Humor in the collectivist Arab Middle East: The case of Lebanon

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Abstract

The Lebanese people are lovers of the social and the humorous, and the soul of their humor is manifest in their social gatherings, tales, civil and religious celebrations, songs, jokes, literature, theatre, cartoons, and spontaneous wit. In the present article, humor, Arabic فكاهة (fukaha), in the collectivist Lebanese culture is discussed with particular focus on comparisons with Western humor scholarship. The discussion is illustrative rather than exhaustive and is informed by Western contemporary humor theories regarding conceptualization of humor and its varied forms and functions. In addition to providing Arabic humor terminology and English equivalents, culture-universals (mass media, rhetors humor, jokes, wit and accidental humor) and culture-bound (zajal and Zalghouta) humor in the Lebanese context are described. Finally, the psychological and social functions of Lebanese humor are identified, as are gaps in research and the need for a science-driven agenda for cross-cultural humor scholarship involving Arab Middle Eastern and EuroAmerican humor scholars.

Keywords: culture-bound humor; forms of humor; humor functions; Lebanese humor; zajal humor; zalagheet humor.

1. Introduction

Humor is the positive emotion of mirth invoked in a social context by the perception of playful incongruity and expressed through laughter-related behaviors (Martin 2007). Humor scholarship has been grounded primarily in EuroAmerican thought and ethics, and as such, it has inadvertently influenced

Humor 24–3 (2011), 329–348
DOI 10.1515/HUMR.2011.020
0933–1719/11/0024–0329

humor scholarship in different parts of the world. Interest in cross-cultural humor study involving the West and the Arab Middle East has been a recent phenomenon and focused on the study of Gelotophobia under the leadership of Willibald Ruch and Rene T. Proyer, both from the University of Zurich, Switzerland. Cross-cultural humor research involving the Arab Middle East is imperative for three major reasons. First, it contributes to establishing the universality (etic) or culture-specificity (emic) of humor theory and practice that is informed by the individualist EuroAmerican culture, a contribution also made by cross-cultural humor studies involving countries other than the Arab Middle East. Second, the heterogeneity of the Arab Middle Eastern society provides Western-based humor scholarship on race, ethnicity, and religion a unique perspective in which the host countries are Muslims rather than Christians, as is the case in Western countries, and the so called minority ethnicities or religions are Christians (e.g., Armenians and Copts) rather than Muslims. Studies on ethnic humor in Arab Middle Eastern countries are likely to provide new insights on the strengths and limitations of Western-based ethnic humor theories. Third, cross-cultural humor research involving the Arab Middle East allows increased scientific intercourse between Western and Arab Middle Eastern humor scholars. Such collaboration is likely to benefit not only humor scholarship generally but also the mutual dispelling of 'ignorance and stupidity' (Raskin 2006) about their respective cultures.

The Arab Middle Eastern landscape provides a fertile ground for humor theory and research. Ancient Arab literature is rich with transparent humor, and several Arab nationals including Egyptians, Jordanians, Lebanese, and Moroccans are well-known for their sense of humor and the contribution of their scholars and literary communities to humor literature and the science and practice of humor (Alhigaz 1991; Al-Khatib 1999; 3abd Al-Hamid 2003; Farshoukh 1989; Frayha 1988; Khouri 2007; Nilsen and Nilsen 2000a). While humor studies on Arabs in Israel have been published for international consumption (Nevo 1985), scholarly work on humor in Lebanon remains relatively unknown to Western humor scholars. As a cradle of confessional coexistence and a fertile (battle) ground for Eastern and Western thought, Lebanon provides an invaluable context for the interdisciplinary study of humor. In the present article, the available but scarce and primarily Arabic literature on Lebanese فكاهة (*fukaha*), the Arabic term for humor, is described with a particular focus on the many forms and functions of humor (Marineau 1972; Raskin 1985; Draister 1994; Attardo 1994, 2001; Attardo and Raskin 1991; Ruch 1998; Martin 2007) in the collectivist and religiously-grounded Lebanese soci-

ety. The discourse on Lebanese humor in the present context is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

2. On humor scholarship in Lebanon

While humor in its different manifestations is integral to the every day life of the multi-religious and multiethnic Lebanese society, paradoxically, there are very few contemporary Lebanese and Western scholars actively involved in research on humor generally, and Lebanese humor in particular. Interestingly, Lebanese humor scholarship has been male dominated and most scholarly discourse on Lebanese humor has appeared between the 1960s and early 1990s, a historical period of political turmoil and civil strife including the protracted civil war from 1975 to 1990. Notable contributions to the study of Lebanese humor during the three decades mentioned include the works of Frayha (1962, 1988), Hankash (1962, 1964), Al 3tri (1970), Grh Ali (1972), Khater (1977), Al-Asmar (1986), Mrouah (1987), Farshoukh (1989), Hanin (1979, 1981), and Lahoud (1991).

The humor scholars of the decades of 1960s to the decade of the 1990s have focused on Arabic humor terminology and their foreign equivalents, particularly English and French, the nature and form of Lebanese humor, and the psychological and social functions of humor in the Lebanese context. Lebanese humor scholars have distinguished between popular humor (فكاهة شعبية, *fukaha sha3biyeh*) and literary humor (فكاهة ادبية, *fukaha adabiyeh*), and while they have recognized the existence of street humor (فكاهة شارعية, *fukaha shari3iyeh*) as a form of popular humor, they have lamented their inaccessibility in written form for study primarily because of prohibitions against the publication of transparent and 'nude' street humor on the grounds that such humor is construed as dirty (بذيئة, *bazi'a*), disdaining (رذيلة, *razila*), and diminishing of social standing (تنزيل من مقام الشخص, *tanzil min makam al shakhs*). As the late eminent Lebanese anthropologist Fuad Khouri (2007: 6) has observed, 'freedom of speech [in Arab society] has not yet gained widespread recognition as a legitimate human right,' and that while 'the flow of oral information is unrestricted; the written form is tightly constrained.'

Humor study in the Lebanese context since 2000 has been focused on adaptation of Western-grounded measurement tools for the assessment of humor, in particular validation of the Arabic and Armenian translations of the Humor Styles Questionnaire (Kazarian and Martin 2004, 2006; Taher et al., 2008) and its friend and family versions (Berberian, 2005), and its cross-cultural

comparison (Kalliny et al. 2006). In addition, humor study in Lebanon since 2000 has been preoccupied with ethnic Armenian humor in the Lebanese context (Kazarian 2006), discourse on the history of Lebanon through analysis of political jokes in the country (Sara Binay, personal communication June 8, 2007), socio-linguistic approaches to the communication of humor (Raja T. Nasr 2007), and the study of Gelotophobia cross-culturally mentioned earlier.

3. On Arabic humor terminology and English equivalents

According to Frayha (1962), the Arabic term فكاهة is equivalent to the English term *humor*. He related that the Arabic word فاكهة (*fakiha*), meaning fruit, is one of the derivatives of the word فكه (*fakih*), an ancient Arabic term frequently mentioned in the Holy Koran in different forms such as *fakiheen* and *fawakeh*, and contended that the original meaning of *fakiha* (fruit), a rarity in the desert, is حلاوة (*halawa*), meaning sweet (dessert); the *halawa* that the sons of the desert savored on consuming it. Humor (*fukaha*) in Arabic, therefore, is a metaphor whose experiential basis is the physiological/sensory experience of the dessert word فاكهة (*fakiha*), thus allowing for the expression of mental experience of humor.

While there is recognition of the equivalence of the Arabic term فكاهة (*fukaha*) to the English term *humor*, cross-language equivalence of a number of other Arabic humor terms has been somewhat problematic. Thus, there has been historical inconsistency in the English equivalents of the Arabic terms *wit and joke* (ظرف vs. نكتة vs. دعابة), *sarcasm and satire* (سخرية vs. هجاء), and *pun and wit* (دعابة vs. تورية). 3abd Al Hamid (2003) has suggested the following Arabic-English equivalents: فكاهة for humor, دعابة (*da3abeh*) for wit, نكتة (*noukta*) for joke, سخرية (*soukhrieh*) for satire, هجاء (*hija'*) for sarcasm, حس الفكاهة (*hass al fukaha*) for sense of humor, and تورية (*tawrieh*) for pun.

4. On the definition of humor in the Lebanese context

Humor through a Western psychological lens is seen as comprising four essential components; namely, social, cognitive (production of humorous stimuli and perception of the humorous), emotional (positive affect and mood) and vocal-behavioral (laughter and smiling); a view generally consistent with those proposed by Arab (3abd Al-Hamid 2003) and Lebanese humor scholars (Farshoukh 1989; Frayha 1988). Frayha (1988: 19–20) acknowledged the

social origin and context of humor (*fukaha*) and defined it in terms of its cognitive, emotional and behavioral elements. More specifically, he described humor as "قدرة [*gudra*; ability] عقلية [*3aklieh*, mental] and روحية [*ruhieh*, spiritual] that is capable of discerning those aspects of verbal expressions, actions and movements that are incongruous (متناقضة, *moutanagida*) and funny, goes along with it, and expresses it in laughter, smile, or feeling of content."

3abd Al-Hamid (2003), on the other hand, identified six components to humor: cognitive (humor-related mental functions such as awareness, imagination, comprehension, and appreciation), emotional (positive mood associated with التسلية playfulness; المرح mirth; and الاستمتاع, enjoyment), behavioral (laughter, facial muscular movements, body movements), social (responsiveness and communication between individuals or groups), psychophysiological (brain waves, hormonal secretions), and humor-related processes such as production of jokes, caricatures, comedies, etc.

Other Lebanese humor scholars have focused on certain components of humor, laughter in particular (Hanin 1979; Frayha 1988) recognizing gradations in the intensity of the non-linguistic expression of humor and the intensity of emotion it is likely to convey. In relation to the non-linguistic expression of humor, a distinction is made between laughter without any sound or roaring sound (*gahgaha*), smiling, and laughing out loud. In relation to intensity of emotion, laughter is seen as conveying a variety of emotions including happiness (سرور, *sourour*) and elation (طرب, *tarab*).

Analysis of Arab and Lebanese psychological conceptualizations of humor suggests that humor scholarship in the Arab Middle East is cognizant of the social, cognitive, emotional and behavioral components of humor. However, Lebanese scholars have been less preoccupied than their Western counterparts (e.g., Apte 1985; Martin 2007) with the distinctive positive emotion that is evoked by the perception of humor, namely, the positive emotion of mirth (مرح, *marah*).

5. On culture-universal forms of humor in the Lebanese context

Humor scholars in the West have suggested that humor occurs in various social contexts and assumes different forms. Mass media types of humor represent one cluster of humor form, and in Western contexts include television sitcoms, stand-up comedies, blooper shows, political satires, and humorous advertisements; film and theatrical productions of comedies; newspaper publications of comic strips and cartoons; and humorous literary work (Martin 2007). A

second cluster of humor form in the Western context is rhetors use of humor in communication such as politicians including humor in their speeches and pastors using humor in their sermons (Myers 2000). A third cluster of humor form is humor use in everyday social intercourse, which Martin (2007) divided into three categories. According to Martin, the first category of humor in everyday social interactions is (canned) jokes, that is, short, amusing stories that end in punch lines. The second category is spontaneous conversational humor or wit which is inclusive of such rhetorical strategies as irony, satire, sarcasm, self-deprecation, and rhetorical questions (Weingarten 2006). The third category of humor in everyday social interactions is unintentional linguistic humor (e.g., Freudian slips) or accidental physical humor such as slipping on a banana peel (Nilsen and Nilsen 2000b).

The many forms of humor that have preoccupied Lebanese humor scholars parallel those of their Western counterparts. Lebanese humor scholars have captured the varied Lebanese humor types in social gatherings in homes over *funjan kahwé* (cup of coffee), in *sahrat*s (evening get-togethers), in cafés over بوظة (*buza*, ice-cream) or نرجيلة (*nargileh*, water pipe), in traditional tales related by the الظريف (*zareef*, witty) and the حكواتي (*hakawati*, story-teller) in coffee houses or public baths; in civil and religious celebrations, in the spontaneous wit of individuals or families known for their humorous disposition, and in Lebanese songs, jokes, art, literary work, cartoons, and mass media creations including theatre, magazines, and newspapers published in their own country or the diaspora.

Lebanese humor scholars such as Farshoukh (1989) and Lahoud (1991) have documented the history of the varied types of Lebanese mass media humor and their role in Lebanese society. More specifically, these and other humor scholars have traced the first mass media publication in Lebanon to 1858, and the first comic weekly magazine, هبت (*habat*), to 1908. Farshoukh has also listed other humor magazine outlets that followed the publication of هبت such as حمارة بلدنا (*himarat baladna*, the donkeys of our town) in 1910. Farshoukh and Lahoud identified the first humorous theatrical production in Lebanon as the البخيل (*al bakhil*, the Miser), a theme reminiscent of the Al Jahez, the famous Abbasid literary humor scholar (3abd Alhamid 2003). The Miser, written by the Lebanese Maroun Al Nagah rather than translated from Moliere, premiered in 1848 and was followed by other theatrical productions played by such distinguished actors as Najib al Rihani and Bshara Wakim, and many others.

Furthermore, Farshoukh (1989) has focused on Lebanese radio programs and indicated that the first humor program aired in 1951 and that numerous

other programs followed including عشر دقائق مع ابوسليم (*3ashr daga'eg ma3 Abu Salim*, Ten Minutes with Abu Salim). Similarly, Farshoukh related that the first humor program on television was broadcast in 1960 followed by a series of productions of made-for-TV humor programs including مسرح الفكاهة (*masrah al fukaha*, Humor Theatre). Finally, Farshoukh has studied humor production in the context of the cinema and traced the first comedy film to 1930, after which many more humor movies were produced including مغامرات ابو عبد (*mughamarat Abu 3abd*, the Adventures of Abu 3abd).

Needless to say, Farshoukh's (1989) scholarly historical treatise of mass media humor forms in Lebanon is outdated and as such it requires similar contemporaneous treatise, and inclusion of the proliferated mass media programs in the country (Dajani 2001) and humor sites on the Web. A cursory examination of current mass media types of humor in the Lebanese landscape suggest that practically all Arabic newspapers publish cartoons, primarily political, on a daily basis, and that some weekly magazines include sections on humor inclusive of jokes. Similarly, movie and particularly theatrical productions aim at invoking social, economic, and political reform. In relation to contemporary films, *Bosta* (The Bus) with its focus on the social and psychological consequences of the protracted Lebanese civil war evoked considerable tears and laughter. In relation to theatre, comedy shows such as *Haki Niswan* (Talk of Women) have been popular aiming at exposing prevailing cultural taboos regarding sexuality. Finally, current popular political satiric live theatrical productions such as *Comedy Night* and TV comedy shows such as *Sl Shi*, *Irbat Tinhal* (It will be resolved soon), *La Yumal* (Never Boring), *Bas Mat Watan* (*BMW*, Haugbolle, 2007) and '*8, 14 and Us*' have been ongoing aiming at portrayal of the prevailing political dissonance in the country. *Bas Mat Watan* has the double meaning of a 'nation's smile' and 'when a nation died' whereas the '8' and the '14' in the more recent satiric show '8, 14 and Us' refer to the political schism in the country in the form of what is construed as the *Mou3arada* (Opposition) camp and the *Mouwala* (Ruling Majority) camp, each in the business of demonizing the other at the expense of the 'us.'

A number of Lebanese humor scholars have focused on humor based on everyday social interactions, particularly those involving jokes and wit, while accidental humor has received very little attention, Lahoud (1991) being the exception. In Lebanese culture, a witty person is described as a person with 'lightness of blood' (خفة الدم, *khifet el dam*), a highly desirable characteristic. Lahoud (1991) has distinguished between different types of wit and offered the following as an example of political wit that is presumed to invoke tears:

A villager complained to Ibrahim Pasha al Masri that one of his soldiers snatched a bottle of milk from her, drank its content and broke it without paying for it. However, she did not have any witnesses to the incident. Ibrahim Pasha decided to investigate the matter in such a technical manner that he could conclusively rule in favor or against the woman's allegations. Ibrahim Pasha ordered the stomach of the soldier cut open, and when he saw its content, he ruled in favor of the complainant.

In relation to Lebanese jokes, Khouri (2007) has suggested roughly three types of jokes: the structured, the standard, and the situational. Khouri described the structured jokes as impersonal, that is humor that is inherent in its structure, and considered them transferable across cultures. Similarly, Khouri (2007: 3) described standard jokes as entailing "an awkward or unexpected combination of elements that goes contrary to the mores and customary behaviors of a particular culture," and considered them transferable within a culture. Finally, Khouri (2007) characterized situational jokes as spontaneous instances of wit invoked by the 'dynamics of interaction within a group,' and considered them not transferable.

Hanin (1979), on the other hand, has focused on the characteristics of a successful joke and, in quoting Khoury Youseef 3aoun, has suggested the elements of 'expressiveness, imagery, and precision in timing." Hanin (1979: 26) has also invoked 3aoun's use of the metaphor of a joke being 'dynamite in a person's hand, when dropped at the right moment, it explodes for the listener and represents a successful joke; if delayed it explodes in the hand of the joke-teller and represents an unsuccessful narrative.'

Farshoukh (1989) has exalted the predisposition of the Lebanese for engineering humor-fertile social gatherings almost on a daily basis, and has sourced his humor narratives for psychological, sociological and anthropological analysis from *al majales alsiyasiyin*-the courts of politicians from the early 19th century onwards, particularly those of Bashir II, Bashir Joumblat, Al Khaziniyin, and Riyad El Sulh; *majales al udaba'*-courts of literary men, and *majales al 3ama*-the public courts. He has also relied on jokes in the domains of religion, women, and politics for the study of Lebanese humor. The following is an example of a narrative from the domain of women:

Son: Tell me father, do donkeys marry?
Father: Why son (*ya tugbor abouk*, may you bury your father), is there anyone other than a donkey who marries? (Farshoukh 1989: 243–244)

Hanin (1979), on the other hand, has sourced the wit of a particular Lebanese family, the El Khazen family, well-know for their trans-generational spontane-

ous conversational humor, as did Frayha (1988). The following is an illustration of an El Khazen wit:

> Sheikh Mansur Ghaleb El Khazen was playing around with a gun when it accidentally fired and hit the head of a man in his vicinity. One of the many people who rushed to the scene when they heard the shot-gun looked at the victim and saw that he was still breathing even though parts of his brain were scattered, and said "Is it possible that he is still alive when he is without a brain?" Sheikh Alfred El Khazen who happened to overhear the man replied, "Why are you surprised. There are many people without brains living among us." (Frayha 1988: 175)

In addition to sourcing El Khazen and Shaker Al Khoury narratives, Frayha (1988) has collected jokes from daily newspapers, weekly magazines, and the 'mouths' of Lebanese to invoke a variety of themes including religion, marriage, politics, and family. The following is an example of a rural minister joke and the Lebanese national alcoholic spirit, Arak:

> Rural Minister: My son, Arak is a person's worst enemy.
> The Drunk: Father, you have always preached that we should always love our enemy.
> Rural Minister: This is very true, my son, but I have never said you should swallow your enemy. (Frayha 1988: 57)

Lahoud's (1991) work on Lebanese humor has considered a historical perspective in that he has sourced Lebanese witty anecdotes from the Moutasarrifieh period (1861–1915), particularly those relating to the Ottoman-appointed Christian administrators over Mount Lebanon such as Daoud Pasha Al Armani (the Armenian; the first administrator of Mount Lebanon) and Ohannes Kuyumjian Al Armani (the last administrator of Mount Lebanon). Lahoud has also sourced narratives from the French Mandate and post Sovereignty (1943) periods of Lebanon's history to contextualize his witty narratives in terms of mass media humor (the theatre and the press), social institutions (justice, medicine, religion, schools and universities) and literature (poetry).

Al-Asmar's (1986) work on Lebanese humor has focused on *fukaha sha3biyeh* (popular Lebanese humor). He has offered a total of 60 Lebanese نوادر (*nawader*, witty anecdotes) and 60 jokes preoccupied with a variety of social topics including sex, religion, marriage, education, medicine, and the courts. The following examples of a popular *nadira* and a joke are extracted from Al-Asmar (1986: 35 and 96, respectively):

Example of a popular nadira

> In the 19th Century Mount Lebanon, confessional conflicts were further fueled by the foreign powers of the time in an effort to establish their protectorate role and hence gain

increased access to the rich resources of the region. In this spirit, the French offered protection to the Maronites, England to the Druze, Turkey to the Sunni Muslims, and Tsarist Russia to the Greek Orthodox. And in the height of the confessional conflicts, the 1860 civil war between the Maronites and the Druze, France invoked the notion of a Christian State in the Middle East under the leadership of Bkirki, the Patriarchate and Religious Seat of the Maronites. The French offered two options for the consideration of the Greek Orthodox community: join the Christian State and the protection of the Maronites or join the Muslims and Turkey as their protectorate. After discussion, one Greek Orthodox Lebanese commented, 'التركي ولا بكركي,' 'I choose Turkey over Bkirki.'

Example of a joke

Son: Mother, I overheard you tell dad that you bought him with your own money; is this true?
Mother: Yes, it is true.
Son: Why didn't you then pay more and buy someone better than him?

Finally, AbouJaoude and AbouJaoude's (1997) work on Lebanese humor has focused on everyday social interactions and involved a collection of 1001 jokes. The authors have pointed out that the jokes were presented in spoken (محكية, *mahkieh*) Arabic as jokes tended to lose much of their humor when related in classical (*alfus ha*) Arabic.

While the many forms of humor identified in the West have preoccupied Lebanese humor scholars, they have understudied them structurally and thematically. Thus, it would be valuable to study the semantic and structural properties of Lebanese humor forms following existing models such as the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (Raskin 1985) and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH; Attardo and Raskin 1991) for the purpose of detailing the six postulated Knowledge Resources, namely; Language, Situation, Narrative strategy, Target, and Script opposition, and Logical mechanism. The work of Al-Khatib (1999) on joke-telling in the Jordanian context exemplifies the successful application of GTVH in the Arab Middle East.

It would also be important to consider comparative and cross-cultural perspectives to study mainstream and ethnic (e.g., Armenian or Druze) Lebanese humor structurally and thematically as suggested by Khouri (2007), Ruch (1998) and Davies (1998). Mainstream and ethnic Lebanese humor that is relevant for structural and content analysis includes jokes published by humor scholars (e.g., AbouJaoude and AbouJaoude, 1997), and humor that considers Lebanese fictional or real characters as the centerpiece of jokes such as *Abu Abed*, an Archie-Bunker-like figure (Boustany 2006), *3Ali Hmyet* and *Hussein*

Hmyet, *Wahbi*, and the Armenian *Artin*. Comparisons between countries with intranational targets as the subject of their humor and those with extranational targets would also be valuable. Thus, Lebanese consider themselves externalized rather than internalized with respect to the butt of their jokes, that is, the target group as the butt of their jokes is non-Lebanese rather than Lebanese. In contrast to Lebanon, Western countries such as Canada use people of a particular region (Newfoundland) as the butt of their jokes, as do Egyptians in the case of the *Saidi* or the upper Egyptian, Palestinians in the case of *Khaleelis* (Hebron), Jordanians in the case of *Al Sarih* or *Al Tafili*, and Syrians in the case of the *Homsy*.

Finally, there is a clear absence of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the humor of Lebanese or hyphenated Lebanese in the diaspora. For example, Lebanese and Lebanese-Armenians in Western countries invoke a particular type of humor in their literal translation of Arabic or Armenian terms into the English language. The following narratives taken from the files of the present author exemplify the rich humor landscape Lebanese diasporan life provides for humor scholars generally and ethnic humor scholars, in particular:

Example 1
In Lebanon, نخاع (*nkha3*, lamb brain) cooked and marinated in olive oil and lemon juice is considered a delicacy. A Lebanese-Armenian goes to the butcher in London, Ontario, Canada, and asks if 'he has brains.' The butcher looks at the customer with puzzlement and indignity, and replies, "I know I do but I don't know about you."

Example 2
An appointment is arranged for a Lebanese Armenian woman in Boston, Massachusetts to see an English-speaking doctor for a chronic headache problem. When the doctor invites her to his office and asks her what she was in for, she says, 'doctor, my chapter is hurting.' (*Kloukh*, head in Armenian, also means chapter, as in a chapter in a book.)

6. On culture-bound types of humor in the Lebanese context

The many types of humor discussed thus far seem universal in that they prevail in Lebanon and other Arab Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Jordan as they do in EuroAmerican countries. However, two types of humor seem

culture-bound, that is, indigenous to Lebanese culture. These are Popular Poetry Humor (زجل, *Zajal*), and Expressions of Happiness Humor (زلاغيط, *Zalagheet*). Frayha (1988) and Farshoukh (1989) have suggested that the *Zajal* and *Zalagheet* types of humor are expressed either in literary (classical) Arabic (الفصحى, *al fus ha*) or colloquial (العامية, *al 3ammiyeh*) Arabic.

Lebanese *Zajal* comprises three characteristic elements: spontaneous popular poetry composition, singing while improvising the popular poetry, and 'battling' in teams before an attentive audience. A *zajal* session is likely to start with the two *zajal* teams whose members are known as the people of wisdom (*Ahl oul Zaka*). The people of wisdom are expected to welcome and even praise their opponents as a prelude to their 'battle' of popular poetry. However, poetic outsmarting the opponent and escalation of poetic outsmarting energy are expected and delight the highly receptive audience. In addition to evoking the best of Lebanese wit and humor, Lebanese *zajal* invokes Lebanese intelligence and the Lebanese mind to process and respond to artistic expression and humanity. Well-Known Lebanese *zajaleen* include Rashid Nakhleh, 3abd Allah Ghanem, Shahrour Al Wadi, Zaghloul Al Damour, and many others (Lahoud 1991). The following is an example of a *zajal* exchange translated from Frayha (1988: 32):

Moujalli of Zajaleen Team One
Oh glass of wine, full of fineness and emotions
I know how you go down to my belly
I know not how you ascend to the head.

Moujalli of Zajaleen Team Two (in response to team one)
The wine is not approving of you
Go complain to the judge.
You'll find your belly full
But your head empty.

As an indigenous type of humor, Expressions of Happiness humor (زلاغيط, *Zalagheet*, the plural of زغلوطه, *zaghlouta*) is believed to be derived from the Arabic *zaghrad*, and denotes expressions of happiness (فرح, *farah*) and joy (ابتهاج, *ibtihaj*). *Zalagheet* is used in weddings and festivals for celebrating heroes, political patrons (*zou3ama*), and returning émigrés. A *zaghlouta* has structure in that it starts with "*aweeha* . . ." or "*ay haya* . . ." or "*awouha* . . ." or "*a eeha* . . ." and finishes with "*looloolo*" or "*leeleelee*." The following represent two examples of *zalagheet*:

Example 1
Aweeha, God be with you oh bride, God be with you.
Aweeha, too much crying will not help.
Aweeha, should there be a nail in your father's house,
Aweeha, remove it and take it with you.
Looloolo

Example 2
Aweeha, oh bride remove your veil and throw it away.
Aweeha, curse to the father who gossiped and hid you there.
Aweeha, your face is that of a moon, a flower blossomed.
Aweeha, your bosom is a field for the horseman to play.
Leeleelee

While the two types of distinctive Lebanese humor, *zajal* and *zalghouta*, are integral to Lebanese life, and have captured the attention of Lebanese humor scholars, two main issues prevail. Firstly, the available specimens of *zajal* represent a miniscule of the rich source of humor produced by the *zajaleen* community in Lebanon. It would seem that much of *zajal* humor is lost to obscurity as *zajaleen* in the main rely on oral history and rarely resort to writing, let alone publishing their work. The loss of *zajal* to oral history is probably true regarding *zalagheet*. The present author validated the loss of *zajal* with Elias Khalil (personal communication, May 2006), a contemporary member of the zajaleen community in Lebanon who confirmed that much of his *zajal* is lost because he neither records his spontaneous creations on various occasions nor does he put it in written form at the conclusion of his improvisations. In fact, the present author suggested that *zajaleen* carry recording devices with them or with those who accompany them for the purpose of recording all their poetic *zajal* creations for later transcription. Secondly, as observed in the case of other forms of Lebanese humor (e.g., jokes and cartoons), the Lebanese *zajal* and *zalagheet* are understudied, and as such are likely to benefit from interdisciplinary humor research.

7. On psychological functions of humor in the Lebanese context

Western humor scholars have identified four psychological benefits associated with humor: cognitive, interpersonal, social communication and influence, and tension relief and coping (Martin 2007). More specifically, cognitive benefits of humor entail increased creativity in problem solving, better memory, and

improved executive functions, whereas interpersonal benefits of humor include increased levels of social responsibility and such prosocial behaviors as generosity and helpfulness. Social communication and influence benefits of humor relate to strengthening interpersonal relations, resolving conflicts, promoting cohesion, and enhancing one's self at the expense of others. Finally, tension relief and coping benefits of humor refer to humorous approaches to dealing with stress and adversity.

Lebanese humor scholars have also been preoccupied with the psychological functions of humor, particularly the benefits of the positive emotion it evokes. Lahoud (1991: 50) considered the cognitive benefits of humor and prescribed it to the Lebanese public generally and to Lebanese literary men and artists, in particular, as an effective medicine for overcoming conceit *(ghrour)*, which he considered "the cancer of talents *(mawaheb)* and deformer (*moushaweh*) of the genius mind."

Several Lebanese humor scholars have focused on the social benefits of humor (Hanin 1979; Al-Asmar 1986; Frayha; 1988; Lahoud 1991; Khouri 2007). Thus, Emil Ya3goub (cited in Al-Asmar, 1986) exalted the social importance of humor in such folk expressions as "Meet me but don't feel you need to feed me" (لاقيني ولا تطعميني, *lakini wala ta3mini*), and the aversion of the Lebanese to the 'obituary face' (ورقة النعوة, *warakat el na3wa*). Lahoud (1991) observed that humor invokes affective bonding between the humorous persons and the recipients of their humor, in addition to buttressing others' familiarity with their personhood, opinions and political inclinations. While Lebanese humor scholars recognized the use of negative humor in interpersonal contexts, they suggested that humor ethics required that the elements of funniness and humor contained in critical and disparaging humorous expressions not exceed the threshold of amusement and merriment, for other wise, the humor is likely to cause pain, anguish, or hurtfulness, and diminish social bonding.

Hanin (1979) has considered the communication and influence function of humor, as did Al-Asmar (1986) and Lahoud (1991). More specifically, Hanin (1979: 22) suggested that humor "helps a person escape from a corner . . . resolves personal complexes, brings closer divergent views, dissolves obstacles, breaks evil, eases the obstinate, and has the power of changing attitudes and opposing positions." In addition, Hanin (1979: 23) suggested that humor can be self-enhancing in that it can be used to 'escape a difficult situation, save face, and succeed in getting something that couldn't have been possible to get without the use of humor."

Finally, several Lebanese humor scholars have attributed a tension relief and coping function to humor (Hanin 1979; Al-Asmar 1986; Frayha 1988; Khouri

2007). More specifically, Khouri described use of humor in dealing with negative emotion (mild depression) and moments of loneliness and despair. Hanin (1979: 17) suggested that humor is capable of "lifting us from the dark ocean and melting our sorrows into hope" and quoted Arab (Imam 3Ali, Ahmad Amin, Haroun al Rashid, Al Jahez, Maroun 3Aboud) and Western (Dryden, Bernard Shaw) figures attesting to the coping function of humor. In fact, Hanin indicated in the Preface of his book that his initiative to write his Khazinieh Wit (*Noukat Khazinieh*) was motivated by the negative consequences of the protracted civil war in Lebanon. He suggested that he wanted to make his book available to the Lebanese to help diminish their worry (قلق, *kalak*), fear (خوف, *khawf*) and hopelessness (يئس, *ya's*). Frayha (1988) has ascribed similar psychological functions to humor.

8. Social functions of humor in the Lebanese context

Western humor scholars have identified several important social functions of humor. Martin (2007) listed eight mutually inclusive social functions of humor, as follows: use of humor to disclose personal attitudes (beliefs, feelings and actions) that may be contrary to social norms and help probe the attitudes of others on sensitive or taboo subjects; to save face; to enforce social norms or control other's behaviors; to establish or maintain a position of dominance; to gain attention, approval and favors from others; to enhance group identity and cohesion; to initiate, control and end a conversation; and to purely enjoy the pleasures inherent in humorous interpersonal intercourse.

Lebanese humor scholars, as their Western counterparts, have recognized the varied social functions of humor, particularly the social safety valve it provides for a people 'struck' by internal and external cultural, social, religious, economic and political 'evil eyes.' While Lebanese humor scholars have not catalogued the social functions of humor, examination of the many forms of Lebanese humor (poetry, press, theatre, *zajal* and witty anecdotes) they have provided are suggestive of Lebanese use of humor to vent pent-up frustrations and emotions, to expose the painful contradictions in their society (e.g., the coexistence of the veiled covered woman and the bikini-nude woman) and the social ills plaguing them (e.g., economic hardship due to political instability and alleged corruption), to enforce social norms and control, particularly those that pertain to religion, the 'weaker sex' and politics; and to enhance or denigrate personal, social, religious, political, or national status.

The use of pun in one of Lahoud's (1991: 26) narratives is illustrative of the use of humor for social (confessional, minority) control purposes. To contextualize the narrative, reference should be made to Article 5 of Protocol 1864 which was imposed on Mount Lebanon by the Ottoman Turks and several countries including France, Italy, Russia, and Prussia. Lahoud posited that the best Article 5 offered was its inclusion of the clause 'all are equal under the law;' and the worst it provided was the stipulation of a confessional system in all government institutions and administrative appointments.

> A Jewish family in the Shouf area presented a petition to the Mutasarrif of Mount Lebanon, Rostom Pasha, requesting a seat on the confessional Mount Lebanon Administrative Council since the Council did not designate a specific seat, as required by Article 5, for the officially recognized Jewish faith. The petition was signed by all members of the Jewish family whose surnames happened to end in المنجد (*Almunajed*, literally meaning upholsterer). Evidently, Rostom Pasha looked at the petition and seeing that all the signatories carried the surname Upholsterer (plural منجدين, *munajideen*) ruled that 'اثاث المجلس جديد فلا حاجة لمنجدين' [the furniture of the Council is new so there is no need for Upholsterers (*Almunajedeen*).

Examples of use of humor for status enhancement and status denigration at many levels (confessional, ethnic, political, national) are also suggestive in Lahoud's witty narratives on judges, lawyers, physicians, teachers, and 'men of the church,' and those of Farshoukh (1989) on men of religion, women, and politicians. Interestingly, Lahoud described the status enhancement process of humor as 'invoking the lion in the cat' and the status denigration process as 'invoking the cat in the lion.' The following is an example of the use of humor for the purpose of status denigration.

> A group of villagers wanted to congratulate the Maronite Patriarch Al Houwaik on the anniversary of his appointment as a Patriarch. A delegation was formed for this purpose and headed by a villager who was motivated to project himself as an all-knowing leader. The man convinced his countrymen that he knew the ins and outs of Bkirki, the Seat of the Maronite Patriarchate, and that he and the Patriarch knew each other well. When the delegation met Patriarch Al Houwaik, the man assumed his self-appointed role of presenting each member of the delegation to the Maronite Patriarch. The Patriarch listened patiently to the name, occupation, social status, and family composition of each of the delegates, and at the conclusion of the introductions, turned to the man and asked him delicately, 'And you my son, who do *you*, happen to be?"

The study of the social functions of humor in the case of Lebanon is seemingly lacking in theoretical grounding; even though the religiously pluralist, nationally fragmented, and precarious political Lebanese landscape provide fertile grounds for theory building, testing and application. Martineau's (1972) model of the social functions of humor is highly relevant in the Lebanese case as it allows humor analysis at the levels of the intragroup, the intergroup and the interaction of groups comprising the intergroup. Martineau proposed consideration of four major variables-actor, audience, subject and judgment, within each of the three structural settings for the identification of the social functions of humor. Actor refers to the individual or group initiating the humor; whereas the audience concerns the individual or group that experiences or is exposed to the humor. Subject refers to the butt of the humor; whereas judgment concerns the subjective evaluation of the humor as esteeming or disparaging. Thus, in an intragroup context, Martineau suggested that humor initiated by a member of the ingroup and judged as esteeming may serve the function of solidifying the ingroup while humor judged as disparaging may serve such functions as control of ingroup behavior, introduction or fostering of preexisting conflict in the ingroup, or demoralization and social disintegration of the ingroup. In an interactional intergroup context, Martineau postulated that humor judged as esteeming one of the groups may either enhance consensus and social integration or foster disintegration of the intergroup relationship. Similarly, Martineau suggested that humor judged as disparaging one of the groups may either foster disintegration of the intergroup relationship or redefine it.

While Martineau's (1972) model has been found highly relevant in the West (e.g., Draister, 1994) and the Arab Middle East (Al-Khatib, 1999), it needs to be applied to mainstream and ethnic Lebanese humor sources for understanding the social functions of humor at the intragroup, intergroup and interactional intergroup contexts and for further advancing humor scholarship in the country. It is important to underscore that the study of the social functions of humor in Lebanon needs to be contextualized to historical periods in the life of the Lebanese nation. For example, Haugbolle (2007) suggested that the political climate post-civil war Lebanon (1990–2005) allowed humor that was focused on Lebanese national traits and stereotypes (e.g., good looks) rather than satire with sectarian overtones, whereas post 2005 Lebanon witnessed a revival in humor that was focused on political satire.

As a final note, and considering the limited contemporary interest in humor research in Lebanon, and the limitless opportunities for the study of humor in the conflicted Lebanese landscape, a revitalized science and practice of humor

may have the positive consequence of transcending national disunity and invoking a science-driven humor agenda for national and international humor scholarship.

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Note

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