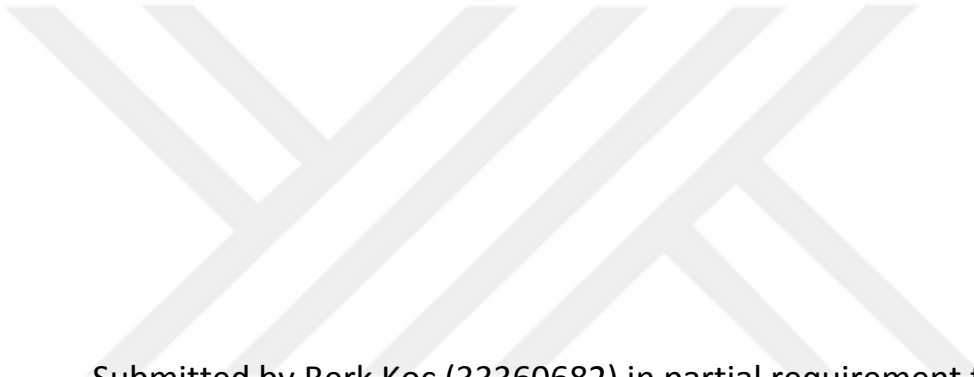


THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE REVIVAL OF THE LAZ IDENTITY AND LOCAL  
RESPONSES FROM NORTH-WESTERN TURKEY



Submitted by Berk Koç (33360682) in partial requirement for the  
degree of MA Media and Communications, Goldsmiths, University of  
London

August 2015

## Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths, University of London

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## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examine the extent of the intelligentsia's success in their efforts to revive the Laz language and culture in Turkey and discuss music's role in this revival process. I initially introduce the Laz people and trace the transformation of the Laz identity from ancient times to present day. I then give a brief historical overview of the origins and activities of the Laz cultural movement, highlighting a disconnection with the people at grassroots level. In the next chapter I focus on the concept of cultural identity as a construction and argue that this might explain the absence of a strong sense of collective identity among the Laz. In doing this, I suggest that the performative aspect of identity construction might be able to explain the slowness of the revival process and give reason to be optimistic about the future. I also consider the notions of belonging and detachment when thinking about the relations between music and cultural identity. Finally, I provide excerpts from interviews with several Laz individuals and suggest that while previous assumptions do mostly remain true, there is hope for a *cultural revival*.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is centred on questions about the following: first, the contemporary condition and value of the Laz cultural identity; second, the structure and strength of the relations between the Laz cultural movement and the Laz people; third, the ways in which music affects the Laz movement and the people with regard to cultural identity; and fourth, the extent to which these correspondences have changed over the past two decades in the light of the shifting social and political environment of Turkey.

The Laz identity matters because it represents a large community of people in Turkey, albeit without a strong sense of it, with a distinct language on the verge of extinction. Like most ethnic minorities of Turkey, there is no state policy on the Laz.<sup>1</sup> Therefore there is an imminent risk of cultural death. Part of this can be attributed to the homogenisation policies of the state and part of it to the discursive construction of cultural identity.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, in an environment with no state support, raising awareness of and reviving the Laz language and culture depend on social actors to prevent complete assimilation of an ethnic group. Central to this endeavour, scholars, intellectuals and activists started a cultural movement for the purpose of saving the Laz language and culture, whose efforts have struggled to resonate with the public.

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<sup>1</sup> Erkan Temel, 2013. In Fehim Taştekin, 2013. 'Turkey's Laz Awakening'. *Al-Monitor Online*, 1 December, accessed 15 August 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/laz-people-of-turkey-awaken.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See Stuart Hall, 1990. 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.) *Identity: community, culture, difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

There have been sporadic but continuous efforts for this purpose since the early 1990s, however, these efforts have been met with a less than enthusiastic response.<sup>3</sup> It remains to be seen how affective the movement's activities in the past two decades have been in stroking the Laz people's interest in their own culture.

The aims of this study are to explore the reasons behind the alleged disconnection between the Laz cultural movement and the Laz people, and to consider the role of music in relation to the Laz cultural identity as well as the revival efforts.

It has the potential to test the previous arguments about the (lack of) importance of the Laz identity and reveal the extent to which the Laz cultural movement has been successful in reaching their target audience over the past two decades. Despite recent developments and claims of an increasing demand for cultural rights that might help to facilitate a cultural revival for the Laz, the literature reveals that in the light of these recent developments relatively little is known about the potential changes in perceptions and attitudes of the Laz towards their identity and the Laz cultural movement. This study aims to narrow this gap.

In doing so, the theoretical chapter discusses the concept of cultural identity and adopts the constructionist approach to identity as it has been explained by Stuart Hall<sup>4</sup> in order to understand the historically adaptable and amenable nature of the Laz cultural identity. It argues that precisely because identity is a fluid construction within discourse, the orientation of the Laz towards peaceful assimilation or a conscious preference of other hegemonic identities over their Laz identity is only natural, especially considering the number of strong influencers such as nationalism, religion

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<sup>3</sup> See Hann, 1995; Bellér-Hann & Hann, 1998, 2001; Bellér-Hann, 2007; Taşkın, 2011; Serdar, 2012-3.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall & Paul Du Gay (eds.), 1996. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: SAGE Publications, 4.

and globalisation. The second section on music and cultural identity suggests an alternative viewpoint to “thinking about musical practices via notions of community and solidarity”<sup>5</sup>, which I argue might be helpful in explaining the profound but volatile impact of music on the Laz cultural movement and identity.

As this research is intended to give insight into *the people’s* views and opinions, the semi-structured in-depth interview method was used.

The semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection strategy in which the researcher asks informants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions ... In addition to questions directly related to the concepts under investigation, semi-structured interviews also use a variety of probes that elicit further information or build rapport through the researcher’s use of active listening skills.<sup>6</sup>

Five interviews were conducted with Laz people who live as part of one of the largest Laz diaspora populations in the minority village of Sapanca in North-west Turkey. The interviews revealed and confirmed a number of themes believed to be deeply embedded in the Laz cultural identity. Despite not having been able to break new ground with my findings, by conducting the most recent study on the Laz, I hope to have provided answers that might help us understand the nature of the Laz identity, the extent of the Laz cultural movement’s influence, and music’s role in the process.

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Negus & Patria Roman Velazquez, 2002. ‘Belonging and detachment: musical experience and the limits of identity’. In *Poetics* 30: 133.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa M. Given (ed.), 2008. *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods, Volumes 1&2*. London: SAGE Publications, 810.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE LAZ IDENTITY

This chapter traces the historical background of the Laz or Lazi from their ancient roots in the Colchis region at the eastern end of the Black Sea south of the Caucasus before the Common Era<sup>1</sup> to their modern-day presence in the same Black Sea coastal regions of present-day north-eastern Turkey and Georgia. The first section explores the origins, history, geographical distribution, religion, culture and the current estimated population of the Laz. The second section, then, examines the contemporary Laz identity in Turkey, focusing on public perceptions and attitudes towards being Laz as well as its representations in popular culture.

#### 2.1 A Brief History of the Laz

In Greek and Byzantine sources the earliest historical account of Laz people dates back to Colchis (see Figure 1), an ancient Greek name given to the region at the eastern end of the Black Sea.<sup>2</sup> Following the Romans' victory over the Pontic Greeks some time in 75-63 BCE, Colchis was renamed Lazica after the strongest tribe in the region, the Laz.<sup>3</sup> Therefore the term 'Laz' first came into existence during this time after the fall of the Kingdom of Colchis.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. 'Colchis', accessed 21 July 2015, <http://global.britannica.com/place/Colchis>; Barbara A West, 2009. *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Asia and Oceania*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 171.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopædia Iranica Online*, s.v. 'Colchis', accessed 21 July 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/qf365xa>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> West, 2009: 461.



Figure 1: Andrew Andersen, 2004. *Early Georgian (Colchis-Iberian) States CA. 600-150 BC.*

Lazica (or Egrisi in Georgian sources<sup>5</sup>) began to gain strength in the first century CE and subsequently became a kingdom in the region where it succeeded the ancient kingdom of Colchis.<sup>6</sup> Lazica remained mainly under the political and cultural influence of the Roman and Byzantine Empires respectively for hundreds of years.<sup>7</sup> Christianity became the state religion in the fourth century and despite the struggles to gain control of the region, which resulted in the Great Lazic War between the Byzantines and the Persians, Lazica continued its existence mostly under Byzantine control until

<sup>5</sup> See: Nodar Lomouri, 1968. *Kingdom of Egrisi*. Tbilisi, (in Georgian); Tamila Mgaloblishvili, 2013 [1998]. *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*. New York: Routledge, 3; David L. Muskhelishvili, 2007. 'A Historical Atlas of Georgia'. In *Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences* 175 (1): 156-8.

<sup>6</sup> Pauline Allen & Bronwen Neil, eds., 2015. *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*. New York: Oxford University Press, 449; see also: Lordkipanidze & Otkhmezuri, 2010: 174.

<sup>7</sup> Allen & Neil, 2015: 449; West, 2009: 461.

the eight century when it was conquered by the Kingdom of Abazgia.<sup>8</sup> Following this change of power, Abkhazia and Lazica united in the mid-eighth century to form a joint kingdom in the region which encompassed the whole of western Georgia.<sup>9</sup>

As far as religion is concerned, from around the sixth century until the latter half of the ninth century the church of Lazica was subordinate to the church of Constantinople; however, towards the end of the ninth century the West Georgian Church withdrew from the authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople, and instead joined with the East Georgian See in order to break away from the religious and cultural influence of Constantinople and establish new Georgian sees which later became centres of Georgian culture.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Lazica region had become the Lazistan *sancak* (sub-province) of the Trebizond (present day Trabzon) *vilayet* (province) of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>11</sup> The Lazistan *sancak*, or simply Lazistan, extended from the eastern border of Trebizond, “the ancient centre of the Black Sea’s Pontic Greek communities”, to lands belonging now to Georgia.<sup>12</sup> Having been early adopters of Christianity (Eastern Orthodox), the vast majority of the Laz converted to Sunni Islam

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Lordkipanidze & Otkhmezuri, 2010: 174.

<sup>10</sup> Mgaloblishvili, 2013: 7; Mariam Lordkipanidze & Georgi Otkhmezuri, 2010. ‘Abkhazia’s Status as Part of Georgia: Historical Perspective’. In *The Caucasus & Globalization* 4 (1-2): 172-83, 176.

<sup>11</sup> Ildikó Bellér-Hann & Chris Hann, 2001. *Turkish Region: State, Market and Social Identities on the East Black Sea Coast*. Oxford: James Currey, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

during the Ottoman rule; however, there remains a small group of Christian Laz in Georgia who converted back to Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

The borders of the region were redrawn in the aftermath of the war between the Ottoman and Russian Empires in 1877-78.<sup>14</sup> The war resulted in a victory for the Russians. As a consequence, Russia claimed Batumi causing Rize to become the new capital of the Lazistan sub-province (see Figure 2).<sup>15</sup> Thus, the contemporary borders of the region began to take form. Borders as well as names continued to change following the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Under the Kemalist<sup>16</sup> Turkish Republic not only was the historic Lazistan divided into smaller new provinces, Rize and Artvin (both of which have survived into the present day), but also the use of Lazistan and Laz as a title (such as Laz Ahmet) was banned in 1926 due to being deemed unpatriotic by the Kemalist regime.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Özhan Öztürk, 2009. *Pontus: Antik Çağ'dan Günümüze Karadeniz'in Etnik ve Siyasi Tarihi (Pontus: The Ethnic and Political History of the Black Sea Region from Antiquity to Today)*. Ankara: Genesis Books, 737-38, 778; Roger Rosen & Jeffrey Jay Foxx, 1992. *The Georgian Republic*. Illinois: Passport Books.

<sup>14</sup> Stanford J. Shaw & Ezel Kural Shaw, 1977. *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey: Volume 2, Reform, Revolution, and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey 1808-1975*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 182-4.

<sup>15</sup> Bellér-Hann & Hann, 2001: 1.

<sup>16</sup> The ideas and principles of the founder and first president of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. For more on Kemalism, see Mete Tunçay, "Kemalism", in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, accessed 23 July 2015, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0440>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. See also Alexandre Toumarkine, 1995. *Les migrations des populations musulmanes balkaniques en Anatolie (1876-1913)*. Istanbul: Isis Press, 64-5.

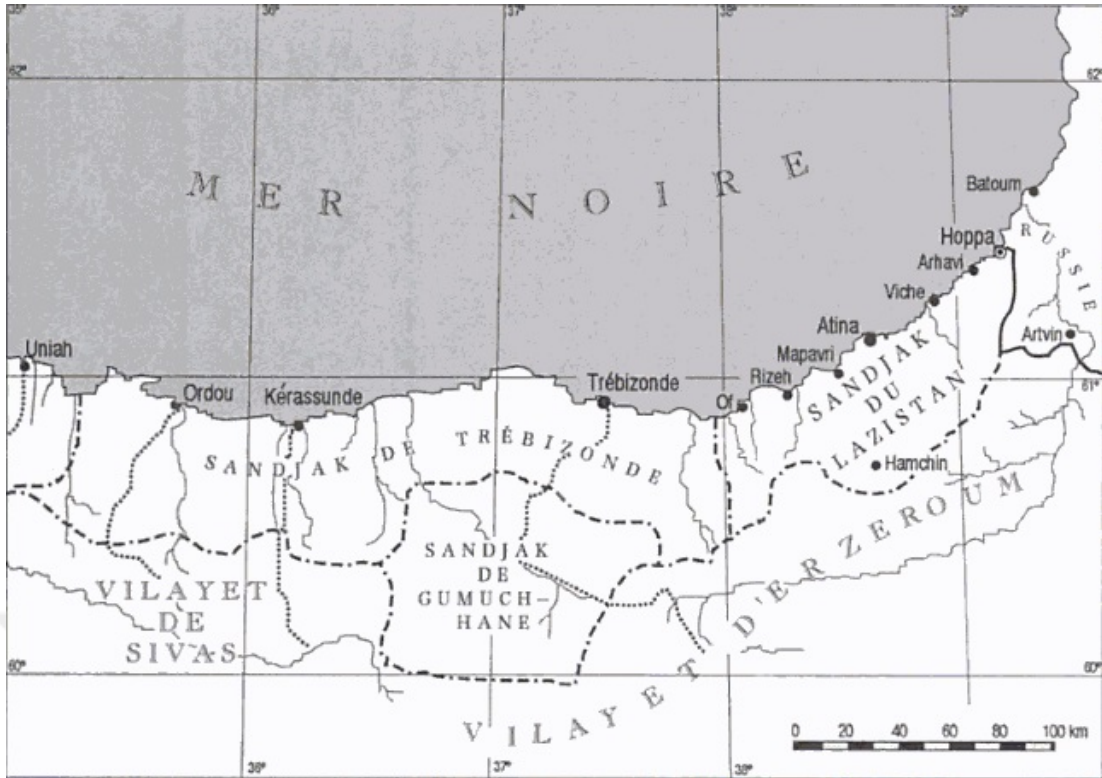


Figure 2: Vital Cuinet, 1890. *Vilayet de Trébizonde*. Paris: E. Leroux. In Bellér-Hann & Hann, 2001: 2.

The Laz today still inhabit their ancient homeland on both sides of the Turkish-Georgian border, from the small Turkish towns of Pazar (Atina), Ardeşen (Artaşeni), the north of Çamlıhemşin (Vija/Vijadibi), Fındıklı (Vitze), Arhavi (Arkabi), Hopa (Xopa) and a part of Borçka to the tiny Georgian border village of Sarpi (see Figure 3).<sup>18</sup> ‘Lazona’ is the preferred contemporary name among the autochthonous Laz in Turkey to designate their native land – the small region from Pazar to Sarpi.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, a sizeable Laz population resides in north-western cities of Turkey such as Kocaeli, Sakarya, Yalova and Bursa (see Figure 4), comprised of displaced migrants who

<sup>18</sup> İsmail Güney Yılmaz, 2013. ‘Laz Kimliği Üzerine’ (On Laz Identity), *Bianet Online*, 17 August, accessed 24 July 2015, <http://www.bianet.org/biamag/kultur/149186-laz-kimligi-uzerine>.

<sup>19</sup> Kamil Aksoylu, 2010. *Laz Kültürü: Tarih, Dil, Gelenek ve Toplumsal Yapı (Laz Culture: History, Language, Tradition and Social Structure)*. Ankara: Phoenix Yayınevi, 53-4.

escaped the Russo-Turkish War in 1877-78, as well as in the diaspora in Istanbul, Ankara and Germany.<sup>20</sup> Sevan Nişanyan's Index Anatolicus Online<sup>21</sup> estimates the number of Laz settlements (towns, neighbourhoods, villages) in Turkey today at two hundred. Turkey's Laz population, meanwhile is estimated to be between 250,000 and 1.6 million according to different sources.<sup>22</sup> The big gap between the estimates can be attributed to a lack of census information and the confusion regarding the term 'Laz' which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

It is argued that the principal marker of distinctiveness of the Laz identity is language as virtually all other characteristics of the Laz identity – religion, music, food, folklore and other aspects of culture – strongly resemble that of other local ethnic communities in the region.<sup>23</sup> Lazuri, the Laz language, is a South Caucasian language under the Zan branch of the Kartvelian language family along with Mingrelian.<sup>24</sup> It is divided into four main dialects that are named after the cities around which they are spoken: Pazar (Atina), Ardeşen (Artaşeni), Fındıklı-Arhavi (Vitse-Arkabi), Hopa-Batum (Xopa-Batumi).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples Online*, s.v. 'Laz', accessed 24 July 2015, <http://www.minorityrights.org/4398/turkey/laz.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Nişanyan, 2014. Index Anatolicus Online, accessed 24 July 2015, <http://www.nisanyanmap.com/?eth2=lz>.

<sup>22</sup> Bülent Günel, 2011; *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples Online*.

<sup>23</sup> Bellér-Hann & Hann, 2001: 10-11; Chris Hann, 1995. 'Intellectuals, Ethnic Groups and Nations: Two Late-twentieth-century Cases'. In *Notions of Nationalism*, Sukumar Periwal (ed.), 106-128. Budapest: Central European University Press, 116-7: "All other aspects of culture have long been freely exchanged and shared in this 'multi-ethnic' region"; Yılmaz, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> M. Paul Lewis, Gary F. Simons and Charles D. Fennig (eds.) 2015. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World Online, 18th edition*. Texas: SIL International, accessed 24 July 2015, <http://www.ethnologue.com>.

<sup>25</sup> Silvia Kutscher, 2011. 'On the expression of spatial relations in Ardeşen-Laz'. In *Linguistic Discovery*, 9.2: 49-77. Yılmaz (2013) notes that Borçka can also be considered a separate dialect.

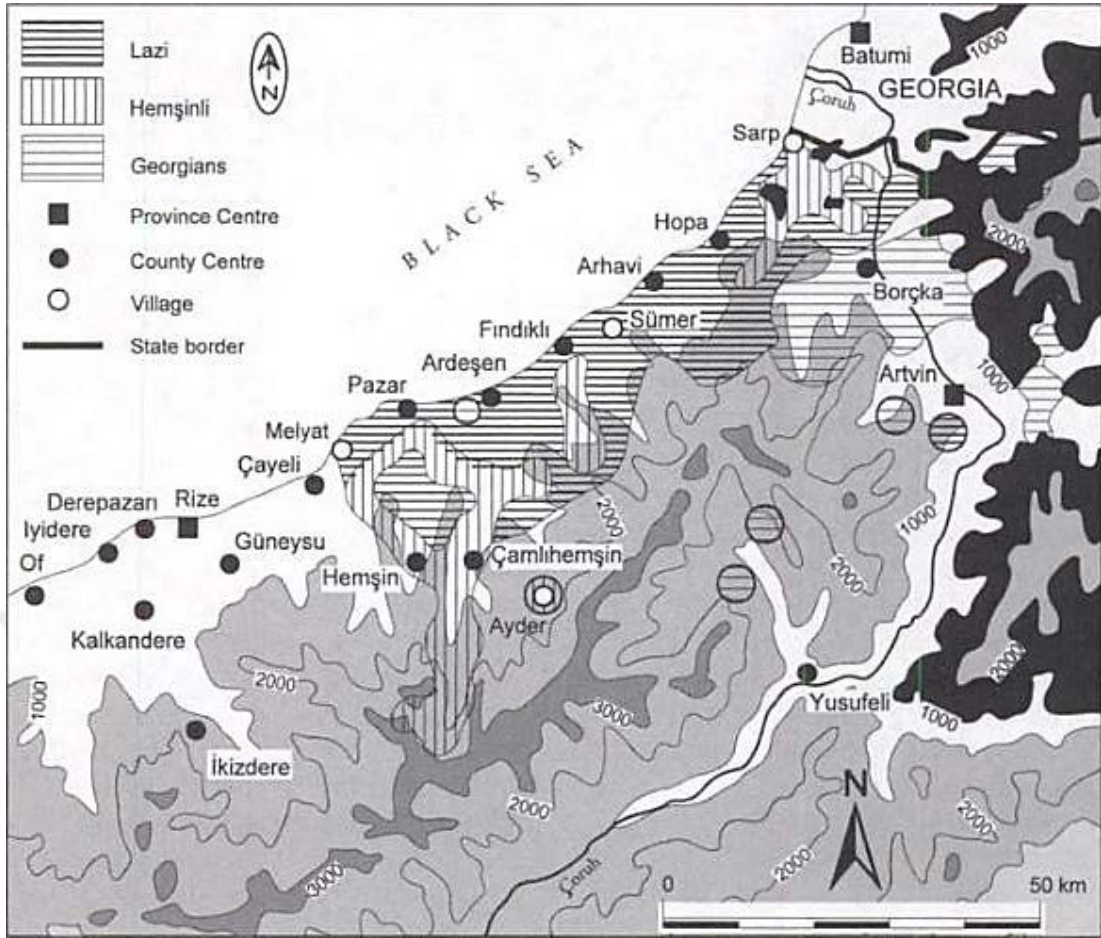


Figure 3: Edda Schröter (n.d.). *Contemporary Northeast Turkey: main settlements and minority groups*. Halle: Martin Luther University. In Bellér-Hann & Hann, 2001: 3.



Figure 4: Sevan Nişanyan, 2014. *Laz settlements*. Index Anatolicus Online.

Lazuri is currently classified as an endangered language by UNESCO, with estimates of the current number of speakers ranging from 22,000 to 130,000 to 250,000 as stated by several different sources.<sup>26</sup> It should also be noted that Lazuri was an unwritten language for most of its existence until several attempts have been made to create an alphabet towards the end of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

Historically an agricultural land, Lazona is rich in tea, hazelnuts, corn, kale (collard greens) and other vegetables. Fishing and farming also contribute greatly to the Laz economy although it is argued that the distinctive Laz economy gradually waned after the introduction of tea cultivation.<sup>28</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century, tea production brought prosperity to the region until the privatisation of the industry in the 1980s led to an expansion of tea plantations but a drop in quality and a growing inequality.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.2 The Contemporary Laz Identity in Turkey

Today the term 'Laz' is commonly, albeit mistakenly, used to refer to the entire population of the Eastern Black Sea region, stretching as far as Giresun (Kérassunde in Figure 2) on the western end. The peoples of the region (Laz, Hemshinli, Lom/Bosha,

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<sup>26</sup> Bellér-Hann & Hann, 2001: 11; Lewis et al., 2015; Christopher Moseley (ed.) 2010. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger Online*, 3rd edition. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, accessed 25 July 2015, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages/atlas>. Lazuri's degree of endangerment is 'definitely endangered' (which means "children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home") based on nine factors, with a strong emphasis on intergenerational transmission.

<sup>27</sup> Aksoylu, 2010: 55-6.

<sup>28</sup> Yılmaz, 2013. For him, the increasing loss of culture and language is facilitated by the capitalist system, the state and technology.

<sup>29</sup> Chris Hann, 1990. *Tea and the Domestication of the Turkish State*. Huntingdon: The Eathon Press, 20-42.

Circassians, Pontic Greeks, Turks, Georgians and Kurds<sup>30</sup>), most of whom are bilingual, speak Turkish with a variety of accents. All of these accents are usually associated with the Laz and this leads to anyone from the Black Sea region speaking with a similar accent to be mistakenly recognised as Laz. For example, someone from Trabzon, regardless of their ethnicity, would almost certainly be considered Laz in Istanbul, whereas they would not be considered Laz in Rize or Artvin if they were not ethnically Laz.<sup>31</sup> They may even consider themselves Laz without being aware of a different Laz identity existing further east than Trabzon, although Black Sea people would know whether they are really Laz or not.

The reason for this confusion is that 'Laz' in this general, regional sense is used to refer to people mainly from the Eastern Black Sea region (sometimes even outside of it as far west as Samsun) separately from their ethnic background. It can be said that in this usage 'Laz' becomes interchangeable with '*Karadenizli*' (from the Black Sea). Perhaps this confusion is convenient for the state as it helps to homogenise the entire population of the Black Sea region by blurring the lines between who is Laz and who is not.

As Meeker puts it, "Any mention of the Laz should be understood with respect to the situation of the speaker using the term."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Meeker proposes that a distinction should be made between those who belong to a specific linguistic and

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<sup>30</sup> Yılmaz, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> See Figures 2 and 3 for geographical locations.

<sup>32</sup> Michael E. Meeker, 2002. *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press. E-book, accessed 26 July 2015, Part III, Notes: 30. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft0v19n7b6>.

cultural group, and others with a number of common customs and characteristics who simply inhabit the Black Sea region.<sup>33</sup> The term 'Lazi' is more frequently used by foreign scholars to refer to the Lazuri speakers while the more generic term 'Laz' is reserved for the wider population of the Black Sea region.<sup>34</sup> Black Sea people who have knowledge of this distinction often refer to the Lazi as '*mohti (moxti)* Laz' which literally means 'come Laz' – a term whose sole purpose is to differentiate.

In a few words, 'Laz' is a complicated term. While I agree with Meeker in that a distinction should be made between the two, I prefer to use 'Laz' (not 'Lazi') in this dissertation when referring specifically to the Lazuri-speaking ethnic group to whom the term truly belongs, and the straightforward 'Black Sea people' or 'Eastern Black Sea people' when referring to a wider population of the Black Sea region, including the Laz.

Eastern Black Sea people, the men in particular, are subjected to stereotypical representations that portray them as hook-nosed, witty, skilful but impetuous, short-tempered, stubborn and sometimes slow-witted and naïve people, whose diet consists of anchovy, cornbread and kale.<sup>35</sup> It is often said that their minds work differently. The men also have a reputation for being fearless fighters and soldiers but for most Turks, as Meeker observed, the Eastern Black Sea men are an amusing paradox:

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<sup>33</sup> Michael E. Meeker, 1971, 'Black Sea Turks: Some Aspects of Their Ethnic and Cultural Background'. In *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2 (4): 318-345. On the Lazi-Laz distinction see also West, 2009; Aksamaz 1997; Toumarkine, 1995.

<sup>34</sup> Marr, 1910; Meeker, 1971; Feurstein 1983; Hann, 1995; Bellér-Hann, 2007; Simonian 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Aksoylu, 2010: 51.

When, in a folk festival, they come on to the stage, everyone is delighted. Their frenetic, restless dances (*horon*), their thin three-stringed violin (*kemençe*) and its nervous music, their accents, even their somber and fierce looking costumes often strike an Anatolian audience as a little funny.”<sup>36</sup>

Bellér-Hann & Hann note that “Turks tell Laz jokes in rather the same way that English people tell jokes about the Irish (or used to tell them).”<sup>37</sup> ‘Black Sea or Laz or Temel jokes’<sup>38</sup> are (or used to be) very popular among people, albeit considered rather offensive by the Laz because Temel<sup>39</sup> (the main male protagonist of the jokes) is a distinctive Eastern Black Sea name that is considered to be a cultural marker of the Laz.<sup>40</sup> Eastern Black Sea women, on the other hand, are underrepresented as far as stereotypes are concerned. Other than a supporting role in the jokes as Temel’s wife Fadime (a common female name in the region) as well as being known for their courage and hard work in the tough mountainous environment, the Laz woman stereotype is not as well-developed as the men’s.

The depiction of the Laz in this stereotypical fashion can often be encountered in popular culture. The traditional Turkish shadow theatre (Karagöz and Hacivat), for instance, which has its roots in the preceding Ottoman puppet theatre depicts the Laz character in the play as a man wearing “zipka – jodhpur – style trousers, a long-sleeved

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<sup>36</sup> Meeker, 1971: 326.

<sup>37</sup> Bellér-Hann & Hann, 2001: 12-3.

<sup>38</sup> Note how the confusion about the terms are apparent even in the name of the jokes. For examples of Temel jokes, see İbrahim Okur, *Black Sea Anecdotes*, <http://web.itu.edu.tr/soylemezm/Interest/blacksea.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> From Greek ‘themélio’, meaning ‘basis, foundation’. *Nişanyansözlük Online*, s.v. ‘temel’, accessed 27 July 2015, <http://www.nisanyansozluk.com/?k=temel>.

<sup>40</sup> Özhan Öztürk, 2005. *Karadeniz Ansiklopedik Sözlük (Black Sea Encyclopaedic Dictionary)*. Istanbul: Heyamola Yayıncılık, 1076-78.

tight jacket [over a high-necked green shirt], a scarf with long fringes twisted round a fez”, and playing a *kemençe* (kemenche) – a bowed folk instrument peculiar to the Black Sea region<sup>41</sup>:

Laz, who comes from the Black Sea coast, is either a boatman, woolbeater or tin smith. He has a strong Black Sea coast accent. He is very talkative and also speaks quickly. He takes approximately fifteen minutes just to say 'hello' and is very jittery. As he is usually so busy talking to himself, he cannot listen to other people or follow what they say and has a habit of becoming angry in a very short time. Karagöz [the main character] often has to forcibly close Laz's mouth in order to get a word in himself.<sup>42</sup>

Other examples of stereotypical representations can be found in literature, theatre, cinema, television and other media. These include *Laz Kapital*<sup>43</sup>, a humorous copy of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* written in Turkish with a Laz accent; *Laz Agent*, a play featuring none other than Temel as the protagonist; films *The Of Hodja Code*<sup>44</sup> (2014), *Temel: The Moscow Code* (2012) and *Temel: The Sümela Code* (2011); *Laz bakkal* (shopkeeper), a famous television character; and strip cartoons and comic books.

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<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Scarce, 1983. *Karagöz Shadow Puppets of Turkey*. The Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh. <http://repository.nms.ac.uk/356/>.

<sup>42</sup> Metin And, 1975. *Karagöz Turkish Shadow Theatre*. Istanbul: Dost Yayınları, 67-75.

<sup>43</sup> Yılmaz Okumuş, 2006. *Laz Kapital*. Istanbul: Epsilon Yayınevi.

<sup>44</sup> As Meeker (1971: 326) notes, the district 'Of' in the Eastern Black Sea region (see Figure 3) is so famous for its “argumentative and uncompromising men of religion that any hardheaded religious teacher is proverbially referred to as an 'Of hodja' (*Ofiu hoca*).”

## CHAPTER 3

### THE LAZ CULTURAL MOVEMENT

This chapter elaborates the Laz cultural movement, or the '93 Process' as it is commonly known, which refers to the endeavours of a group of intellectuals and activists to revive the Laz language and culture in Turkey. The movement itself was considered to be a revival of sporadic and short-lived attempts at establishing a distinct Laz identity and language in the Ottoman Empire and the Soviet Georgia between the 1870s and 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Recent developments concerning the Laz such as elective language courses, opening of Laz institutes, book publishing entirely in Lazuri and cultural festivals are the fruits of this collective effort, which began in the early 1990s with the aim of setting up a research institute to explore the Laz language and culture.<sup>2</sup> What followed the 93 Process over the past two decades were rather inconsistent but persistent efforts to establish a standard alphabet, produce literature and music in Lazuri and struggle for cultural rights. The turning point for the Laz movement was 1993 in which the first bilingual periodical in Lazuri-Turkish *Ogni* (Hear) was published by the Laz movement in order to raise awareness of the history, culture and the endangered language of the Laz. It marked an important milestone for the people involved in the process that set forth the cultural movement. This is why, 1993 henceforth became known as the 93 Process.

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<sup>1</sup> Aksoylu, 2010: 55-6; Yılmaz, 2015. '90'lar: Laz Kültür ve Kimlik Hareketinin Doğuşu' (90s: The Laz Culture and Identity Movement's Birth). *Bianet Online*, 7 January, accessed 31 July 2015, <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/bianet/161339-90-lar-laz-kultur-ve-kimlik-hareketinin-dogusu>.

<sup>2</sup> Aksoylu, 2010: 475.

### 3.1 The Origins of the Movement

Before going further into the detailed activities of this relatively new movement, it is important, first, to give a brief account of the endeavours preceding the 93 Process that laid the foundations of the Laz cultural movement in Turkey. The list of the intelligentsia and organisations that spearheaded the early efforts include in chronological order Faik Efendi, İskender Tzitaşı, Georges Dumézil, Lezabura (Laz culture, language) and Kachkar Cultural Circle.<sup>3</sup> This list is not intended to be exhaustive as different sources cite many more names and associations who have contributed to the Laz cultural movement. My intention is to give an idea about the circumstances leading up to the 93 Process with an emphasis on works concerned with establishing Lazuri as a written language.

Attempts at creating a Lazuri alphabet dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century, to Faik Efendi from the Hopa district of the Ottoman Lazistan.<sup>4</sup> It is argued that Faik Efendi was imprisoned by Sultan Abdülhamit II due to his work on the Laz language, which led to his work's being burned, his exile and eventually death by enemies of the Laz community.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, in 1929, a Lazuri alphabet based on the Latin script was used for the first time in *Mçita Murunxı* (Red Star), a newspaper published under the leadership of Soviet Laz İskender Tzitaşı (or İsgenderi Chitaşı).<sup>6</sup> Tzitaşı produced several seminal

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<sup>3</sup> Ali İhsan Aksamaz, 2014 [2000], *Dil, Tarih, Kültür ve Gelenekleriyle Lazlar (The Laz: Language, History, Culture and Traditions)*. İstanbul: Belge Yayınları, 214-6; Aksoylu, 2010: 55-7.

<sup>4</sup> Ali İhsan Aksamaz, 1997. *Kafkasya'dan Karadeniz'e Lazların Tarihsel Yolculuğu (The Historical Journey of the Laz from the Caucasus to the Black Sea)*. İstanbul: Chiviyazıları, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

textbooks for primary school children in Lazuri such as *Çkuni Çhara* (Our Writing), *Oxesapuşi Supara* (Mathematics Book), *Alboni* (Alphabet) and *Okitxuşeni Supara* (Reading Book), which were published in 1932, 1933, 1935 and 1937 respectively.<sup>7</sup> Similarly to Faik Efendi's fate, Tzitaşi is said to be murdered in 1938, allegedly on Joseph Stalin's orders.<sup>8</sup> In early 1930s Turkey, meanwhile, French linguist Georges Dumézil was carrying out fieldwork in Istanbul with a group of Laz from Arhavi.<sup>9</sup> His work consisting of a compilation of Laz folk tales and linguistic analysis was subsequently published in a book titled *Contes Lazes* (Laz Tales) in 1937 in Paris.<sup>10</sup>

After a long and relatively unfruitful period of time, arguably the biggest contribution to Lazuri was made in 1984 by two Germany-based organisations: Lazebura study group and Kachkar Cultural Circle, who developed a Lazuri alphabet based on previous examples in Turkish Latin script which is the closest one to a written standard today.<sup>11</sup> The new alphabet, also known as the *Lazoğlu* alphabet, was a collaboration between Fahri Kahraman (Lazoğlu) after whom the alphabet was named and the controversial German scholar Wolfgang Feurstein. According to journalist Neal Ascherson<sup>12</sup>, these organisations “set about the task of building a written

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<sup>6</sup> Aksoylu, 2010: 56.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.; İskender Tzitaşi & İsmail Bucaklışı (ed.), 2014. *İskender Tzitaşi'den Mektuplar: Sovyet Dönemi - Kızıl Lazistan - Laz Okulları* (Letters from İskender Tzitaşi: Soviet Period – Red Lazistan – Laz Schools) (Eren Mühürücü, trans.). Istanbul: Lazika Yayın Kolektifi.

<sup>8</sup> İskender 3itaşi (Tzitaşi), 1994. *Gürcistan Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyeti'nde Okutulan Lazca Alfabe* (Lazuri Alphabet Taught in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic), Istanbul: Doyuran Matbaası.

<sup>9</sup> Aksoylu, 2010: 56.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.; Tolga Uzun, n.d. 'Laz Örgütlenmeleri' (Laz Organisations). *Lazuri.com*, accessed 1 August 2015, [http://www.lazuri.com/laz\\_organlenmeleri.html](http://www.lazuri.com/laz_organlenmeleri.html).

national culture” for the Laz and actively promoted the Laz language and culture in the 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, they produced an alphabet; a textbook for primary schools, *Nananena* (Mother tongue); and two periodicals, *Parpali* (Butterfly) and *Lazuri Ambarepe* (News in Lazuri).<sup>13</sup>

Feurstein is a key figure in the Laz cultural movement: he is the co-creator of the most commonly used Lazuri alphabet today; he is cited in most contemporary Laz-related works; and not surprisingly he has both supporters and detractors. The main reasons for the controversy surrounding Feurstein despite his significant contributions towards the Laz language and culture are twofold: his intentions as a foreign person and moral responsibility as a social scientist.

After visiting the Lazona region in the mid-1960s as a student, “where he found an elaborate oral culture, music and songs, fairy tales and rituals and a spoken tongue”<sup>14</sup>, Feurstein has never set foot in the region again after the late 1970s when he was arrested, briefly imprisoned and expelled due to “illegally entering a frontier district.”<sup>15</sup> Although he submitted a master’s thesis to the University of Freiburg on Lazi material culture following the period of time he had spent in the Lazona region, “unusually for a German intellectual approaching middle age [in 1993], he is not a Herr

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<sup>12</sup> Neal Ascherson, 2011 [1995]. *Black Sea: Coasts and Conquests: From Pericles to Putin*. Random House. Kindle Edition, Kindle locations 3746-3749. “First came an alphabet. That had to be the start. Then came little textbooks in Lazuri for primary schools, which went out from Schopfloch [where Feurstein lived in Germany] towards Turkey *through many clandestine channels* [emphasis added].”

<sup>13</sup> Yılmaz, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Ascherson, 2011: Kindle location 3737.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*: 3745.

Professor or even a Herr Doktor.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, for Ascherson<sup>17</sup>, Feurstein had “something like a religious revelation” which convinced him that the Laz were “a *Volk* – an authentic national community”, a “tiny people – defenceless, still at an almost foetal stage in its development”, and he was determined to ‘save’ them:

This is not something invented in a European head! In every village, I saw this lighting-up of faces and eyes when they understood that I valued their culture. Call them a nation, a folk, an ethnicity – I don’t care.<sup>18</sup>

In his adulation for Feurstein, Ascherson writes, “what is so astounding about Wolfgang Feurstein's work for the Lazi is that he is repeating, step by step, the process of creating 'modern nations' out of folk-cultures which began in Central Europe almost 200 years ago.”<sup>19</sup> This is why Feurstein is a controversial figure. Because he is a complete outsider with no ties to the Laz community other than ‘personal interest’, his nation-building efforts are questioned by both his peers and Turkish nationalists. He is often depicted as a German agent with a separatist agenda of not nation-building but nation-destroying<sup>20</sup>, smuggling books into the Lazona region. As Germany has a sizable Laz diaspora, and the majority of activism and literature originates from there, intellectuals and activists (Laz or non-Laz) with a Germany connection are often accused by Turkish nationalists as traitors or German agents.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.: 3734-5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: 3741-4.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Feurstein, 1993. In Ascherson, 2011: 3802-4.

<sup>19</sup> Neal Ascherson, 1993. ‘Journey to the end of an alphabet’. Independent on Sunday Online. 7 November, accessed 1 August 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/journey-to-the-end-of-an-alphabet-1502722.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Term borrowed from Paul Robert Magosci, 1990, ‘Nation-building or nation-destroying? Lemkos, Poles and Ukrainians in contemporary Poland’. *Polish Review*, 35 (3): 197-209.

Feurstein's critics from academia, meanwhile, argue that he is morally and scientifically wrong.

Their ... argument is that nationalism is in all circumstances evil, and that to encourage it is therefore unpardonable. The second ... objection is that any student of another society has an obligation to do no more than study. It may be inevitable that the very presence of a foreign researcher will to some extent contaminate and modify the behaviour under examination, but to take sides in that society's disputes, still more to set out to change its attitudes irrevocably, is a monstrous intrusion and a violation of scientific responsibility.<sup>21</sup>

Chris Hann is among Feurstein's critics. For him, Feurstein is a complete stranger to the Laz community and has been away from the region for too long to be able to observe and understand the local response to his and others' endeavours to revive the Laz cultural identity. What is important according to Hann is to learn and respect the self-identifications of the people recognized by Feurstein as a *Volk*.<sup>22</sup>

Conversely, George Hewitt agrees with Feurstein in that a social scientist should be more than a camera.<sup>23</sup> Since Hewitt knew the last speaker of Ubykh<sup>24</sup>, he is of the opinion that if nothing is done, both Lazuri and with it the Laz culture will be lost; and therefore people with an interest in the languages of the Caucasus must prevent any of the rest from suffering the same fate.

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<sup>21</sup> Ascherson, 2011: 3806-11.

<sup>22</sup> Hann, 1995: 120.

<sup>23</sup> George Hewitt. In Ascherson, 2011: 3818-31.

<sup>24</sup> An extinct Northwest Caucasian language.

### 3.2 The Activities of the Movement

This section presents in reverse chronological order an overview of what has been done to prevent Lazuri suffering Ubykh's fate by the Laz cultural movement and elaborates on the event which triggered the movement itself in 1992.

Laz Institute is the latest organisation founded for Laz people in May 2013 with the intention of preserving and promoting the language, culture and history of the Laz. The institute is focused primarily on two areas: education in Lazuri and publishing in Lazuri. The promotional event to celebrate the opening of the institute was held in November 2013 with a thousand people in attendance including an MP from the Kurdish 'Peace and Democracy Party' showing their support.<sup>25</sup> The same year Turkey's first newspaper in Lazuri, the bimonthly *Agani Murutsxi* (New Star) was published and Laz language classes were launched in Arhavi and Fındıklı (and later also in Pazar, Ardeşen and Borçka) with over one hundred secondary school students.<sup>26</sup> Boğaziçi University was the first to offer elective courses in the Laz language two years earlier in 2011, for its undergraduate and postgraduate students, after elective courses in minority languages were allowed in schools.<sup>27</sup> However, the opening of the Laz language courses was a challenge due to the shortage of teachers as well as faculties to train these teachers in addition to a lack of interest in the courses.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cihan News Agency, 2013. 'İstanbul'da ilk Laz Enstitüsü'nün açılışı kutlandı' (Opening of First Laz Institute Celebrated in Istanbul). *Zaman Online*, 23 November, accessed 2 August 2015, <http://www.zaman.com.tr/gundem-istanbulda-ilk-laz-enstitusunun-acilisi-kutlandi-2171855.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Taştekin, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Other leading organisations preceding the Laz Institute include the Lazika Publishing Collective, founded in 2010 and has since published over thirty-five bilingual Turkish-Lazuri books; Laz Culture Association (2008), the first organisation in the history of the Republic of Turkey bearing 'Laz' in its name; and the SİMA Service Foundation for People from East Black Sea Region (1996), whose name and articles of association did not use the word 'Laz' due to legal constraints at the time.<sup>29</sup>

Bilingual magazines and periodicals in Lazuri and Turkish are featured prominently in the Laz cultural movement. Although most of them seized publication after a few issues, notable examples include: *Tanura* (Luminary) (2011-2012) and *Skani Nena* (Your Language) (2009) with three issues each; *Mjora* (Sun) (2000) with two issues; *Kafkasya* (Caucasus) (1997-2000; not overtly about the Laz which explains its longer life) with eight issues; and *Ogni* (Hear) (1993-1994) with six issues.<sup>30</sup> *Ogni* was the first periodical in Turkey for the Laz with a Lazuri name. Published in November 1993, the journal's mission was to explore, publicise, and rebuild the Laz culture through publishing and to become a common voice of and a bridge of solidarity between the peoples of Anatolia and the Caucasus.<sup>31</sup> Even though it was shut down after only six issues due to accusations of separatism, *Ogni* provided the stimulus for the Laz cultural movement in Turkey.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.; Uzun, n.d.

<sup>30</sup> 'Lazların Tarih, Edebiyat, Kültür ve Sanat Dergileri' (Laz History, Literature, Culture and Art Magazines), *Kolkhoba Online*, accessed 2 August 2015, <http://www.kolkhoba.org/teksti24.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Uzun, n.d.

The movement was not limited to the publishing world. Folk musician Birol Topaloğlu, whose 1997 album *Heyamo*<sup>32</sup> was a milestone in Laz folk music, is an influential name for the Laz cultural movement. Like the founders of *Ogni*, he also had legal troubles due to the aforementioned separatism accusations.<sup>33</sup>

Laz rock band *Zuğışı Berepe* (Children of the Sea), founded in 1993 at the heart of the Laz cultural movement, was perhaps the spirit of the movement consisting of one of the founding members of *Ogni*, Mehmedali Barış Beşli, as well as Kazım Koyuncu who would later become arguably the most famous Laz in the country.<sup>34</sup> The band's 1995 debut album *Va Mişkunan* (We Do Not Know) was historically noteworthy because it was the first lyrical album entirely in Lazuri released in Turkey. Although the group disbanded after two albums, Koyuncu went on to become a successful solo artist with two albums and hit music made for TV shows, particularly *Gülbeyaz*<sup>35</sup> in 2002 about a young Black Sea woman, which brought Koyuncu nationwide fame and helped popularise Lazuri. Music and especially Koyuncu have been a part of the Laz cultural movement to such an extent that the late musician and activist, who died of lung cancer at the age of thirty-four in 2005, is often credited as one of the leading figures of the movement. He was once described by the head of the Laz Institute Prof Mehmet Bekaroğlu as the real founder of the institute, who “took the first step for them”.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Laz activist Ali İhsan Aksamaz argues that with Koyuncu, public

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<sup>32</sup> A word with no particular meaning that Laz women say to each other to motivate themselves whilst working in the field.

<sup>33</sup> Uzun, n.d.

<sup>34</sup> Aksoylu, 2010: 486.

<sup>35</sup> Literally Rosewhite; a female given name.

awareness of the Laz identity gained traction in the 2000s because Koyuncu made Lazuri a popular language through music.<sup>37</sup>

This entire on-going process of reviving the Laz culture in Turkey was triggered in 1992 by a book titled 'Laz History', written by Vanilishi & Tandilava, in which the Laz was depicted as descendants of the Georgians.<sup>38</sup> In spite of this misinformation which is believed to be politically charged, the book is said to have given a group of people the push they needed to start a process which has survived to this day.<sup>39</sup> One of the founding members of *Ogni* and leaders of the Laz cultural movement Kamil Aksoylu explains why the book was such a driving force for the movement: "Whatever it may be, the book was informing us that we knew nothing about the Laz and it was paving the way for those who wanted to be informed."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Vercihan Ziflioğlu, 2013. 'Laz community opens institute to save culture'. *Hürriyet Daily News Online*, 21 November, accessed 2 August 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/laz-community-opens-institute-to-save-culture.aspx?pageID=238&nID=58268&NewsCatID=339>.

<sup>37</sup> Aksamaz, 2015. 'Ali İhsan Aksamaz ile Söyleşi (1): "Lazlar bir Kafkasya halkıdır"' (Interview with Ali İhsan Aksamaz (1): "The Laz are a Caucasus people"). *Ajanskafkas Online*, accessed 2 August 2015, <http://ajanskafkas.com/soylesi/ali-ihsan-aksamaz-ile-soylesi1-lazlar-bir-kafkasya-halkidir>.

<sup>38</sup> Aksoylu, 2010: 473-4.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

According to some scholars ethnic identity is not very important for the Laz.<sup>1</sup> This view holds that, the Laz cultural movement could not move beyond a secularised intelligentsia in cities in Western Turkey because the demand for such a revival is not there. Some attribute this to religion, some to nationalism and some to the fear of the 'separatist' label. Even though the movement has emphasised on promoting language and culture only and stayed as far away from ethnic nationalism as possible, it still struggled to inspire the people at grassroots level. The Kemalist regime, Islam, the Kurdish movement and the state's stance on ethnic minorities no doubt have so far affected the actions and activities of the movement. However, it is evident from the recent developments that the changing political conjuncture of Turkey under the AKP<sup>2</sup> rule has facilitated more courageous moves by the younger generation of activists towards demanding recognition and educational and cultural rights based on ethnic identity. But the fact remains that the Laz do not seem to be responding to these developments as the intellectuals wish them to.

Music meanwhile seems to inspire feelings in people that the movement fails to do so otherwise, considering how popular and beloved a figure Kazım Koyuncu is for the public, Laz and non-Laz alike. He is arguably the most famous Laz person and a

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<sup>1</sup> Meeker, 1971; Rüdiger Benninghaus, 1989. 'The Laz: An Example of Multiple Identification'. In *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (ed.) Peter A. Andrews. Göttingen: Hubert & Co, 497-502; Hann, 1995; Bellér-Hann & Hann, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Justice and Development Party.

key figure for the Laz movement which indicates the power of music in reaching the audience rather unsuccessfully intended by the intellectuals. Musical culture (*destans* (epics), lullabies, instruments *kemençe* and *tulum* as well as dances such as *horon*) is an essential part of the Laz everyday reality that has the unique ability to bring people together. Drawing on cultural identity theory and ethnomusicology, this chapter discusses why the Laz cultural movement has been struggling to resonate with the public at grassroots level and the extent to which music played a role in influencing the movement and the Laz cultural identity.

#### 4.1 Cultural Identity

One of the most striking characteristics of the intelligentsia involved in the Laz cultural movement is their insistence on avoiding to use terms such as identity, ethnicity and nation. The Laz cultural movement has been very careful from the beginning in selecting the right words to further their cause and not pose an ethno-nationalist threat to the Turkish state. The whole movement has mainly revolved around the words 'language' and 'culture' and preserving and promoting them. Nonetheless, the people taking part in the process initially had and still have internal conflicts caused by this very dilemma about the mission of the Laz cultural movement. Some wanted to openly champion the Laz identity; others only aimed to preserve their language and culture as loyal citizens of the Turkish nation-state and nothing more; while another group wanted to be more subtle with their appearance despite their real intentions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Aksoylu, 2010: 476.

It has been argued that, unlike the Kurdish movement, the Laz cultural movement is exactly what its name suggests it is, a cultural revival endeavour rather than one that is concerned with ethnic nationalism.<sup>4</sup> The statements of some of the intellectuals and heads of organisations involved in the process confirm this view, although in contrast to the original members of the movement the younger generation of activists speak more bluntly and more bravely about the future of the Laz movement, which implies a direction towards an ethnic identity struggle (but not necessarily ethnic nationalism).

For example, while the older generation made statements in the 1990s and 2000s such as “Laz intellectuals and activists do not endorse/approve of ethnic nationalism. Neither do they sympathize with ethno-political organizations”; “The Laz people identify themselves primarily as Turks and secondarily as Laz. They think that they are part of Turkey and they have a strong will to fight for the interests of the country”; “We are only concerned with the protection and promotion of the Laz language and culture”; and “We only care about our language and culture ... We do not have any further demands or needs such as education in Lazuri ... a political party or any type of autonomy or separation”<sup>5</sup>, in 2010s the new generation can say “I think that the Laz cultural movement has turned into an identity struggle” and openly talk

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<sup>4</sup> “The feeling of being a separate ethnic group, which is based especially on the awareness of speaking a language completely different from Turkish, did not lead the Laz into political or cultural opposition to the Turks as has apparently been the case with many Kurds” (Benninghaus, 1989: 501).

<sup>5</sup> Aksamaz, 1997: 45; Gülay Burhan (SİMA Foundation Chairwoman), Mehmedali Barış Beşli (Laz Culture Association Chairman), Aytekin Lokumcu (Laz Culture and Solidarity Association). In Zeki Sarıgil, 2009. ‘Comparative Ethnonationalism: The Laz vs. Kurds’. APSA 2009 Toronto Meeting Paper.

about their future projects.<sup>6</sup> The political environment in Turkey today makes this discussion possible.

Laz people outside of the movement on the other hand are described as lacking in a sense of solidarity based on ethnic identity and instead feeling more strongly about other belongings: “to localities, to counties, to their country and to the universal community of Islam.”<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon can essentially be linked to the Islamisation of Lazistan by the Ottoman Empire and the Turkification policy of the Kemalist republic; however, there are several other factors: an extreme Turkish nationalism in the Eastern Black Sea region, traditional loyalty to the Turkish nation-state, a fear of the ‘separatist’ label, migration, and economic issues prevailing over cultural concerns.<sup>8</sup> “In this context, the prevailing political leanings of the Laz could be described as being pro-status quo or a conservative statist stance.”<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, for Bellér-Hann and Hann<sup>10</sup> this complex situation of the Laz cannot be explained by a Kemalism-Islam dichotomy as there are more factors, internal and external, that shape the Laz culture such as traditions irrespective of religion or ideologies, globalisation and capitalism. They argue that the order that keeps the Laz

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<sup>6</sup> Adnan Avcı Bucaklışı, 2013. *Laz Institute Online*, accessed 2 August 2015, <http://www.lazenstitu.com/?p=985>.

<sup>7</sup> Bellér-Hann & Hann, 2001: 208. They conducted an extensive fieldwork in the Lazona region between 1982 and 1999. See Hann (1995: 122) for a similar observation he had made in the early 1990s.

<sup>8</sup> Erkan Temel, 2013. In Taştekin, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Bellér-Hann & Hann, 2012 [2001]: 300.

in their current state stems not from a deep shared culture but from the society created by the Kemalist nation-state.

As a result, “The authors conclude that the Kemalist modernisation project has largely succeeded, since the inhabitants of the region identify with a national culture in Gellnerian<sup>11</sup> terms.”<sup>12</sup> However, Kemalism has long been replaced by the AKP regime and the former no longer reflects the current social, cultural or political milieu of Turkey. Therefore, an analysis of the Lazona region and its people against a Kemalist backdrop may fall short of describing accurately the present-day Laz cultural identity.

For Stuart Hall, there are (at least) two different ways of thinking about cultural identity, which he explains eloquently in the following paragraphs.

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This 'oneness' underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence ...<sup>13</sup>

It could be argued that Feurstein (and to a certain extent his avid supporter Ascherson) shared these sentiments because what he saw in the Laz was a *Volk* – literate, culturally self-aware and headed for nationhood, if possible for statehood.<sup>14</sup> What he

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<sup>11</sup> Ernest Gellner, 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 57. For Gellner, “nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population.”

<sup>12</sup> Leyla Neyzi, 2003. Review of *Turkish region: state, market and social identities on the east Black Sea coast*, by Bellér-Hann & Hann, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (9):1, March, 171.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, 1990: 223.

<sup>14</sup> Ascherson, 1993.

did not see or did not want to see was the fluid nature of cultural identity as Hall explains:

There is, however, a second, related but different view of cultural identity. This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become'. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute ... 'uniqueness'. Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.<sup>15</sup>

I claim that this constructionist or discursive approach is central to understating the Laz cultural identity and the reluctance of the Laz to respond to the revivalist efforts of intellectuals and activists.

Cultural identities are marked by various factors and in the Laz example, these factors include nation, religion, ethnicity, language, tradition and globalisation to name a few. 'Difference' is at the centre of identification; "identities are constructed through, not outside, difference ... it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not ... that the 'positive' meaning of any term ... can be constructed (Derrida, 1981; Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1993)."<sup>16</sup> Consequently, "we get

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<sup>15</sup> Hall, 1990: 225.

<sup>16</sup> Hall & Du Gay, 1996: 4-5.

ideas about communities, even imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) and ethno-national boundaries”<sup>17</sup> when we define ourselves or are defined by others in relation to the Other. In this context, otherness becomes deviance.

Under Turkish rule, Lazness or any ethnic minority identity is comparable to Kurdishness, the strongest example of an alternative to Turkishness. Given that the perception of Kurdishness is akin to ‘separatist’ in very broad terms, the Laz do not prefer to be defined as such. Instead, they position themselves not as ‘separatist’, but as proud citizens of the Turkish nation-state. Thus, Lazness loses value vis-à-vis the Turkish national identity. This is how the Laz identity is kept at bay, existing as a symbolic folk culture with an oral language and traditions but never strong enough to turn into ethnic nationalism.

Keeping the fluidity of cultural identity in mind and the fact that the Laz have been subjected to strong influences, it is natural and/or understandable that these influences added to and altered the Laz cultural identity. Instead of holding onto one collective ‘true’ identity, the Laz adapted, positioned and positioned by accordingly, and arrived at this point in time as a different community, different individuals than they were at any point in the past. At the local level the people appear to be content with who they have become and who they are today. It is others – intellectuals, activists, foreigners – far away from the homeland, not the ‘folk’, who are concerned with discovering, excavating, bringing to light and reviving. The people already practice their cultural identity as part of their daily lives – with the ways in which they speak, dance, sing, pray and wed. It is not necessarily a systematic state assimilation

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<sup>17</sup> Simon Clarke, 2008. ‘Culture and Identity’. In Tony Bennet & John Frow (eds.) *the SAGE Handbook of Cultural Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications, Chapter 24: 510.

policy forced upon them that makes the Laz the way they are today. It is a process of becoming rather than returning to their 'true self'. If that were the case, they would need to change their religion as well because the earliest, the 'truest' Laz were not Muslim.

There is no question how badly the idea of changing religions to return to the 'true' Laz identity would be received by the Laz or any contemporary thinker. Hann writes about an international conference where the Laz identity itself was received in a similar fashion by the anthropologists in attendance. According to them,

Ethnicity was constructed, it was situational, it must always take its place alongside non-ethnic forms of identity, and at the end of the day no two individuals ever shared the same culture: consequently, to ground ethnic or national identity in culture could only lead to hopeless reifications.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore,

For them, Lazi identity is obviously a quite artificial creation, the construction of someone [referring to Feurstein] who, if not necessarily a fascist reactionary, must be at best a crackpot or an amiable eccentric. As for Ascherson's article, this was dismissed as *Realsatire*: a preposterous caricature of an 'essentialist' Herderian<sup>19</sup> approach to identity that could not possibly be taken seriously by any contemporary anthropologist.<sup>20</sup>

Evidently from the anthropologists' response, efforts to revive the Laz cultural identity as a national identity (something it never was) seem ultimately to be in vain. The majority of the people that make up the Laz cultural movement knew this and

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<sup>18</sup> Hann, 1995: 124-5.

<sup>19</sup> "the view that each culture has a definable core that makes it what it is, and that distinguishes it from any other." Sonia Sikka, 2011. *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Hann, 1995: 124-5.

acted accordingly, emphasising language and culture as opposed to ethnicity and nation. Yet the response has so far been less than desired.

Does this mean that there is no hope for a Laz cultural revival? It seems clear that the idea of constructing a national identity out of the Laz culture is absurd. Despite this, it might be too early to dismiss the notion of a *cultural* revival. While I adopted the constructionist approach to cultural identity in this study, according to which identity is “never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions”<sup>21</sup>, I maintain that identification is not simply a matter of words. One does not *become* without acting, performing, repeating. As such, cultural identity can be understood as performative, as a corporeal style.<sup>22</sup> It is through performance and repetition that one *becomes*. Therefore, I argue that *becoming* takes time. Given the more positive outlook of the younger generation of intellectuals and activists, it may be that the Laz are finally *becoming* not as Feurstein but as the Laz cultural movement wish them to.

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<sup>21</sup> Hall & Du Gay, 1996: 4.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Butler, 1988. ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’. In *Theatre Journal*, 40, 4: 519-531, 521-2.

## 4.2 Music and Cultural Identity

We Don't Know<sup>23</sup>

*Va Mişkunan*

We don't know we don't know  
What to say now  
We don't know we don't know  
Future days for us  
Will be how  
We don't know we don't know  
What will we say to tomorrow?

*Va mişkunan va mişkunan  
Mu vitrağudat huy  
Va mişkunan va mişkunan  
Na moxtasen nağalepe şkuni şeni  
Mu peri iyasen  
Va mişkunan va mişkunan  
Çumanişa mu vuzvaten?*

We know  
We will sing songs on the roads  
Brides will raise us children  
Our children will sing songs  
Our tongue will not die  
Will not die, will not die

*Komişkunan  
Gzalepe vitrağudaten  
Nusape bere mirdanen  
Berepeşkuni treğudasen  
Nenaşkuni va ğurasen  
Va ğurasen, va ğurasen*

We don't know we don't know  
What we will say to tomorrow  
We don't know we don't know  
We are afraid  
Our elder women all die  
Kukumboli<sup>24</sup> is not found anymore  
We don't know we don't know

*Va mişkunan va mişkunan  
Çumanişa mu vuzvaten  
Va mişkunan va mişkunan  
Maşkurinenan  
Didalepeşkuni mtel ğurunan  
Aşkva var iziren kukumboli  
Va mişkunan va mişkunan*

“Popular music is an integral component of processes through which cultural identities are formed, both at personal and collective levels”.<sup>25</sup> Accepting this constructionist approach whereby music can be used to construct and communicate specific identities, this section discusses the basic assumptions (such as the notions of

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<sup>23</sup> Mehmedali Barış Beşli (Zuğışı Berepe [Children of the Sea]), 1995. ‘Va Mişkunan’ (We Don’t Know). In *Va Mişkunan*. CD. Istanbul: Anadolu Müzik.

<sup>24</sup> An onion-like plant and its dish with the same name peculiar to the Eastern Black Sea region, which does not grow anymore due to tea production.

<sup>25</sup> John Connell & Chris Gibson, 2003. *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place*. London: Routledge, 117.

community and solidarity) about the links between music and cultural identity, and considers the role of music in the Laz cultural movement and the Laz cultural identity.

It is widely accepted that music has a unique ability to bring about or enhance collective experiences of people, activating sentimental feelings of attachment, solidarity, belonging and so on.<sup>26</sup> “A number of writers agree that music can do this but disagree as to whether the sense of belonging precedes or follows the music.”<sup>27</sup> Some argue that “Music cannot instil a sense of fellowship. . .The best that it can do is to confirm situations that already exist”<sup>28</sup>, while others contend that “identification is always imaginary”<sup>29</sup> and hence music “constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginary cultural narratives.”<sup>30</sup>

In the Laz example, it is clear that music is embedded in the Laz cultural identity. Several traditional folk music and dance styles and instruments can be regarded as “potent and ubiquitous cultural markers” of the Laz identity almost as much as Lazuri.<sup>31</sup> These include *desřani* (epic), *bgara* (threnody), *nani* (lullaby), *xoroni* (horon; χορός: literally dance in Greek), *kemençe* (kemenche) and *guda/tulum*

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<sup>26</sup> David Hesmondhalgh, 2013. *Why Music Matters*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell; Negus & Roman Velazquez, 2002: 133–145.

<sup>27</sup> Negus & Roman Velazquez, 2002: 140.

<sup>28</sup> John Blacking, 1995. *Music, Culture and Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Georgina Born & David Hesmondhalgh, 2000 (eds.), *Western Music and its Others*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1–58.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Frith, 1996. ‘Music and Identity’. In Hall & Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: SAGE Publications, 124. See also Martin Stokes (ed.), 1994. *Ethnicity, Identity and Music*. Oxford: Berg, 1–27.

<sup>31</sup> Connell & Gibson, 2003: 134.

(bagpipe).<sup>32</sup> Traditional folk music being an integral part of cultural identity is not surprising; in actual fact it is expected because we can argue that the folk produce folk music as much as they are produced by and through the music.<sup>33</sup>

Rock music, on the other hand, is a foreign style, although not foreign to the construction and maintenance of identities. Initially rock music was the locomotive of the Laz movement to start the whole cultural revival process. At the time there was a Laz cultural identity, already 'imagined', which the movement wished to revive. Music served as an emotive/affective means to enhance that particular 'harmless' Laz identity rather than constructing a distinct ethnic identity as Feurstein and a group of others intended.

The way Lazuri-rock band *Zuğışı Berepe* (Children of the Sea) was formed in the heart of the cultural movement was perhaps only natural given the seditious and anti-authoritarian image of rock music. The messages of the band were consistent with the aims of the movement. Their main concern was to highlight the importance of saving Lazuri from extinction.<sup>34</sup> Although a minor hit, the group's debut album *Va Mişkunan* (We Don't Know) as well as the group itself were limited in their reach as Koyuncu himself admitted: "We reached the Laz emotionally. But except the youth it was not possible for the Laz to like our music. But they liked us, I know this."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Birol Topaloğlu, 2001. 'Lazeburi' album leaflet, CD. İstanbul: Kalan Müzik.

<sup>33</sup> Negus & Roman Velazquez, 2002: 137.

<sup>34</sup> Koyuncu said in an interview a few years after the group disbanded: "During the *Zuğışı Berepe* period we were not very interested in folk songs, it was more language, Lazuri that was important for us." Derya Bengi, 2001. 'Bizim şarkıları Laz fıkrası sanıyorlardı' (They took our songs for Laz jokes). In *Roll*, September-October, 57, accessed 10 August 2015, <http://birdirbir.org/roll-arsivlerinde-kazim-koyuncu/>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Following *Zuğışı Berepe*'s success, Lazuri folk music also gained nation-wide popularity towards the end of the 1990s by virtue of musician Birol Topaloğlu, and by the early 2000s, popular Laz music reached its peak with Koyuncu reaching an audience larger than ever through *Gülbeyaz*, the TV series. Considering how statist the Laz are generally portrayed as, it is understandable that what propelled Kazım Koyuncu to Laz hero status was not rock but popular music.

There is a consensus that Koyuncu and other musical acts were influential in breaking the stigma of the Laz identity and making Lazuri more public. Unfortunately, Koyuncu died in 2005 from lung cancer. Even though his legacy lives on, little has been written about the extent to which his death affected the Laz cultural movement. From this perspective, Negus and Roman Velasquez's critique of the assumptions on music and cultural identity is important. They suggest that "equal attention should be paid to instances when music is associated with ambivalence and detachment rather than belonging."<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the authors propose that "music may connect with, become part of, or be totally irrelevant to our sense of self and collectivity."<sup>37</sup>

In relation to the question about the Laz cultural movement in the aftermath of Koyuncu's death, Negus and Roman Velasquez ask: "what happens when the music stops? Do we "return" to the same condition, or do we move onwards towards some transformed state of being?"<sup>38</sup> They draw attention to the temporality of musical experiences and suggest that "The temporality of music may actually be one of the

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<sup>36</sup> Negus & Roman Velasquez, 2002: 133.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.: 142-3.

characteristics which does not so much allow an affirmation or construction of identity as a retreat from the social categories with which our sense of self must be negotiated.”<sup>39</sup> On this point, music’s relationship to affective experience gives another dimension to this discussion. The ‘affective turn’ in cultural theory recognises that moods, feelings and bodily sensations are fundamental to our cultural experiences.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, these affective, bodily experiences of music might be “related to the way that music does not always contribute to the construction and reinforcement of identities but to the temporary release from identities.”<sup>41</sup>

It may be that music provides for the Laz a temporal escape to an imagined state of Lazness, away from the other dominant identities, satisfying their somatic needs in the process, and at the end of the musical experience a return with fulfilment to their ‘regular’ identity to which they are accustomed, hence the oft-repeated claim that the Laz lack continuous feelings of solidarity to constitute a strong ethnic identity. Although it could also be that music is simply not very important for the sense of self and community of the Laz.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.: 143.

<sup>40</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 46.

<sup>41</sup> Negus & Roman Velazquez, 2002: 143.

## CHAPTER 5

### LOCAL RESPONSES FROM SAPANCA

I have so far presented various viewpoints of scholars, intellectuals and activists on what the Laz cultural identity means, giving evidence for the lack of resonance between the Laz cultural movement and the people. It is important to remember here that a large proportion of the scholarly work and ethnographic studies<sup>1</sup> on the Laz were conducted before the mid-1990s when the Laz cultural movement in Turkey had only just begun in a different political setting than today. Therefore, the observations made in that previous 'era' may not reflect how the Laz are currently responding to the recent developments in the changing social and political environment of Turkey.<sup>2</sup> Later works from the late 1990s onwards and more recent ones from the 2010s<sup>3</sup> also point to similar conclusions about the docility of the Laz cultural identity that do not diverge very much from the previously made assumptions.

From the more recent statements coming from several newly founded associations springing up in various cities as well as the more established ones, however, it appears as though the demand is beginning to meet the movement's expectations. It has been stated that there is a significant demand to learn Lazuri and

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<sup>1</sup> See Marr, 1910; Bryer, 1996-7; Meeker, 1971; Feurstein, 1983; Feurstein & Berdsena, 1987; Benninghaus, 1989; Toumarkine, 1995; Hann, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Although, to his credit, Hann (1995: 122) predicted that a cultural revival may be imminent in the early 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> See Bellér-Hann & Hann, 1998, 2001; Aksoylu, 2010; Taşkın, 2011; Serdar, 2012-3.

unlike previous years, when there was a shortage of teachers, the Laz Institute claims that they do have the capacity to train educators to meet this demand.<sup>4</sup>

Is it true that there is increasing demand for language courses and overall a bigger interest in the Laz cultural revival efforts? If so what is the reason? In this chapter I hope to provide an insight into what the Laz *people* think about their identity, the efforts of the movement to revive their language and culture, and music's role in this process as well as its place in their lives.

To answer these questions I conducted five hour-long in-depth interviews with Laz people who live in the 'diaspora', in one of many minority villages of Sapanca – a small town with a sizeable Laz population in north-western Turkey. The setting is similar to that of the 'homeland' – a lush green and relatively 'untouched' region by the Sapanca Lake with a rich ethnic population consisting of Georgians, Circassians and Abkhazians along with the Laz. Devout Muslims and proud Turkish citizens, the latest general election results suggest that the Laz of Sapanca are about equally as conservative and nationalistic as but considerably less Kemalist than their Lazona counterparts.<sup>5</sup> On this point I want to draw attention to the fact that the people I interviewed live in what is considered to be diaspora and therefore their opinions may not reflect that of the Laz inhabiting the East Black Sea region. Nonetheless, Sapanca is one of the biggest Laz settlements in Northwest Turkey and the conditions are comparable to the homeland.

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<sup>4</sup> A. A. Bucaklışı, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Anadolu Ajansı, 2015. Sapanca 2015 General Election Results. *SecimHaberler.com*, accessed 11 August 2015, <http://secim.haberler.com/2015/sapanca-secim-sonuclari/>.

The interviewees were from a neighbouring village to the one where my maternal grandparents live in Sapanca. However, none of them were related to me or my family and I did not know any of the interviewees before meeting them, but some of them knew my grandfather by name and this eased the process of establishing a rapport with them. There were two elder women, I will call them Sabahat and Hanife<sup>6</sup>; two men, one in his mid-forties (Cevdet), the other in his early twenties (Kaan); and one young woman in her mid-twenties (Fidan).

Of the five people that I interviewed, not surprisingly only the two oldest, Sabahat and Hanife were fluent in Lazuri. Cevdet could understand and speak only the most basic words and phrases while Fidan and Kaan were at absolute beginner's level with little more than an awareness of the existence of Lazuri.

### 5.1 Major Themes and Patterns

The most salient theme that immediately emerged from the responses was the relative insignificance of the Laz identity. As has been mentioned numerous times throughout this dissertation, the Laz identity did not come across as strong enough to constitute a “cultural distinctiveness and a related ethnic consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> It was always below the Turkish and Muslim identities.

B: Do you feel as Laz?

S: I don't know about being Laz. They say we're Laz but... um, we're Laz of course, we speak Lazuri, we know that. We are from Batum [see Figure 3]. Our grandfathers came from Batum. Not my father; my father's father.

B: How important is being Laz to you?

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<sup>6</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>7</sup> Bellér-Hann & Hann, 1998: 257.

S: If I'm Laz, I'm Laz but now I have forgotten Lazuri from not speaking so much. When I speak more I remember but I keep forgetting ... I spent my childhood speaking Lazuri but after school it started to get mixed up with Turkish. But my mother could hardly speak Turkish, she would speak Lazuri. But my father for example was a very bright man. Despite not being educated he was so bright. He was also Laz but he would speak Turkish. No matter who it is, he would speak Turkish, with us too.<sup>8</sup>

Hanife, the other fluent Lazuri speaker, came across as more protective and proud of her Laz identity in so far as it stayed firmly behind Muslimness and Turkishness.

B: You're Laz, aren't you?

H: Yes myself is Laz. I'm Laz son of a Laz [*Laz ođlu Lazım*; an expression referring to her 'purity'].

B: How important is it to you?

H: For me, as far as my life, my thing is important of course. I'm Turkish, Muslim of course. First I'm Muslim. Then I'm Turkish. After that I'm Laz. My self is Laz.<sup>9</sup>

For Cevdet, the boundaries of his Laz identity were clear:

C: My personal opinion is Lazness, I mean as a sub-identity I prefer Lazness but I would never, when it is about decisions to be made about motherland, about Turkey, put Lazness forward. But here [in Sapanca] I feel like I must know this.<sup>10</sup>

Fidan and Kaan, on the other hand were less enthusiastic than the rest.

F: In conversations like this I say I'm Laz but I don't have anything to do with Lazness I think. I prefer to be Turkish. I am Turkish. My ancestors may have come from the Caucasus, most people's ancestors in this town came from there but I'm Turkish now.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 'Sabahat' (pseudonym). Interview by author. Recording. Sapanca, Sakarya, 16 July 2015.

<sup>9</sup> 'Hanife' (pseudonym). Interview by author. Recording. Sapanca, Sakarya, 16 July 2015.

<sup>10</sup> 'Cevdet' (pseudonym). Interview by author. Recording. Sapanca, Sakarya, 17 July 2015.

<sup>11</sup> 'Fidan' (pseudonym). Interview by author. Recording. Sapanca, Sakarya, 17 July 2015.

K: I don't feel Laz but when I look at people in general, in terms of habits I feel like I have some Lazness. But I don't know what Lazness means. In terms of culture I don't know much.

B: What about its importance for you? How would you rank it?

K: Turkishness I think is more important to me. When they ask me like, for example, I tell them about this and they laugh, like I'm Laz. But for example, like even my grandma, I don't know, knows the language but my mother doesn't for example. She didn't teach anybody. The reason why I don't feel Laz is, I don't know, the Laz are generally seen as, like, stupid. Like their minds don't work after 12 o'clock. So when I say I'm Laz they laugh at me. But we never talk about it [ethnicity], I only know my girlfriend.<sup>12</sup>

Another noticeable theme was the tensions between the different ethnic groups (Laz, Georgian, Circassian, Abkhazian) in Sapanca now living together in peace. The issues were centred on accusations of cultural appropriation stemming from each group claiming to be the true owners of the cultural markers (except language) associated with Eastern Black Sea people, which was another sign of a lack of cultural distinctiveness. Paradoxically, it is possible to read this situation as displaying a sense of community, although not against the state but against each other over cultural distinctiveness.

H: In the past they didn't like each other at all. They wouldn't go to weddings and would fight in every one of them. There was a conflict for some reason. Now they have accepted it. I don't know what it was. They wouldn't want each other.<sup>13</sup>

C: Certainly, let me tell you something, this is all about where they came from. Georgians, in terms of disposition, can see themselves as superior.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 'Kaan' (pseudonym). Interview by author. Recording. Sapanca, Sakarya, 18 July 2015.

<sup>13</sup> 'Hanife'.

<sup>14</sup> 'Cevdet'.

F: I think it was that everybody migrated from the Caucasus, Laz, Georgians, Circassians, Abkhazians but everybody lays claim to that culture for themselves. Like our culture, our dance, our I don't know what. Actually it's the same manner when you look at it. For example their dances are the same. When you ask them they say no this is Circassian, no this is Laz, Georgian. Actually when you look at it as culture, they came from the same place.<sup>15</sup>

A final theme that stood out from the responses was the lack of awareness regarding the existence of the Laz cultural movement. Only Cevdet had any knowledge about the activities carried out by the movement. He knew about the Lazuri language classes from a documentary he watched on TV about the Laz:

B: Do you know about the Laz cultural movement, about intellectuals, musicians trying to save the language and culture? Have you heard or seen anything about this?

C: Yes. There is a channel about this, a local channel, Black Sea channel. Particularly there is a programme, trying to revive and retain the Laz alphabet. In, err, in Black Sea [region], like two-three years ago optional classes opened. I watched it in a documentary, on one of TRT's<sup>16</sup> channels. They were teaching completely in Lazuri. But you know how those children were, if you had seen them, the way they speak, exactly like the accent in Tepebaşı<sup>17</sup> [laughing]. Little kids.<sup>18</sup>

About patterns, it seems clear that the Laz identity is behind the Turkish and Muslim identities in terms of value regardless of demographic factors. However, in my study its value also decreased with the age of the participants. Furthermore, the only person with any knowledge of the Laz movement was a male restaurant owner in his mid-forties (Cevdet) who knew about it from television. The elders and the younger adults were oblivious to the activities of the Laz cultural movement, which indicates

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<sup>15</sup> 'Fidan'.

<sup>16</sup> The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, the national public broadcaster of Turkey.

<sup>17</sup> A neighbourhood of Sapanca.

<sup>18</sup> 'Cevdet'.

the dissonance between the movement and the people. These patterns might not be surprising but they are contradictory to what we are hearing lately from Laz organisations about the increasing demand regarding language classes and cultural activities. It may be that this demand comes mainly from the homeland and not the diaspora. The fact that the language classes are currently being taught in Lazona and not in Sapanca or anywhere else supports this argument.

## 5.2. About Music's Influence on the Laz Identity

Music did not spontaneously come up in conversation as a noticeable theme but when I mentioned it, the participants started to sing a different tune. Music's effect on them was immediately visible in their faces: a subtle smile appeared and a change of posture followed, implying a sigh of relief from the 'serious' conversation. Their responses reflected this difference.

C: There are things that bring it [Laz identity] forward, rekindle it, factors. For example, look, until today, say for the last ten years, before that Black Sea music was common, like Black Sea-heavy horon, something, more without lyrics, but lately Laz, Georgian, Armenian... There is a guy in fact, what's that, seriously sings Lazuri songs and that I like more. Those bring it forward much more but of course it's about knowing the meaning of the lyrics.<sup>19</sup>

F: I think music and songs are very effective. Things that penetrate into your skin can be very effective. For example after the TV series and popular songs, I heard in my circle many people who say I'm Laz in fact missing those Black Sea lands. Like 'We should go there and see. It's actually very beautiful. We should take a trip to the coastline'. I also want it very much.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 'Cevdet'.

<sup>20</sup> 'Fidan'.

S: I love Black Sea folk songs. Really. I love them. I don't like the others very much. Play a Black Sea folk song and... there is something that draws you. I really love them, very much.<sup>21</sup>

When I asked Sabahat whether she knew of any songs in Lazuri or had a favourite Laz folk song, she hesitated and said "Are you going to get me to sing?" with a smile. "I'm just asking," I replied. Then she proceeded to sing one for me anyway. "From the Black Sea," she said, a favourite of her mother's:

Velvet [his] pouch is,  
From the coffeehouse comes [his] voice

...

She could not remember the rest but it was in Turkish. I later learned that *Kadifeden Kesesi* (Velvet [His] Pouch Is) was an Istanbul ballad, perhaps hinting at just how disconnected the Laz are from their cultural identity in these north-western parts of Turkey.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Sabahat'.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

This study attempted to depict the contemporary Laz cultural identity in Turkey and the dynamics underlying the relationship between the Laz cultural movement and the Laz people, while also investigating music's role in the process. In doing so, I explored the history of the Laz in the first section of Chapter Two, beginning from the ancient Colchis and ending with what is now referred to as Lazona. The transformation of the Laz identity from ancient times to today demonstrated that "cultural identity is fluid and contingent in relation to historical and cultural circumstances."

The second section of Chapter Two about the contemporary Laz identity then revealed the complexity and ambiguity of the term 'Laz', explaining the preference of some scholars to use 'Lazi' instead, and provided examples of cultural stereotypes and representations associated with the Laz from different periods of time. Despite the recurring caricature of Laz still being prominent in popular culture, there are signs that representations of the Laz are improving, with relevant literature and more realistic depictions in the media helping to slowly change perceptions.

The third chapter painted an overall picture of the endeavours of numerous intellectuals and activists who have contributed to the Laz culture in the past century, from the early activists to the more recently formed Laz cultural movement to the optimistic younger generation. The chapter's first section featured the German scholar Wolfgang Feurstein, his life-long commitment to revitalise the Laz identity, his controversial ways and the response he received by his peers as well as the Laz people.

The second section then outlined the milestones in the cultural revival process with particular emphasis on the value of music for the movement.

The focus of Chapter Three was the debate on the extent to which the Laz cultural movement connected with the public at grassroots level. There are two perspectives on this question. The general scholarly impression is that there is a clear disconnection while Laz organisations, new ones in particular, hold the view that the relationship is improving and the demand (for language classes, festivals, events etc.) is increasing.

On this point, the first section of Chapter Four used a constructionist approach towards identity such that identity is a process made within the discourses of history and culture rather than a fixed essence in the past to which we must return.<sup>1</sup> The discussion raised theoretical questions about the performative aspect of cultural identity. The suggestion was that both arguments regarding the apparent disconnection could be true because it might take the Laz some time to develop a certain sense of identity through learning, performing and repeating, which may or may not coincide with the movement's expectations.

The second section of Chapter Four problematized the assumptions about feelings of solidarity and community when thinking about the relations between music and cultural identity. It argued that other feelings such as ambivalence and detachment should also be considered. The notion of retrieving from identity during musical experiences provided a possible explanation as to why the Laz movement could not capitalise on the success of Laz music. It might be that temporal fulfilments

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<sup>1</sup> Hall, 1990: 226.

of Lazness during musical experiences and a return to the dominant identity after they have finished prevent the Laz from establishing a perpetual sense of collectivity through music.

Finally, the fifth chapter was about the people. It provided insight into the worlds of several Laz from Sapanca: about their identities, the importance of Lazuri, Laz culture and identity, their knowledge of the Laz movement and music's place in their culture. Given their close proximity to Istanbul, the expectation was towards a higher awareness of the Laz movement's activities; however, that did not seem to be the case. It might be because the main target of the movement is and always has been the Laz in the homeland. The books, the magazines, the dictionaries; they all went straight to Rize and Artvin, perhaps with the thought that those in the diaspora would have easier access to these materials.

The reader might wonder at this point that why more attention was not paid to the concept of diaspora. Admittedly I might not have attached great importance to it because the homeland and Sapanca are located in the same country to which the Laz display great loyalty as Turkish citizens. There is not a strong sense of community in the homeland, let alone a diasporic sense of community elsewhere in Turkey. Furthermore, as has been mentioned earlier the conditions of a village in Artvin and one in Sapanca are comparable such that it is possible to draw demographical parallels. Accordingly, the Laz from Sapanca might be a good reflection of those in the homeland.

The most notable themes to emerge from the responses of the interviewees did not differ from that of the previous works about the Laz. They centred around the relative unimportance of the Laz identity, the disconnection with the Laz movement

and music's strong but short-term effects on cultural identity. These opinions grew stronger as the interviewees got younger. In the end, it is possible to say that the Laz people I interviewed did not surprise in terms of their orientation towards reviving their cultural identity. They fit with the description given by previous studies.

Ironically, it is said that the lack of solidarity among the Laz can also be seen among the intellectuals. There is a disagreement as to what the aims of the Laz movement should be. Although the majority insist on language and culture, there are other groups who emphasise ethnic identity and community more. The key seems to be avoiding essentialist dreams of conjuring a sense of Laz nationhood and focusing on saving the cultural markers that belong to the Laz, starting with their language, Lazuri, which the movement is already doing.

The Laz have survived and lived in more or less the same region for thousands of years. They have endured invasions and conquests, kingdoms and empires from all directions and yet here they are in 2015, still in Lazona with a distinct language. There is and must be room for the Laz cultural identity in Turkey. The multiple identifications of the Laz allow this to happen, but ultimately, the fate of Lazuri might be depending on another issue altogether:

“If present efforts and negotiations to bring a peaceful end to the Kurdish problem succeed, it is likely that ethnic groups like Lazes [sic] would have less trouble in embracing their languages. This would bear the potential of disappearance of prejudices against Kurds. Only after Laz language courses would be likely to help sustaining and cherishing Laz language in a truly democratic and multicultural society. That is ironic but it seems that the fate of Laz language is somehow connected to the Kurdish problem.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Serdar, 2013.

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## APPENDIX

### MA Research Ethics form [if you are an MPhil/PhD student you fill out a different form.]

Goldsmiths, University of London.  
Department of Media & Communications.

#### Research Ethics Form

For **MA students only**; for Final Year Projects, Taught Masters Dissertations and other Projects involving Research with Human Subjects, on the ground or online.

To be completed and submitted to programme convenor/course tutor for approval and/or further consultation

If any there are any issues arising, the Supervisor can refer these to the Departmental Research Ethics sub-committee are raised.

More information and guidelines are available on the Research Skills & Resources VLE; <https://learn.gold.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=1525>

Only type/word-process this form.

Name of Student	Berk Koç
ID Number	33360682
Email address	bkoc001@gold.ac.uk
Date	07.06.2015
Programme of Study	MA Media and Communications
Project (e.g. Dissertation)	Dissertation
Working Title of Project	Music's Role in Preserving and Revitalising the Laz Identity in Turkey
Supervisor	Julian Henriques

#### Overview

Does the proposed research involve working with human subjects, on the ground or online?

Yes  No

*Examples of research involving human subjects include (but are not limited to): carrying out interviews; conducting a survey; distributing a questionnaire; carrying out focus groups; and observation of individuals or groups. Where this research can take place can be in conventional, on the ground settings, on the web, or a combination of the two.*

If so please respond to the questions below in Part A, and Part B where necessary. If not please proceed to sign and date the form and attach to your project

#### Project Description (50-100 words)

Investigating music's role in the intellectuals' efforts to revive the Laz identity in Turkey and presenting the responses of the local people from Sapanca, a north-western minority village with a sizeable Laz population.

#### Purpose (50-100 words)

There has been increasing activities since the early 1990s by intellectuals and activists to revive the Laz language and culture. Music is a key component of these revival efforts. However, the literature shows that there is a disconnection between the Laz cultural movement and the people. I aim to learn why and whether the response is changing by conducting interviews with locals from Sapanca.

#### Research Methodology (100-150 words)

I plan to do five semi-structured in-depth interviews. "The semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection strategy in which the researcher asks informants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions ... In addition to questions directly related to the concepts under investigation, semi-structured interviews also use a variety of probes that elicit further information or build rapport through the researcher's use of active listening skills" (Given, 2008: 810).

**Part A**

1. Human Subjects: Does the research proposal involve:

- (a) any person under the age of 18? Yes  No
- (b) adult patients? Yes  No
- (c) adults with psychological impairments? Yes  No
- (d) Adults with learning difficulties? Yes  No
- (e) Adults under the protection/control/influence of others (eg in care/in prison)? Yes  No
- (f) Relatives of ill people (eg parents of sick children)? Yes  No
- (g) People who may only have a basic knowledge of English? Yes  No  I will conduct the interviews in Turkish and translate them into English so this will not be an issue.

2. Subject Matter: Does the research proposal involve:

- (a) sensitive personal issues? (eg suicide, bereavement, gender identity, sexuality, fertility, abortion, gambling)? Yes  No
- (b) Illegal activities, illicit drug taking, substance abuse or the self reporting of criminal behaviour? Yes  No
- (c) any act that might diminish self-respect or cause shame, embarrassment or regret? Yes  No
- (d) research into politically and/or racially/ethically sensitive areas? Yes  No

3. Procedures: Does the proposal involve:

- (a) use of personal or company records without consent? Yes  No
- (b) deception of participants? Yes  No
- (c) the offer or disproportionately large inducements to participate? Yes  No
- (d) audio or visual recordings without consent? Yes  No
- (e) invasive physical interventions or treatments? Yes  No
- (f) research which might put researchers or participants at risk? Yes  No

If you have answered YES to any of the questions in PART A, section 1-3, you will also need to comply with the requirements of PART B of this form.

4. Research Subjects (informants):

- (a) who will your informants be? Laz individuals from Sapanca, an ethnic minority village in north-western Turkey.
- (b) Do you have a pre-existing relationship with the informants and, if so, what is the nature of that relationship? No, but my grandparents live in the same town and people recognise the names of elder townspeople.
- (c) how do you plan to gain access to/contact/approach potential informants? Via my grandparents.
- (d) what arrangements have you made for anonymity and confidentiality? I will use pseudonyms.
- (e) what, if any, is the particular vulnerability of your informants? There is none.
- (f) what arrangements are in place to ensure that informants know the purpose of the research and what they are going to inform about? I will summarise my project and inform them about my purpose.
- (g) how will you ensure that informants are aware of their right to refuse to participate or withdraw at any time? I will inform them of their right to refuse my interview request or to withdraw at any time.
- (h) what are the safety issues (if any) arising from this research, and how will you deal with them?
- (i) how do you propose to store the information? There are no safety issues.  
Voice recording.

**Check-List**

If you have answered NO to all of the questions in sections 1-3 above, please ignore PART B of the form.

You should return a hard and soft-copy to your supervisor for approval or further consultation.

As noted above, the supervisor can contact the Departmental Ethics Sub-Committee about any issues arising. This form should be considered and completed before research begins.

Student Signature:

Date 07/06/2015

Supervisor Signature:

Date

7/06/15.