"SO WHAT IF I AM LAZ?": IRONY, MOCKERY AND HUMOR IN ETHNIC INTEGRATION AND INSUBORDINATION

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In an interview which I conducted with a retired male Laz teacher in his sixties, we first talked about his childhood years. He recounted how they were disdained and beaten at primary school by their teachers for not knowing Turkish and speaking in the Laz language–*Lazuri nena*, or *Lazuri*–. Afterwards, he ended the interview with the following statements: "The Laz are an insubordinate people. Wherever they are, they become the ruling class, they have never been subordinated." What would seem as a contradiction to an outsider, that on the one hand he recalls a memory of oppression for speaking *Lazuri* and on the other he asserts that the Laz have never been oppressed, is in fact a common proclivity among the Laz.

In this study, I analyze how the Laz, an autochthonous people of the eastern Black Sea region in modern day Turkey, cope with the nation-state system that denied their ethnic distinctiveness by focusing on their use of irony, mockery and humor. Given the fact that the Laz is perhaps the most stereotyped and mocked category in Turkish public culture, I explore how the Laz reflect on ethnic jokes and proverbs based on the Laz stereotype. I look at how ethnic relations and power hierarchies produced by the nation-state system create situational ironies while the Laz seek to integrate themselves into the Turkish identity. In this analysis, how the Laz relate to and reflect upon the Lazuri occupies a central position because it has been the most crucial boundary-maker engendering the ethnic self of Lazness.

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In my previous studies[1] based on a historical and empirical analysis of the Laz identity, I argued that the ethnic Laz both make and unmake their ethnic boundaries in the quest for different aims at the national and regional levels. The Laz both cross the boundaries of Turkishness so as to be integrated into the national category to avoid stigmatization and to access potential rewards provided by the nation-state system. They also contract from the boundaries of Turkishness to the boundaries of Lazness in order to activate a non-contentious or personalized ethnic self as a source of symbolic identity. By using the theories of boundary making[2] and constructivist understanding of ethnicity,[3] I suggest that the Laz fully integrated into the assimilationist Turkish nation-state system by means of a language shift and upward social mobility, while they reproduced a symbolic ethnic distinctiveness to reassert its status in informal regional/ethnic interactions and hierarchies.

In this study, I will present both of these strategies through the lens of irony and humor so as to search for more nuanced and less overt forms of integration and insubordination mechanisms. This offers an alternative reading of power and hierarchies that remains subtle and can shed light on elusive meanings, negotiations and fluidities. Irony is about a high degree of uncertainty and it threatens absolute power because it reminds us that claiming total transparency, certainty and

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1 Ayşe Serdar, "Strategies of Making and Unmaking Ethnic Boundaries: Evidence on the Laz of Turkey," *Ethnicities* 19, no. 2 (April 2019): 335–369, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1468796817739933; Ayşe Serdar, "Yerel ve Ulusal Ölçekte Lazlığın Etnik Sınırlarının Yeniden İnşası: Dil, Hafıza, Kültür," *Mülkiye Dergisi* 39, no. 1 (2015): 93–134; Ayşe Serdar, "Ethnic Languages, Multiculturalism and Assimilation," in *Complex Migration of Global Citizens*, ed. L. Mwanri and J. Maldenwaier (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2014).

2 Andreas Wimmer, "Elementary Strategies of Ethnic Boundary Making," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 6 (2008): 1025–1055, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870801905612; Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Richard Alba, "Bright versus Blurred Boundaries: Second Generation Assimilation and Exclusion in France, Germany and USA," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 20–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987042000280003; Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (August 2002): 167–195, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107.

3 Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference,* ed. F. Barth (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1969).

referentiality is absurd.[4] Irony shares the fluidity and context-dependency of all general concepts and invites us to reread in complex ways, not taking things at their word, looking for what is really meant.[5] In addition, situational irony refers to unexpected, unintended paradoxical outcomes or actions[6] which we can detect in the ways that ethnic minorities find themselves.

According to the existing sociological studies, humor can relieve tension in strained relationships, demonstrate social control by signaling what is considered outside the norm or support social cohesion. In other words, it can forge social bonds, "break the ice" between strangers, and create a closeness. At the same time, it can exclude not only those who do not get the joke, but those who are the target of it, leaving them feeling excluded, shamed or ridiculed. Humor is applied in the expression of conflict, struggle and antagonism.[7] Humor is characterized by a volatile substance. Jokes are not automatically funny. They first have to be negotiated as a joke, which is dependent on the setting and the context in which that joke is told.[8] In this regard, Billig draws our attention to the darker side of humor in the form of practicing ridicule, exclusion and performing a disciplinary role. In his critical approach, he locates humor in the operations of social power, in the form of mockery.[9] Ethnic humor reflects hidden hierarchies and a feeling of superiority. Ethnic jokes, which are popular in most societies, police moral boundaries by mocking groups who are peripheral –socially and often geographically– or seen as ambiguous by the dominant group.[10]

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4 Michael Herzfeld "Irony and Power: Towards a Politics of Mockery in Greece," in *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice and the Moral Imagination*, ed. J.W. Fernandez and M. T. Huber (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 2001).

5 Claire Colebrook, *Irony: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3.

6 Colebrook, *Irony*.

7 Giselinde Kuipers, "The Sociology of Humor," in *The Primer Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin and Willibald Ruch (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 361–398.

8 Michael Pickering and Sharon Lockyer, "Introduction: The Ethics and Aesthethics of Humour and Comedy," in *Beyond a Joke: Limits of Humour*, ed. M. Pickering and S. Lockyer (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

9 Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

10 Christie Davies, "Ethnic Jokes, Moral Values and Social Boundaries," *The British Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 3 (September 1982), 384, https://doi.org/10.2307/589483.

Ironically, in many cases, mocking stereotypes were adopted over time by those same stereotyped groups and used against their more powerful detractors.[11]

A brief description of the Laz people and the Laz homeland

The Laz are considered a native people of the South Caucasia and the descendants of the ancient Colchis civilization. Lazuri is a member of the South Caucasian language group, along with Mingrelian, Georgian, and Svanetian and it is closely related to Mingrelian.[12] The Laz, who had long been Christians, gradually converted to Sunni Islam when their native homeland came under Ottoman rule in the 16th century.[13] The native homeland of the Laz in modern day Turkey is situated on a narrow coastline and its interior hinterland is in the eastern Black Sea region. It includes Pazar –Atina–, Çamlıhemşin –Vija–, Ardeşen –Art̆aşeni–, and Fındıklı –Vitze– districts of Rize province; Arhavi –Arkabi– and Hopa –Xopa– districts of Artvin province. The Laz historically cohabit with the mono-lingual Turkish-speaking Hemshin people in the given districts of Rize province, and Hamshenian-speaking –a Western Armenian dialect– people in Hopa, Artvin. During the 1876–1878 Russo–Ottoman War, many Laz migrated toward northwestern Turkey, and settled in the western Black Sea and eastern Marmara regions. Since the 20th century, a continuous migration outwards to various cities, especially to Istanbul, has taken place. The Laz homeland is a rugged, lush topography with high precipitation, inconvenient for large scale agriculture and urbanization. Since there is no official data on ethnic groups in Turkey, we can only rely on estimates

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[11] Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorison, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1985): 81.

[12] Rüdiger Benninghaus, "Lazlar," in *Türkiye'de Etnik Gruplar*, ed. P. A. Andrews (Istanbul: Ant Yayınları, 1992); Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea: The Birthplace of Civilization and Barbarism* (London: Vintage, 1996), 199–200; Anthony Bryer, "Some Notes on the Laz and Tzan (I)," in *Peoples and Settlement in Anatolia and the Caucasus 800–1900*, ed. Anthony Bryer (London: Variorum Reprints, 1988), 184.

[13] İrfan Çağatay Aleksiva, "15-16. yüzyılda Laz nüfusu, Islamlaşma ve devletsizlik üzerine," last modified April 23, 2015, http://lazoba.blogspot.com.tr/2015/04/15-16-yuzylda-laz-nufusu-islamlasma-ve.html.

and one reasonable approximation is that the Laz population is around 650,000, less than 1% of Turkey's total population.[14]

The Turkish constitution of 1924 reorganized the administrative division system and abolished the former Ottoman system of vilayets –provinces– divided into sanjaks. Lazistan sanjak, which approximately corresponded to the areas where Lazuri was spoken and part of Trabzon vilayet, was also abolished. Up until the 1990s, like other non-Turkish Muslim ethnic groups, the Laz were also exposed to the compulsory assimilationist policies of the state. The universalist and ethnically-blind principles of Turkish nationalism long denied the very existence of ethnic varieties and banned the use of non-Turkish languages. In Turkish public culture, the term Laz is often used to denote the entire population of the Black Sea region, regardless of their actual ethnic origins, and it appears as a denomination for a regional culture rather than being used as the exclusive name of an ethnic group. The colloquial designation of the Black Sea peoples as Laz dates back to the early Christian era.[15] In modern day Turkey, the confusion around the scope of Lazness has ironically come to mask or "soften" the existing and historic forms of ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of the Black Sea region.

Today, most Laz, including cultural activists, avoid using the Lazistan term. Even though in the past Lazistan was the official name of a sanjak division under the Ottoman system, in the republican period, due to the long held denial of ethnic differences, the use of ethnic toponyms is politically risky and commonly connoted with separatism. At present, many Laz cultural activists substitute it with "Lazona" –place/garden of the Laz in Lazuri– a term coined by a Laz poet and used in a book published in 1991.[16] In this study, I use Lazistan, the Laz region, and the

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14 İsmail Güney Yılmaz, "Turkieşi doloxe de gale Lazepeşi nufusi-1," last modified, November 25, 2014, http://www.fikirkarargahi.com/turkiesi-doloxe-do-gale-lazepesi-nufusi/.

15 For a detailed analysis of the designation of Black Sea peoples as the Laz, see Michael Meeker, "Black Sea Turks: Some Aspects of Their Ethnic and Cultural Background," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2, no. 4 (1971): 318–345, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074380000129X.

16 İrfan Çağatay Aleksiva, "Laz entelleri arasında galat-ı meşhur olmuş yanlışlar. 1 Lazona," last modified December 25, 2012, http://lazoba.blogspot.com.tr/2012/12/laz-entelleri-arasnda-galat-meshur.html.

Laz homeland interchangeably to indicate the geographic area which has historically been inhabited by ethnic Laz.

Methodology

This study is based on both primary and secondary sources. In addition to examining available studies on the Laz identity and the extensive body of research on the history of Turkish nation-making, I conducted 45 semi-structured interviews by using snowball sampling between 2012 and 2015. Seven of my informants were involved in Laz cultural activism. Two thirds of the informants were living in the Laz region, 27 of them were women and 18 were men.[17] In this study, before quoting from the interviews I conducted, I provide some details on each informant, but intentionally avoid clearly identifying them to protect their anonymity. From 2012 to 2015, I actively attended several events held by Laz cultural organizations such as meetings, cultural events, and seminars. I observed and recorded debates among Laz users on social media, especially open Facebook pages on Lazuri. Although I am familiar with Lazuri from my family background, I am not able to speak or fully understand it. As a result, all interviews were conducted in Turkish.

Understanding the Language Shift: "We just wanted our children to be successful and not to be humiliated"

Lazuri is classified by UNESCO as a definitely endangered language, as the intergenerational language transmission is very low.[18] How did Lazuri come to this pessimistic condition, while back in the middle of

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[17] The list of informants is given at the end of the article.

[18] Bianet, "UNESCO: 15 languages endangered in Turkey," last modified February 22, 2009, http://bianet.org/english/english/112728-unesco-15-languages-endangered-in-turkey; Silvia Kutscher, "The Language of the Laz in Turkey: Contact-Induced Change or Gradual Language Loss?," *Turkic Languages* 12, no. 1 (2008), 82–102.

the 20th century, it was still considered a living language?[19] As I have analyzed elsewhere,[20] various carrot-and-stick mechanisms of the assimilationist nation-state and the structural transformation of the Laz community by modernization and urbanization processes contributed to the loss of Lazuri. After the 1950s, the generous state-sponsored tea cultivation in the region replaced subsistence agriculture and fishing, and facilitated the formation of a "state-oriented" mindset among the Laz. It also facilitated the widely experienced upward social mobility which accelerated the out-migration to cities in western Turkey and increasing educational levels among the Laz.[21] I suggest that the resulting erosion of Lazuri can be explained by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital.[22] According to Bourdieu, linguistic capital, which he defines as competency in the legitimate language, provides its holder a profit of distinction. States and their educational institutions assign legitimacy to a language. Thus, linguistic competence is not just technical capacity but a statutory capacity with which its holders can speak an authorized, authoritative language, accredited speech, worthy of being believed. Given the fact that Turkish is the statutory and legitimate language in Turkey, and that speaking in non-Turkish –native– languages in public was practically criminalized until 1991, monolingual Lazuri speakers encountered the Turkish language as migrants in Western Turkish cities or at school in their native homeland on highly unequal terms.[23] Among the older generation, a collective memory still exists concerning the replacement of Lazuri with Turkish. They report that local school teachers and instructors implemented central state policies and prohibited speaking Lazuri by using both symbolic and physical violence. They were beaten by their teachers, forced to inform on each

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19 Bryer, "Some Notes on the Laz and Tzan (I)"; Nikolay Marr, *Lazistan'a Yolculuk* (Istanbul: Aras Yayınları, 2016).

20 Serdar, "Strategies of Making and Unmaking Ethnic Boundaries."

21 Chris Hann, *Tea and the Domestication of the Turkish State* (Huntingdon: The Eothen Press, 1990).

22 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

23 Meanwhile, almost all the toponyms were Turkified in the Laz region: Two of the towns and almost all the villages were given new Turkish names; and the names of the remaining towns were adjusted according to the Turkish pronunciation.

other and conditioned not to speak Lazuri either at school or at home.[24] In particular, the Laz working for the state bureaucracy and educated segments of the population resolutely adopted the Turkish language to praise themselves through Turkishness. By identifying speaking Turkish well with being modern and civilized, and considering it a necessary instrument for an upwardly mobile life, they stopped speaking Lazuri to their children. For example, a male informant, an engineer in his sixties, remembering the deprivation they suffered in the past, explained why he did not speak to his children in Lazuri by saying that "we just wanted our children to be successful, and not to be humiliated." Lazuri was increasingly confined to villages in the upper valleys and poorly educated families.[25] Through the integration with the assimilationist and universalist nation-state system, Lazuri lost the linguistic capital it once enjoyed in Lazistan and rapidly turned into a patois, an insufficient and illegitimate language in a wider linguistic market dominated by Turkish. Lazuri has survived mostly in the form of code-switching among bilinguals in private, emotional, informal spheres, in a way, in "the space of social intimacy."[26]

Ironies of (un)speaking Lazuri: "I don't know if speaking or writing Lazuri can get you somewhere in Turkey"

In the past, the Laz sacrificed their language to be accepted into the realm of full-fledged Turkishness and performed very well at moving up social and ethnic ladders. Today, reformist attempts to revitalize Lazuri are still considered risky, unnecessary or too demanding. According to a report on the current status of Lazuri, based on a survey conducted with 450 ethnic Laz, 81% of the participants would like their children to take a Lazuri course at school and 69,1% stated that they would be

[24] Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 49.

[25] Increasing number of mixed marriages in which one parent is not Laz also contributed to the language shift.

[26] Herzfeld, "Irony and Power," 64.

worried about the loss of Lazuri.[27] What has been observed is that although the Laz are principally prone to care about the future of Lazuri, most abstain from taking the necessary action for various reasons.[28] The current status of elective Lazuri courses at secondary schools expresses this paradoxical attitude. In 2012, elective courses, officially called "living languages and dialects," in language spoken by unofficial ethnic minorities in Turkey was made possible in the context of "the resolution process" concerning the ongoing Kurdish conflict. In the face of this new opportunity, many Laz shared their suspicions and outright opposition because they identified the teaching of Lazuri at school as a move that would liken the Laz to Kurds, identified with separatism and in contrast to the patriotism of the Laz.[29] In the 2013-2014 fall semester, for the first time three Lazuri classes were offered in the Laz region, mostly thanks to the individual efforts of certain teachers who worked to convince reluctant parents and hostile local school bureaucracies. After two years of an increase in the number of students enrolled, in the 2017–18 academic year not a single class was offered and it turned out to be "a right unclaimed."[30] Another gap between the expressed concern and actual indifference is the low interest in the recent publications in Lazuri, mostly printed by cultural organizations based in Istanbul. The local media in the Laz region is printed in Turkish and abstain from using Lazuri.[31] The apparent lack of interest in the public use of Lazuri in historical Lazistan can be related to the fact that a living language, actively spoken by an autochthonous minority in their ancestral homeland, is much more likely to be perceived as a potential threat by the state.

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27 Belma Haznedar, *Türkiye'de Lazcanın Mevcut Durumu* (Istanbul: Laz Enstitüsü, 2018), 134–135.

28 For other witnesses of the same paradox, see Ayşe Çavdar, ed., *Gola Gza: Gola ile 10 yıl* (Istanbul: Heyamola Yayınları, 2016), 192–215.

29 Serdar, "Strategies of Making and Unmaking," 353–357; Serdar, "Ethnic Languages, Multiculturalism and Assimilation," 74–76.

30 Bülent Bilmez and İrfan Çağatay, *A Right Unclaimed: Elective Language Courses on Living Languages and Dialects in the Context of Language Rights. Laz Language Example (2012–2021). Summary* (Istanbul: Laz Kültür Derneği, 2021).

31 For an analysis of the print and social media of the Laz, see Özlem Şendeniz, *"Kimdir Bu Lazlar": Laz Kimliği ve Sanal Mekanda Lazca* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2020).

Based on the interviews I conducted, I argue that those who can speak Lazuri well but who are low in other forms of cultural capital are less likely to consider Lazuri a source of linguistic and cultural capital. In contrast, those who are more educated and living in urban areas and who possess cultural capital, nostalgically, culturally and/or politically are more likely to attribute cultural value to Lazuri. This group, however, compensates for the absence of Lazuri in their everyday lives with its symbolic uses rather than investing real time and energy for its survival.

A vivid expression of this paradox was shared with me in an interview. A primary school graduate waiter, bilingual, raised in an upper valley village first ironically described that his parents, grandparents and siblings are all "fortunately primary school graduates." He regretted not speaking a foreign language such as English, which would allow him to find work in the tourist towns of western Turkey. He noted that an elective Lazuri class was not a positive development and there is no point teaching "such things" at school; he thought it should be taught in the family: "I don't know if a Laz would need these words–Lazuri– in Istanbul, Antalya or abroad…I don't know if speaking or writing Lazuri can get you somewhere in Turkey…" When I asked which languages can do that, he replied by laughing, "Turkish, French" and went on saying that "when someone from abroad visits here, they don't ask you whether you can speak Lazuri, but they say 'do you speak English.' So as a second language, if we can speak English or French, would it not be better to respond to them, guide them, have a conversation with them? Even if I'd like to talk to you in Lazuri I cannot." On that point, of course, he was absolutely right. The contrast that we put forward was ironic. Me, a sociologist Laz who cannot speak Lazuri but praises it, while he, a fluent Lazuri speaker, wishes to be able to speak English with which he could be working in western Turkey with a better salary. In this kind of view, Lazuri is assessed as a mere medium of communication, as a means to an end and thus considered insufficient or unnecessary, devoid of linguistic capital convertible into other capitals.

Speaking (with)out accent and (un)marking ethnic-self: "the accent was something else…"

Goffman[32] suggests that the fear of embarrassment makes people conform to the existing social order. Drawing from Goffman, Billig adds that through humor and ridicule we learn to be embarrassed because we fear that others will laugh at us.[33] Visible and audible forms of distinctions function as stimulating forms of ethnic categorization and stereotyping in everyday life, which can be felt as embarrassment.[34] Likewise, for many Laz, speaking an accented Turkish is considered a source of discomfort and embarrassment and they sought to avoid it in search of outsiders' respectability. The Turkish vowels "ı," "ö," "ü" do not exist in Lazuri. It is commonly believed that when one speaks Lazuri as their mother tongue, she/he mispronounces Turkish words and disregards the vowel harmony rule of the Turkish language. It is interesting to note that a strong Black Sea accent is also common among other peoples of the eastern Black Sea region, including ethnically unmarked Turks who have been monolingual Turkish speakers for many generations. If monolingual Turkish speakers of the peripheral regions also have an accented Turkish, especially before the full-fledged penetration of the national education system and national media, then speaking Lazuri was wrongly associated with speaking accented Turkish. This reasoning could be another escape from the fact that it was not the accent but the political implications of speaking Lazuri which was avoided.[35]

Both speaking Lazuri and speaking an accented Turkish was identified with being marked as Laz: Being marked as a villager, ignorant and ethnically different in their encounters with Turks. So as to become ethnically unmarked, not to be stigmatized, or ridiculed, the Laz were

32 Eric Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967).

33 Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*.

34 Howard Giles, "Ethnicity Markers in Speech," in *Social Markers in Speech*, ed. K. R. Scherer and H. Giles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 255.

35 Speaking with a local/regional accent is not specific to Lazuri or Kurdish speakers. Monolingual Turkish speakers may also have regional accents. For similar experiences of university students speaking accented Turkish, see A. Çağlar Deniz, *"Öğrenci İşi": Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Gündelik Hayatı: İstanbul Örneği* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014), 225–252.

prone to correct their accented Turkish. Although speaking Turkish with an accent was a concern particularly for the older generation, Laz university students coming to metropolitan cities can still be exposed to stereotypes and jokes when they speak with a mild accent. Some of the informants shared unpleasant interactions that made them feel embarrassment. A male dentist in his fifties recalled a typical expression of this situation. Back in the 1970s when he was studying at university in Istanbul, in his socialist oriented youth environment, he could hide his rural roots thanks to the common, left-wing style outfit that everybody could afford, but he could not escape from identity stigma because of his strong accent:

We used to make a great effort while trying not to blunder, and not let them find out that we were Laz. Back then, I did not know how to properly pronounce "communism." I was saying "*commonism*" this, "*commonism*" that, while people were sniggering at me. Why were they laughing at me? Then later, a close friend of mine told me that I was pronouncing it wrong, then I corrected it. So, because of the accent, some of our friends stayed away from us. The outfit was OK but the accent was something else. −The informant was laughing while recounting his memory–.

He chose to become unmarked by correcting his accent to avoid mockery and exclusion. On the other hand, not all Laz were willing to "correct" their accents. For some, their accent is a part of their ethnic identity and through that they can assert their true selves. A striking example of this kind of insubordinate attitude was shared with me in a focus group interview. A high school graduate, self-confident and witty woman in her late forties, living in a town in the Laz region depicted how she reacted when she had to attend an elocution class. In the group, her colleagues were familiar with her style and sometimes showed their support for her by their laughter. She proudly spoke Turkish with a Lazuri accent and described how terribly she felt about the elocution course, which she attended because she was working as an instructor at a public training center:

So what if I am a Laz? Though they send me to this elocution course, still, I am who I am. I told them "what do I have to do with elocution" (other participants were laughing at her). I did not want to learn a damn thing…They told us that we should be a role model to young people by our behaviors, by

our speaking. They sent all of us –instructors– to this course. Everyone else was speaking well. The teacher was obsessed with me. He was telling me that I should say tongue twisters. Gosh…in the end I got hot at the teacher, "elocution" I said, "what's the use?" I said. "This is who I am." "I do not want to take this elocution." I cannot speak –proper– Turkish. I do not want to. Take me as I am.

In the end, she said, she quit the course. As she recalled what she went through, she repeatedly emphasized that she did not want to "correct" herself, feeling they were forcing her to lose her integrity. Thus, she refused to "surrender" to the elocution course, turned her insistence into a symbolic act of insubordination against the hegemony of speaking correct Turkish. She refused to live with the "double consciousness" of minorities, that they take different attitudes in public and private realms.

The Laz themselves can judge and mock others for speaking an accented Turkish. In so doing, they construct such symbolic boundaries between themselves and their regional neighbors. I interviewed a mother in her late sixties and her daughter in her forties living in a Laz town. We were talking about how they perceive ethnic differences among the peoples of the Black Sea region. She told me that:

It is so hard to understand the way a villager woman in Trabzon speaks. It's because their Turkish is not right. They cannot speak correct Turkish. Their men speak better. Women cannot. Because they are villagers. But we are villagers too. We are villagers too!

At that moment, her daughter started laughing at her, while I was asking "so you say, still –despite being villager– you can speak correct Turkish?" Her daughter replied to me by laughing "yes, we can speak –correct Turkish– that is the distinction we have." The irony is that the mother was also speaking Lazuri accented Turkish. Her daughter was aware of this paradox. We all laughed at this ironic situation which reveals the fact that perceived accent is a question of familiarity, and a question of degree rather than an absolute scale. It produces stereotypes, symbolic boundaries, and a power hierarchy.

No laughing (ethnic) jokes: "Are you Laz or are you a goose?"

In Turkey probably the most popular and ethnic/regional jokes are about "the Laz." Davies, in her comparative analysis of ethnic humor, mentions the Laz as an example of a "stupid" group in the case of Turkey.[36] As previously mentioned, the term "Laz" in Turkey does not necessarily refer to ethnic Lazness but often to a broader Black Sea identity. One can imitate a "Laz" by using a stereotypically accented Turkish and a few exclamatory words. Although the accented Turkish of the Laz and non-Laz of the Black Sea region are different, in the common stereotypical representation such nuances are ignored. In Laz jokes, the main male character is called "Temel," an ethnically unmarked figure speaking Turkish with a stereotypically fashioned Black Sea Turkish dialect.

Stereotypes do not necessarily draw from the contemporary context but they often inherit a past legacy of meanings and associations. Davies lists Pontic –Black Sea– migrants as an example of a "stupid" group in ethnic jokes in Greece.[37] Likewise, the image of the Black Sea peoples dates back to the pre-nation state times.[38] Even if in the past, they had a connection to social reality, they have now taken on a life of their own.[39] The Laz jokes produce strong stereotypes about the Black Sea people; they are quick-witted, often behave stupidly, have a rude manner and speak a strong and funny dialect; they have a remarkably long nose.[40] These stereotypes form the Laz jokes representing a cultural

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36 Christie Davies, "Undertaking the Comparative Study of Humor," in *The Primer Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin and Willibald Ruch (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 164.

37 Davies, "Ethnic Jokes, Moral Values and Social Boundaries," 385.

38 See, Meeker, "Black Sea Turks," 332–333. Meeker also notes that Pontic migrants are also called Laz (Lazoi) by other Greeks and attributed similar stereotypes.

39 Boskin and Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor," 82.

40 As an illustration of "Laz" or "Temel jokes," here, I share an example. This joke is shared with slight variations on the internet but in all versions the Laz characters are speaking with a heavy and stereotyped Turkish accent: Temel hates himself for being a Laz. He migrates to a Western country, and thoroughly changes himself. He undergoes surgery, and takes lessons and becomes a pianist. In his first concert, dressed in a proper suit, it is impossible to tell that he is a Laz. But, another Laz was in the audience, and congratulates Temel by shouting at him "my fellow countryman, bravo." Temel is surprised and wonders how this guy could tell that he was Laz. He asks: "I corrected my speech, I had a nose job, how come you could recognize me?"

hierarchy in which the peoples of the Black Sea are kept at the margins of acceptable social norms.

In everyday encounters, more than jokes, the Laz are exposed to a number of proverbs reproducing the Laz stereotype. To mention a few: "Laz reason is goose reason", "the goose flies, why not the Laz"; "Laz brain does not work after noon," In addition, consuming loads of anchovy –*hamsi* in Turkish– is stereotypically identified with Lazness, and "*hamsi kafali*" meaning anchovy-headed is also used as a popular insult. "Are you Laz?" is sometimes uttered meaning "are you insane/ stupid?". "Laz contractor" is a generic term identified with a type of businessperson building low quality and ugly concrete apartments in cities. All these sorts of proverbs and expressions imply a "stupidity" or "strangeness" and some type of peculiarity and inferiority.

Pickering and Lockyer say that joking is a process of "negotiation" about the line between offensive and humorous that they call the "ethics" of humor.[41] Likewise, Billig states that an attempt at humor is processual and its's outcome is not certain.[42] If it is negated it is "unlaughter." Both of these approaches emphasize how the line between offensive and humorous are negotiated in relation to power relations and context. Among the Laz, both Laz jokes and proverbs, as well as confusion about ethnic and non-ethnic Lazness, receive mixed reactions. For many Laz, these jokes do not represent ethnically Laz people, but they do represent the traits, culture, and accent of the non-Laz peoples of Rize[43] and Trabzon provinces. The attribution of these jokes to other people of the eastern Black Sea is very common and it is a mechanism of symbolic boundary making.[44] For many others, the Laz jokes

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The guy replies: "All other pianists pull the chair to themselves while sitting, but you first sat on the chair then pulled the piano to yourself." This typical joke constructs a stereotyped identity, and implies that even if Temel, the Laz, corrects his appearance or language, he can't escape from behaving like a Laz (for an analysis of the otherization in Temel jokes, see R. Aslıhan Aksoy Sheridan, "Temel Fıkraları'nda Ötekileştirme Boyutu," *Milli Folklor* 19, no. 75 (2007): 95–103.

41 Pickering and Lockyer, "Introduction."

42 Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*.

43 Pazar, Ardeşen, and Fındıklı districts of Rize are inhabited by Laz and Hemshinli people. But, when the Laz say *Rizeli* –people of Rize– they refer to the ethnically unmarked dwellers of Rize.

44 Serdar, "Strategies of Making and Unmaking," 350.

are relatively benign, after all, or even sympathetic and they represent some aspects of the Laz as clever, quick-tempered and witty people. In this case, the Laz can selectively self-attribute some "positive" aspects of these stereotypes. The case of the USA provides an insightful comparison in which white ethnic minorities participated in using laughter, the more pleasant parts of ethnic-generated humor to win friends, acceptance and material success, which shortened and enhanced their struggle to be accepted.[45] The Laz who are stereotyped by public culture are prone to create their own stereotypes about themselves by selectively attributing delightful aspects of the dominant stereotypes and reinforce a positive image of Lazness. This image, widely upheld by many Laz, emphasizes insubordination as an innate aspect of Lazness. Taşkın notes that Lazness is naturalized and stereotyped as being identified with the wild nature of the Black Sea, that they are dynamic, environmentalists, self-confident and cheerful. This increasingly popular approach, supported by the growing popularity of modernized Laz music at the national level, is best formulated in the following expression: The Laz are "rebels like the tempestuous waves of the Black Sea."[46]

In order not to appear disturbing, offensive or racist, ethnic jokes necessitate a sense of cooperation and intimacy between two sides. Otherwise they cannot function as humor.[47] Many Laz adopt an attitude of indifference, if not an enthusiastic approval, in the face of these jokes and proverbs. A young Laz research assistant, born and raised in the western city of Izmir, remembers that when he was a child he was frequently exposed to such jokes by a local "familiar" barber, who used to tease him by repeating the "are you Laz or are you a goose" proverb. This sort of "joke" necessitates "cooperation" and "intimacy" between two parties. According to the informant, that was the case. He thinks that being a Laz was not something similar to being Alevi or Kurd, in

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[45] John Lowe, "Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter Laughing," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986):439–460, https://doi.org/10.2307/2712676.

[46] Nilüfer Taşkın, *Bu bir İsyan Şarkısı Değil: Lazlar, Kimlik Müzik* (Istanbul: Iletişim Yayınları, 2016), 195.

[47] Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, J Fox, Liana Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 309–311.

a way more privileged because people could tell jokes about it; thus, as a kid, he never thought being Laz was something that different than being a Turk. What he suggests is a reading of the jokes in the political and cultural context of Turkey, in which some other forms of "otherness" face more negative and discriminatory attitudes and stereotyping compared to the Laz.

When negotiation is negated, attempted humor fails and what is uttered is not accepted as joke, but offense. A male engineer in his sixties recalled a memory of feeling offended about a "joke" broadcast on the radio and published in a national newspaper. Back in 1993 or 1994, while listening to a Black Sea radio station which usually played Black Sea songs, a programmer read a joke published in a national newspaper: "A water ox defecates on the road. Then, a car crosses over its sh.t. One half becomes Laz, the other half becomes Georgian." This ethnic joke conveys two messages: The apparent and the neutral one is the close ethnic kinship between the Laz and Georgian peoples. The second one is processual and needs a negotiation; one can feel offended if she/he interprets its message as "different color, same s.it." The informant vividly remembers how he felt offended when he heard this on a live radio show as a "joke," and how he organized his friends and they sent faxes to the newspaper in protest. Eventually, the newspaper published an apology on the front page. In 1998, while I was a university student, I heard the same joke from one of our favorite and sympathetic professors at the faculty. He always shared funny stories and jokes with us in his lectures. One day, he told the same "joke" in the class with his students. Once he had told us that he was an ethnic Georgian from the Black Sea region. When I heard this joke from him for the first time in my life, I remember I did not say anything. Regardless of the content of the joke, I still liked the idea of having "intimacy" and "kinship" with my professor. At that particular context and time, my motives for participating in the joke were higher than those for negating it –as I would do now– because it insults ethnic minorities and peoples in the given political and cultural context.

Ironies of conversions: "The Hemshin are converted Armenians, we the Laz are converted Mingrelians"

Ethnic jokes balance situations that would otherwise be tense and sensitive, or ease expressions of strain, categorizations that are not societally acceptable or openly said.[48] Jokes, proverbs and expressions used by the Laz and Hemshinli[49] in a mutual way reflect a similar kind of function and they play a significant role in the reproduction of the symbolic boundaries between these two groups. The Laz and the Hemshin people have historically been constitutive others for each other's ethnic self, shaping symbolic and sometimes social boundaries.[50] In their shared homelands, local-ethnic identification has always been determined by the question whether one is Laz or Hemshinli. According to Bellér-Hann and Hann, considering inter-marriages, similarities in culture, economy, their shared livelihoods in mountain pastures and mutual dependency, the presence of stereotypes that contradict these actually existing similarities enable groups to consider themselves distinct. These stereotypes are not always negative.[51]

The stereotypes, proverbs, expressions delineating the Laz-Hemshin distinction not only serve to reproduce symbolic boundaries, but also reflect the presence of ethnic separations that have been denied by the official ideology of the state. The fact that the ancestors of some of the Black Sea dwellers were Orthodox Greeks and Armenians has been officially censored; that a small number of people still speak

48 Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity*, 309.

49 For a brief history and assimilation/integration of the Hemshinli into the Turkish nation-state and society, see Hovann H. Simonian, "History and Identity among the Hemshin," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 1–2 (2006), 157–178, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930600903247.

50 Barth, "Introduction."

51 Ildikó Bellér-Hann, "Hemshinli-Lazi Relations in Northeast Turkey," in *The Hemshin History, Society and Identity in the Highlands of Northeast Turkey*, ed. H. H. Simonian (London: Routledge, 2007), 347–348; Ildikó Bellér-Hann and Chris Hann, *Turkish Region: State, Market & Social Identities on the Black Sea Coast* (Oxford: School of American Research Press, 2001), chapter 8. Yet, Hopa districts stands out as an exception, in which Muslim Hemshin people speak a Western Armenian dialect and the Laz and Hemshinli relationship was more segregated and hierarchical than the one in Rize's Laz-Hemshinli districts, Serdar, "Strategies of Making and Unmaking," 350–351.

Romeika –an ancient Greek dialect– in upper valley villages in Trabzon province, and a Western Armenian dialect in Hopa, contradicts the official denialism of Turkish nationalism.[52] Nevertheless, the Laz and Hemshinli can both speak frankly about each other's histories of religious conversion; though not always their own "conversion," since it is easier to point out others' conversions.[53] For example, a female informant in her late sixties answered my question who are the Hemshin people in the following way: "the Hemshin are converted Armenians, we, the Laz, are converted Mingrelians." This simple expression in fact negates the long held official "Turkish history thesis" which claimed that the non-Turkish speaking Muslims of Turkey were in fact Turks who had forgotten their original roots and adopted foreign languages. Even if the pre-Islamic history of the Laz is fuzzy and superficial for most Laz, claiming close ethnic kinship with a Christian ethnic group –Mingrelians of Georgia are Orthodox Christians– indicates that officially outlawed historical facts have been transmitted across generations and have survived despite the overwhelming impact of the official state ideology on the ethnic Turkishness of the Laz. On the other hand, why do the Laz possibly use the expression "we are converts from Mingrelian"[54] instead of saying, "our ancestors converted from Christianity"? The Laz are not "converted" Mingrelians, but the Laz and Mingrelians are two ethnic groups whose ancestors were very closely related. I suggest that this expression ironizes the actual conversion, and refers to the intimate knowledge of the in-group. In so doing, the Laz indirectly speaks of the conversion and substitutes religious conversion with ethnic conversion. As Herzfeld says in group gestures and stance, "irony can express disaffection when more direct means are either too dangerous or require a degree of political awareness than is currently available." Given that "irony

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52 See Yağmur Dönmez, "Ulus Devlet, Milliyetçilik ve Etnik Kimlik: Bir Çaykara Etnografisi" (PhD Diss., Ankara University, 2019).

53 For religious conversion and its implications in the Black Sea, see Michael Meeker, *Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) and Heath W. Lowry, *The Islamization and Turkification of the City of Trabzon (Trebizond) 1461–1583* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2009).

54 When I was a child, I heard the same expression from my family.

demands some degree of opacity, it flourishes in this rueful interior," in an "intimate zone foreigners are rarely admitted."[55]

Discussion: Towards a legitimate intimacy and an "Irony of Fate"?

In this study, I have argued that the Laz resort to irony, humor and mockery to cope with and sometimes negotiate the stereotypes, ethnic humor and mockery they encounter in their interactions with outsiders. I also suggest that the trope of irony, humor and mockery enabled the Laz to navigate in the national and regional hierarchies and reproduce their symbolic boundaries regardless of the common and ardent appropriation of Turkishness. In this discussion section, I reflect on the possible insights of the analysis I suggested as well as new directions of the Laz identity.

When subaltern or minority groups tell jokes about dominant groups or authority, they can implicitly challenge power hierarchies and express symbolic resistance.[56] Among the Laz, I have not encountered jokes mocking state authority or Turkishness, as we find in some other cases in similar situations.[57] A number of popular tales and anecdotes have been told with slight variation on the lived experiences of Laz children who faced symbolic and physical violence because of speaking Lazuri at school in the past. In these "tales," the domination is recognized and neither challenged nor mocked. The Turkish state and Turkishness in its abstract and national form are not, and perhaps cannot be mocked by the Laz, which points out that they do not develop a relationship of resistance against the state to which they feel belonging and loyalty. Nevertheless, the Laz do tell jokes and sometimes mock the perceived cultural differences and manners of other peoples of the

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[55] Herzfeld, "Irony and Power," 68.

[56] Boskin and Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor," 93–97.

[57] For an interesting comparison among Slavo-Macedonians' use of jokes challenging the dominant Greek authority with some interesting similarities to the Laz case, see Riki Van Boeschoten, "Code-Switching, Linguistic Jokes and Ethnic Identity: Reading Hidden Transcripts in a Cross-Cultural Context," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 24, no. 2 (October 2006): 347–377, https://doi.org/10.1353/mgs.2006.0018.

Black sea region including ethnically unmarked ones –meaning monolingual Turkish speakers. By this sort of humor and mockery, they create symbolic boundaries and more subtly challenge the official ideology of the uniformity that was firmly imposed in the past and ongoing forms of the negation of ethnic diversity. In so doing, the Laz ironize their ancestral background and interrupt the imposed official categories and narratives. Lazuri in its surviving forms is still spoken as a medium of intimacy, by which the Laz exchange opinions about others; they entertain themselves with the joy of resorting to an intimate space. They are not, however, prone to defend the use or teaching of Lazuri in public realms. The public use of Lazuri threatens the negotiated boundaries of Lazness and its integration into the nation-state system.

On the other hand, more symbolic uses and appearances of Lazuri have become highly visible in the last decade. The increasing popularity of modernized forms of Laz music, both among Laz and non-Laz, and its highly visible performances in the urban sphere have transformed some of the old Laz stereotypes and polished more positive aspects. Laz music can be consumed and performed by younger generations who are monolingual Turkish speakers and it fits into the current limits of multiculturalism in Turkey.[58] Similarly, social media outlets have created a new medium and market for the symbolic consumption of Lazness. Particularly on Facebook, posting sometimes stereotypical content or ethnic songs and dances has become highly popular.[59] I argue that these new media have created a new type of ethnic capital which does not contradict the present day principles of Turkish nationalism and the Turkishness capital of the Laz. They have fostered new forms of legitimate intimacies which can be shared with non-Laz without embarrassment.

As a final point, I propose that perhaps the most remarkable irony concerning the way the eastern Black Sea region has been integrated into the modern Turkish state and society is that the Turkish

58 On the role of Laz music and performance in urban settings, see Nilüfer Taşkın, "Laz: On the *Good* Citizens of Multicultural Turkey," in *Ethno-Cultural Others of Turkey: Contemporary Reflections*, ed. A. K. Gültekin and Ç. C. Suvari (Yerevan: Russian-Armenian University Press); Taşkın, *Bu bir Isyan Şarkısı Değil!*

59 Şendeniz, *"Kimdir Bu Lazlar?,"* 237–270.

economic and political system has come to be dominated by a new generation of elites coming from this region.[60] People from the most stereotyped region of Turkey, the "Laz" in the sense of "Black Sea people," have become the ruling elites and fully integrated into the power and authority hierarchies. Considering the ethnic diversity of their ancestors, what does this trend possibly show us? The Turkishness[61] constructed by the assimilationist and universalist denial of the ethnic diversity of unofficial Muslim minorities has been accomplished by the actions of its citizens.[62] In the Black Sea region, many non-Turkish ethnic communities, including the Laz, took advantage of being Sunni Muslims, abandoned their politically threatening ethnic distinctions, appropriated the capital of Turkishness through their active performances, and coped with mockery and stigmas by ironizing differences and by negotiating, trivializing or selectively appropriating the imposed stereotypes. In an ironic way, linguistically, ethnically or ancestrally (Sunni Muslim) non-Turks have "out-performed" ethnic Turks in certain ways, in their search for acceptance as Turks, achieving upward mobility and avoiding forms of stigmatization. Can we call this a "fate of irony?"

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[60] As an example, according to a news following the 2019 local elections, in addition to the mayor of the metropolitan area, 75% of 39 district mayors of Istanbul are from the Black Sea region, and eleven are from Trabzon province. They are over-represented both in Justice and Development Party and Republican People's Party mayors. Halkın Habercisi, "İstanbul'da kazanan belediye başkanlarının %75'i Karadenizli," last modified April 10, 2019, https://www.halkinhabercisi.com/istanbulda-kazanan-ilce-belediye-baskanlarinin-ui-karadenizli.

[61] For a recent insightful theorization of Turkishness as a contract in the Turkish nation-state system, see Barış Ünlü, *Türklük Sözleşmesi: Oluşumu, İşleyişi ve Krizi* (Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları, 2018).

[62] A recent dissertation written by Dönmez provides insights on the complexity of the Turkish national integration. She argues that the ways in which bilingual Greek (an ancient dialect called Romeika) and Turkish speakers in Çaykara district in the province of Trabzon appropriate Turkishness reveal the ambiguity of Turkishness. The Turkishness of the locals contradicts the ideal types assuming the preciseness and determinateness of Turkishness through ethnic origin and language. The locals who embrace Turkishness in ways that is in excess or different than imagined by the official nationalism. The bilingual Greek-Turkish speakers integrated their "failures" into the ambiguity of Turkishness by being Muslims and for centuries having served as instructors of official Islam. Dönmez, "Ulus-devlet, Milliyetçilik."

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Supplement

List of Informants

- Informant 1, 40 year old female, university graduate
- Informant 2, 33 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 3, 40 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 4, 64 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 5, 55 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 6, 50 year old female, university graduate
- Informant 7, 33 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 8, 61 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 9, 41 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 10, 28 year old female, university graduate
- Informant 11, 46 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 12, 60 year old male, graduate of a junior college for teachers
- Informant 13, 27 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 14, 48 year old male, high school graduate
- Informant 15, 41 year old female, primary school graduate
- Informant 16, 32 year old male, primary school graduate
- Informant 17, 23 year old male, university student
- Informant 18, 26 year old male, graduate student
- Informant 19, 21 year old female, university student
- Informant 20, 33 year old female, PhD student
- Informant 21, 53 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 22, 16 year old female, high school student
- Informant 23, 45 year old female, high school student
- Informant 24, 36 year old female, university graduate
- Informant 25, 27 year old male, university graduate
- Informant 26, 49 year old female, secondary school graduate
- Informant 27, 40 year old female, primary school graduate
- Informant 28, 43 year old female, high school graduate

- Informant 29, 46 year old female, high school graduate
- Informant 30, 66 year old female, primary school graduate
- Informant 31, 77 year old male, graduate of a junior college for teachers
- Informant 32, 59 year old male, junior technical school graduate

Focus group

- Informant 33, 47 year old female, high school graduate
- Informant 34, 50 year old female, junior technical college graduate
- Informant 35, 50 year old female, primary school graduate
- Informant 36, 47 year old female, secondary school graduate
- Informant 37, 41 year old female, high school graduate
- Informant 38, 34 year old female, high school graduate
- Informant 39, 42 year old female, primary school graduate
- Informant 40, 59 year old female, primary school graduate
- Informant 41, 44 year old female, primary school graduate
- Informant 42, 17 year old female, high school student
- Informant 43, 63 year old female, secondary school graduate
- Informant 44, 50 year old female, high school graduate
- Informant 45, 50 year old female, secondary school graduate