed identity experiences. Linguistic mismatches encountered in formal public settings-such as military checkpoints, courts, and state offices-constitute particularly significant sources of humorous production.

Kuretacı: The Traditional Figure of Humor

In the Dersim Alevi tradition, figures known as *kuretacı* (witty interlocutors, quick-witted repartee artists, verbal acrobats) are local humor narrators distinguished by their sharp language and ready responses. By drawing on the discursive space granted to them within the community, kuretacıs are able to temporarily suspend social hierarchies, tensions associated with tribal structures, and even the seriousness attributed to figures considered sacred, through irony. In this respect, kuretacı narratives correspond to what Mary Douglas has described as the "anti-ritual" domain of humor and joking, which allows established classifications and norms to be briefly inverted. This humorous heritage can be observed in the performative narrative of Teyze Bese, who appears in male disguise, and in the stories of Use Qoji, which revolve around encounters with courts and bureaucracy. In these narratives, humor provides a space in which social hierarchies, gender norms, and entrenched forms of authority are temporarily suspended through irony and imitation. It should be noted, however, that the term *kuretacı* is not used uniformly across all parts of Dersim; alternative expressions such as *lqçı* (meaning "someone with a lot to say") or *kayxo* (meaning "one who plays tricks") also circulate in Kirmancki, and different designations may be encountered depending on context.

Memory, Trauma, and "Hengâme"

Historical traumas such as the 1938 Dersim Genocide, forced displacement, and cultural marginalization constitute key contextual grounds upon which humor has taken shape. In the post-1980 period, described by Reşo Mehmet as an "eighteen-year *hengâme*," the various roles people adopted in order to meet everyday needs under conditions of military control rendered the absurdity of this era visible through humor. As in Use Qoji's courtroom narratives, humorous responses to historical injustices function as a cyclical "cultural archive" that preserves emotional continuity in opposition to the suppressive and linear framework of

official historiography.

Intra-Community Interaction and *Laqo Çeyf*

Humor is not solely a mode of expression directed at tensions with external authority; it also occupies a central place in practices of rivalry, teasing, and play among community members. The Kirmancki expression *laqo çeyf* refers to a reciprocal interactional space in which the speaker "plays with words" and the listener derives "pleasure" from the narrative. Today, this traditional form of interaction has increasingly been carried onto digital platforms by younger narrators and comedians, where humor has re-entered circulation as a significant narrative tool for indirectly making sense of and sharing relationships with a traumatic past.

Conclusion

In conclusion, humor in Dersim Alevi oral culture operates as a narrative domain intertwined with pleasure, play, and everyday interaction, while also engaging-indirectly and often fragmentarily-with a traumatic past. This domain provides a space in which linguistic fractures, historical ruptures, and social tensions can be articulated obliquely, allowing meaning to remain open to negotiation rather than fixed. Rather than transforming experiences of loss into a coherent and unified historical narrative, humorous narratives make visible the difficulty-indeed, at times the absurdity-of achieving such coherence. In this sense, Dersim humor may be understood as a distinctive narrative practice that points not to continuity with the past, but to the ways in which relationships to the past are shaped through discontinuities, ruptures, and contradictions.

Endnotes

[1] This entry is based on the findings of the author's ethnographic research conducted in Dersim and Istanbul within the framework of their doctoral dissertation. Due to conditions of access and linguistic constraints, the research

relied primarily on narratives in Kirmancki and Turkish. As a result, it was not possible to engage equally with all linguistic and social contexts in which humor circulates. Future research conducted at different times with speakers of various Kirmancki dialects, as well as with Dersimlis who speak Kurdish or Armenian, will inevitably provide access to other forms of humor, narrative styles, and worlds of meaning. Accordingly, this text approaches Dersim humor not as a singular and fixed structure, but as a practice that varies according to context and access.

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