

## MUSLIM MINORITY GROUPS IN TÜRKİYE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF MULTICULTURALISM: A STUDY ON THE LAZ COMMUNITY<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This study analyzes the effects of multiculturalist processes in Türkiye on the Laz who are Muslim ethnic minority. Multiculturalist policies carried out in Turkish Republic have had an impact upon both religious and ethnic minorities to some extent. This issue has been frequently discussed in academic and political circles, especially since the 2000s. This article, prepared to contribute to this field, touches on the difficulties that the Laz people had in preserving their own culture in the past, and also describes the multiculturalist movements that have developed in the last twenty years. On the other hand, it justifies that compared to the other minorities, the Laz have not been able to benefit from multicultural progress sufficiently and puts forward a proposal to be able to enhance this situation. In the frame of the Laz's historical improvement application of minority rights, the effectiveness of these rights starting from Ottoman Empire, establishment of Turkish Republic until today are tried to be examined by comparing to the other minorities. In this sense, the article attempts to provide a theoretical and practical summary of multiculturalism and is both a global and local analysis of the subject.

**Keywords:** Minorities, Laz Community, Türkiye, Nation-state, Multiculturalism.

### ÇOKKÜLTÜRLÜLÜK ÇERÇEVESİNDE TÜRKİYE'DEKİ MÜSLÜMAN AZINLIK GRUPLARI: LAZ TOPLULUĞU ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA

### Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de çokkültürcülük sürecinin Müslüman azınlıklar olan Lazlar üzerindeki etkisini incelemektedir. Ülkemizde uygulanan çokkültürcülük politikaları hem dinsel hem de etnik azınlıklar üzerinde belli oranda etkili olmuştur. Özellikle 2000'lerden başlayarak bu konu akademik ve siyasi çevrelerde sıklıkla tartışılmıştır. Bu alana katkı sağlamak amacıyla hazırlanan bu makale Lazların geçmişte kendi kültürlerini yaşatmadaki zorluklarına değinirken son yirmi yıldır gelişen çokkültürcülük hareketlerini de anlatmaktadır. Diğer yandan Lazların diğer azınlıklara göre çokkültürcülük çalışmalarından yeterince faydalanmadığını da savunmakta bu durumun düzeltilebilmesi için de öneriler sunmaktadır. Lazların tarihsel gelişimi çerçevesinde azınlık haklarının uygulanması, bu hakların Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndan başlayarak, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin kuruluşu ve günümüzdeki etkililiği, diğer azınlıklarla Lazlar karşılaştırılarak incelenmeye çalışılmıştır. Bu anlamda makale, çokkültürlülükle ilgili teorik ve pratik bir özet sunmaya çalıştığı gibi konuya yönelik olarak hem küresel hem de yerel bir analiz niteliğindedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Azınlıklar, Laz Topluluğu, Türkiye, Ulus-devlet, Çokkültürlülük.

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## INTRODUCTION

Culture, which includes criteria such as a society's lifestyle, language or norms, appears as an important criterion for defining identity. Culture, whose static structure has become variable over time with the passage of time, has created a field of study under the name of multiculturalism in societies containing different identities. Multiculturalism, which advocates creating appropriate policies for disadvantaged groups in terms of racial, structural or ethnic origin, is a particular philosophy that, unlike universalism, also takes into account the impact of local conditions (Halse, 2021). In societies where the nation-state approach is adopted, the survival of different cultures becomes controversial issues in some cases. In this study, the policies applied to minority groups in the context of multiculturalism, which aims at the continuity of different cultures, will be evaluated and the ethnic and religious situations of these groups in Türkiye will be analyzed, especially the transformation of the Laz identity will be emphasized.

In order to achieve the goals of study, the literature on the subject was carefully scanned. In the theoretical section, references were made to the most fundamental works and contemporary articles in the field of multiculturalism and minority rights. In the section related to Türkiye, studies focusing on minorities in Türkiye were discussed and programs and declarations of different civil society organizations were used. In the article, firstly a theoretical framework was created to prepare a substructure for the following parts, based on the leading theses in the field. In the next section, an introduction to Turkish case was made by touching on ethnic minorities in Türkiye and the legal regulations related to them. Then, information was given about the history of the Laz community, their living conditions in Türkiye, their population and the places where they live densely. In the next part, in the light of all this information, the situation of the Laz people in Türkiye in the context of multiculturalism theory was analyzed and current developments on this subject were discussed. And in the final section, a summary of the findings presented in the study were made and a general assessment was made.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF MULTICULTURALISM

Culture has been defined in different ways from past to present due to its dynamic structure. While for many years it was seen as representative of society's highest intellectual achievements, with industrialization and modernization, this definition was not limited to the access of only the elite, but began to include fields such as music, publishing, art and design, which were adopted by society in general. The anthropological definition of culture as a group's lifestyle and shared values dates back to the second half of the 20th century. In the postmodern period, the dynamic structure of cultures was emphasized and the idea that cultures were shaped not only by shared values or lifestyles but also by power relations and identity politics was adopted (Hall, 2011).

Culture is created by people and shaped by social interaction. Therefore, it has a dynamic structure, not a static one. Culture can be reinterpreted, developed and edited by individuals (Ballard, 2002). Mats Alvesson (2001) states that culture is a collective phenomenon expressed with meaning and symbols within society, rather than individual perceptions in the minds of individuals, and that it can adapt to changing conditions. With a similar approach, Kymlicka (2015) focuses on the social dimension of culture and says that individuals who have a common language and territory have a certain culture in both their daily and official lives. However, here we should not reduce the concept of "common culture" to a single culture; On the contrary, common culture is a structure that brings different cultures together, but at the same time it is necessary to consider the boundaries and the power of expansion.

Multiculturalism, another concept close to the concept of common culture, emphasizes cultural diversity in society. However, multiculturalism should not be evaluated only on the basis of

ethnic differences. This concept has an abstract structure and sharp definitions such as “racist” or “postmodernist” should be avoided (Meien, 2006). Unlike multiculturalism, multiculturalist is a belief and behavior system that accepts the existence of groups with different cultures and supports social integration by preserving the identities of these groups (Rosado, 1997). Ruth Lea (2004) discusses multiculturalism from two different perspectives. According to the first view, each culture should have the right to exist, but their complete independence from each other could lead to social divisions. According to the second and positive approach, different cultures can live together and be part of a common structure while preserving their own identities. Lea supports the latter.

Seyla Benhabib argues that in the era of globalization, where nation-states remain too small to cope with global problems but too large to meet the expectations and demands of identity-based movements, national borders are no longer sufficient for subcultural identities (Benhabib, 2002). This way of thinking can be accepted as the underlying logic for the increasing demands for multiculturalism. Similarly, Bhiku Parekh asserts that if the idea of equality is grounded in human uniformity, it becomes an ideological device to mould humankind in a certain direction. Such an approach would be both philosophically incoherent and morally problematic (Parekh, 2006). Therefore, a truly democratic society could be founded on freedom and recognition of cultural differences.

In order for a society to be described as multicultural, the existence of minorities with different ethnic, religious and linguistic identities must be accepted in that society. The concept of “minority” in the modern sense emerged in the 17th century and was historically formalized for the first time with the Edict of Nantes (1598). This edict, declared by Henry IV, King of France, granted certain rights to Protestants in France, which was governed by the Catholic majority, and was the first official document to protect the rights of religious minorities. Classifying minorities as religious, linguistic and national is considered a critical element in determining the rights granted to them (Tunç, 2004).

Baskin Oran discusses the concept of minority from two basic perspectives. From a sociological perspective, minorities defined as groups that are smaller in number, are not in a socially and politically dominant position, and have an ethnic, religious or linguistic identity different from the majority. From a legal perspective, communities that do not constitute the majority of the state’s population, have ethnic, linguistic and religious differences, and are not dominant in their geography are considered as minorities. These communities generally have a desire to preserve their own identities and cultures (Oran, 2001).

The concept of national minority emerged after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, with the strengthening of the nationalism movement (Altunpolat, 2005). Institutional minority rights were first emphasized in 1848, with the speech made by Hungarian Prime Minister Bertalan Szemere to the National Assembly. In this speech, Szemere introduced the parliamentary system, stated that personal rights should be guaranteed, and emphasized the free development of nations and ethnic communities (Katus, 2002).

After the First and Second World Wars, the protection of minorities began to be addressed at the international level and became an issue discussed by the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (Çavuşoğlu, 2001). According to Hakan Taşdemir and Murat Saraçlı (2007), minority rights in Europe were addressed from a human rights perspective until 1990, and the basis of this situation lies in the concern of states to protect their national integrity. Between 1945 and 1989, minorities were protected by the principles of “equality” and “non-discrimination”, and as long as these principles were fulfilled, minority communities were not expected to make additional demands. However, after 1990, this understanding underwent a radical change and minority rights began to come into the agenda of international law increasingly.

The “Declaration of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities”, adopted on 18 December 1992, officially defined minority rights on international legal grounds for the first time and gave these communities the right to freely live their own identities in public and private spaces (Çavuşoğlu, 2001). One of the most important legal steps towards the protection of minorities was taken at the Vienna Summit, where it was decided to prepare a protocol complementary to the European Convention on Human Rights. As a result, the “Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities” signed by the member states of the Council of Europe is the most comprehensive international document that imposes legal obligations on states to protect minority rights (Özdek, 1994).

However, Taşdemir and Saraçlı (2007) state that this agreement does not create a common minority policy within the European Union, and that each country follows different policies according to its own conditions. Kymlicka (2002), on the other hand, criticizes the imposition of the Western European model of minority rights on the states in Central and Eastern Europe.

### **ETHNIC MINORITIES AND LEGAL SITUATION IN TÜRKİYE**

Since Anatolia has hosted many civilizations throughout history, the existence of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity in today’s Türkiye is inevitable. According to the research conducted by KONDA in 2007, 39 different identity categories were identified in Türkiye. While 81% of the participants identified themselves as Turkish, local identities such as Manav, Laz, Turkmen, Yoruk and other Anatolian Turkish tribes constituted a rate of 1.5%. After Turkish identity, the highest rate belongs to Kurdish-Zaza identity with 9%. In addition, 4.45% define themselves only as citizens of the Republic of Türkiye, while non-Muslim communities (Armenian, Greek, Assyrian, Jewish, etc.) constitute 0.10%. Arab identity is represented by 0.75% (KONDA, 2007: 16-17).

The mother tongue-based findings of the research are also largely parallel to the identity distribution. While 84% of Türkiye’s population declares their mother tongue as Turkish, 12% speaks Kurdish, 1% speaks Zazaki and 1.38% speaks Arabic. However, there is no complete overlap between mother tongue and ethnic identity. For example, while there are individuals whose native language is Kurdish or Zazaki and define themselves as Turkish, there are also individuals whose native language is Turkish and who adopt the Kurdish identity. In this context, KONDA rearranged the data in order to evaluate the identity-native language relationship more accurately. Accordingly, while 90% of native speakers of Turkish define themselves as Turks, the majority of individuals whose native language is Kurdish or Zazaki identify with the Kurdish-Zaza identity. 41% of native Arabic speakers express themselves as Turkish and 44.67% as Arab (KONDA, 2007: 21). The research also examined religious and sectarian differences in Türkiye. 82% of the participants stated that they were Sunni-Hanafi, 9% Sunni-Shafi’i, 5% Alevi, 0.71% Shiite, 0.1% Nusayri, 0.06% Orthodox, 0.01% Catholic, 0.057% Protestant, 0.013% Jewish and 0.047% stated that they did not belong to any religion (KONDA, 2007: 24). However, the bond between religious identity and ethnic identity is not as strong as the mother tongue-identity relationship. For example, 43% of Alevis are of Turkish origin, 42% are of Kurdish and 7% are of Arab origin. On the other hand, 76% of individuals belonging to the Shafii sect have Kurdish identity (KONDA, 2007: 27-28). In conclusion, KONDA’s research shows that ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity in Türkiye spans a wide range. However, officially, minority status in Türkiye is only granted to non-Muslim communities.

Muslim minorities in Türkiye are diverse in terms of ethnicity, language and belief differences. This diversity is one of the important elements affecting the social structure of society. Below are the characteristics of the main Muslim minority groups in Türkiye:

1. Alevi and Sunni Arabs: Their number is estimated to be around 1,000,000. While Sunni Arabs show ethnic and linguistic differences, Alevi Arabs show religious and linguistic differences (Oran, 2004).

2. Alevi: The number of Alevi community is estimated to be close to 12,000,000. The Alevi community is mostly of Turkish origin; However, there are also Alevi of Arab or Kurdish-Zaza origin who speak Azerbaijani Turkish. Alevi, who speak Turkish and are ethnically Turkish or Turkmen, are the most active group within the community. Alevi Kurds are a minority among Alevi, both ethnically and religiously. However, there are also some political and ideological views that do not reconcile Alevism with Islam. According to these views, Alevism is not a religion or does not have a relationship with Hazrat Ali (Oran, 2004).

3. Communities of Balkan and Caucasian Origin: Balkan origin groups such as Bosnians, Torbesh, Pomaks, Albanians and Roma and Caucasian communities such as Circassians, Georgians and Laz constitute a significant minority in Türkiye. These groups tend to maintain their cultural identity and are mostly Sunni Muslim. These groups, which do not question the Turkish super-identity, generally settled in Türkiye through migration and integrated into Turkish society (Oran, 2004).

4. Kurds: Their number is estimated to be between 12,000,000 and 15,000,000. Kurds are concentrated in southeastern Türkiye and are largely Sunni Muslim; However, there are also Alevi Kurds. While Sunni Kurds generally speak the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, Alevi Kurds use Zazaki. Debates continue as to whether Zazaki is a dialect of Kurdish or a separate language. Kurds, unlike other Muslim minorities, question the Turkish super-identity, the reasons for this are their large population, living in geographical isolation, maintaining their traditional forms of production, and most importantly, being an autochthonous people (Oran, 2004).

According to the Treaty of Lausanne, minorities in Türkiye were accepted only as non-Muslims, and Muslim groups that were different in terms of language, race and religion were not recognized as minorities. After the First World War, the League of Nations stated that racial, linguistic and religious minorities should be accepted as an international issue; However, Türkiye has internationally secured non-Muslim minorities with the Treaty of Lausanne. This regulation aimed to secure the rights of non-Muslims after the victorious emergence of Türkiye. The provisions of the treaty narrowed minority rights and provided rights only for non-Muslims (Tunç, 2004; Oran, 2002). While Article 37 of the Treaty of Lausanne states that minority rights are unchangeable, Article 38 states that everyone residing in Türkiye has negative rights and non-Muslims have the right to free movement. Article 39 regulates that Turkish citizens can use their own language except in official institutions and can defend themselves in languages other than Turkish in courts. In addition, the right of non-Muslims to establish their own schools and receive education according to their own traditions is also guaranteed in Article 40. Article 44 states that the rights of non-Muslims in Türkiye will also be granted to Muslims in Greece (Oran, 2002; Uçarol, 2010).

The Treaty of Lausanne grants various rights to non-Muslim Turkish nationals in Türkiye. These rights include free movement, migration, civil and political rights. In addition, these minorities had the right to establish structures such as educational and religious institutions, provided that they covered their expenses, and they were able to manage and supervise these institutions themselves. The Treaty of Lausanne also allowed minorities to use their own languages. Minorities will be able to receive certain financial support from local budgets to receive education in their own language. In addition, their right to practice and spread their own beliefs is also guaranteed. Respect for their family and personal cultures is an important right granted to minorities (Duman, 2005: 309).

However, only three non-Muslim groups were able to benefit from the Treaty of Lausanne, and one of the reasons why other groups could not benefit from these rights was that there was no kin state that could follow these minorities, or they could not make their voices heard due to the geographical conditions of the places where they lived. In addition, the fact that the Nation System consisted only of Armenian, Greek and Jewish nations also affected this situation (Oran, 2004: 70). In Lausanne, rights were not recognized only for non-Muslims. In the 3rd and 4th paragraphs of Article 39, it is stated that all Turkish nationals should not be discriminated against in terms of religion, belief or sect and that these people should be able to use the language they want in any meeting. In the 5th paragraph of Article 39, it is stated that, regarding Turkish nationals who speak a language other than Turkish, these people can make oral defense in courts in their own language (Duman, 2005: 309). In addition, the Treaty of Lausanne granted everyone living in Türkiye the right to life, freedom and equality before the law (Quoted by: Oran, 2004: 73).

The War of Independence period included a multi-ethnic structure rather than a mono-religious structure. Different ethnic groups such as Laz, Kurdish, Circassian and Tatar fought against the British, French and Greek armies. This struggle has turned into a struggle between Muslims and non-Muslims. Because the word “national” had a religious meaning at that time, as in the nation system (Aktürk, 2010: 87-88). In the early years of the Republic, ethnic minorities were considered Muslims and therefore seen as Turks. Because the Treaty of Lausanne only accepted non-Muslims as a minority. Although the existence of other ethnic groups was accepted by the 1924 Constitution, these groups were not legally recognized. Therefore, “the state could not recognize any nation other than Turkish” (Yeğen, 2006: 52-53, 125).

## **THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF LAZ PEOPLE**

According to recent research, the origin of the Laz people dates back to 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Colchis, citizens of the Kingdom of Kolchida, were known as the Laz people’s name before the Byzantine (Greek) occupation. The Laz, who became Christians together with the Byzantines, established the Kingdom of Lazica under Byzantine rule. Lazica was destroyed in the 8th century after Persian-Byzantine conflicts, and after this date, the name Abkhazia began to be mentioned, and Lazica fell into oblivion. The territorial integrity of Lazica was disrupted, but most of these lands came under Byzantine rule. After Georgia became stronger and took almost the entire Caucasus under its rule, the Kingdom of Trebizond was established and joined the Ottoman Empire in 1461. During the reign of Yavuz Sultan Selim, the Laz people began to be Islamized under Ottoman rule. After the 93 War, the territorial integrity of Lazistan was disrupted again and the Ottomans and Russians tried to instill their own culture in the Laz people. With the outbreak of the First World War, the Greeks withdrew from the Eastern Black Sea region, and this enabled the Laz in the region to live their own culture more easily. The Transcaucasian Federation, covering Lazistan, was established in 1917, but collapsed after a short time. After the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, Laz people began to be perceived as local differences rather than as an ethnic group. In Georgia, although the Laz people were able to preserve their cultural identity during the Soviet period, they were forced to be recognized as Georgians and were exiled in later years.

Language is an important part of culture, and ethnologist and linguist Edward Sapir argued that there is a connection between language and culture and stated that the elements that make up culture should have a place in the language. Therefore, culture and language follow each other in parallel (Sapir, 1921: 104). Laz people have been able to preserve their language orally until today. South Caucasian language family is divided into three main language groups: Mingrelian-Laz, Svanish and Georgian. Over time, Laz and Mingrelian were separated into two branches of the Zan language family. However, Laz-Megrelian is considered a separate language from Georgian (Dzhodzhua, 2014: 181-183). Encyclopædia Britannica defines Laz as an unwritten language spoken

on the Black Sea coast of Georgia and in the regions of Türkiye adjacent to Georgia (The editors of Encyclopædia Britannica). While Silvia Kutscher defined Laz as a member of the South Caucasian (Kartveli) language family, she stated that the main feature that distinguishes Laz from other South Caucasian languages is that this language is spoken predominantly in Türkiye, not Georgia. Although Laz has several different dialects, it does not have a distinct written or spoken form. While almost all Laz people are fluent in Turkish, the older generation knows both Laz and Turkish. However, there is a great decrease in the number of people who can speak Laz in the younger generations. External reasons for the extinction of Laz include economic and educational factors, denial of the language and political factors such as the language law in Türkiye. While many parents want their children to receive a good education, they think that learning a second language besides Turkish will have negative effects. For this reason, most parents prefer to speak only Turkish with their children. Additionally, some academics and even Laz people deny Laz ethnic identity. Strict laws applied to minority languages in Türkiye until the end of the 90s caused Laz to face the danger of extinction. For example, with the law enacted in 1934, it was made mandatory for children's names and surnames to be Turkish, and in the 1950s, it was decided to change the names of villages and towns (Kutscher, 2008: 82-88).

According to Vanilişi and Tandilava, Niko Maar went to Lazistan in Türkiye and studied the grammar of Laz language. These studies have revealed that Laz and Mingrelian have great similarities. Laz language in Türkiye is largely influenced by Ottoman Turkish. It is possible to see traces of both Turkish and Greek in these languages. However, the Laz language spoken in Fırtına Valley can be considered the purest Laz language (Vanilişi & Tandilava, 2005: 87-88). Laz language is generally spoken between Rize and Hopa, as well as in Akçakoca and Sapanca regions in Türkiye (Aksamaz, 2014: 213). One of the common features between Turkish and Laz is the absence of masculine and feminine features and the placement of prepositions at the end of nouns. However, verb systems differ greatly from each other. For example, the passive voice in Turkish does not exist in Laz (Haig, 2001: 199). There are a total of 35 letters in Laz, 5 vowels and 30 consonants (Aksamaz, 2014: 217). The word order of Laz language is generally in the form of subject-object-predicate. Laz language has suffered great losses, especially among the younger generations, and is spoken almost exclusively at home and within the family. Among Laz speakers, only 5% or 10% are competent native speakers, while the rest use Laz incorrectly and cannot fully master it (Kutscher, 2008: 94-99). Laz is spoken by approximately 22,000 people of the Laz population in Türkiye (Ethnologue, 2016). In the past, the majority of people who knew Laz were between Rize and Borçka, but over time, the number of people who did not speak Laz increased with migration to this region. Seasonal workers came to this region from the inner parts of Anatolia or neighboring coastal regions. Except for seasonal workers, most of them settled in small towns. Except for Arhavi, the number of non-Laz people in the rural parts of this region is quite high and they see themselves as the autochthonous people of the region. The majority of them are Georgians and Hemshinlis. The old language spoken by the Hemshinli people is included in the Armenian subclass by linguists. Hemshinlis have the second largest population in the region where Laz people live. There is competition between these two peoples, and both sides see themselves as the most open-minded and forward-thinking society. However, over time, Laz-Hemşinli marriages are viewed more positively (Hann, 1995: 127-128; Yılmaz, 2013).

In addition to history, language and culture, belief is also an important factor in the social structure of the Laz people. It is thought that the Laz people believed in Paganism, a polytheistic religion, before embracing Christianity. In this belief, celebrations were held to regard natural events as sacred and to glorify concepts such as the moon, the sun and the world. The influence of the pagan belief on the Laz can also be understood from the fact that in Laz, "Sunday" is called "Sun day" and "Monday" is called "Moon day" (Aksamaz, 2014: 51). At that time, the Laz, who believed that every event in nature was governed by a god, wanted to get the consent of the gods in their actions in order

to avoid the curse of the gods. For this purpose, ceremonies were held where sacrifices were made (Sarı, 2007). In addition, the belief in Mazdeism, which advocates social equality (Yıldırım, 2010: 15), is among the religions that the Laz believed in before Christianity (Vanilişi & Tandilava, 2005: 7). It is stated in some sources that in the early 4th century, while they were dependent on Byzantium, the Laz people began to adopt Christianity. However, Christianity began to be abandoned in Lazica, which came under the rule of the Persians in the 5th century, and with the change of power in 522, Christianity became the official religion in Lazica. Lazican nobles received the title of Byzantine ruler by marrying Byzantine heirs (Sinclair, 1989: 169). Some sources state that after Trabzon joined the Ottoman administration in 1461, the Laz people were forcibly converted to Islam (Vanilişi & Tandilava, 2005: 50-51). However, "Is This the History of the Laz?" Mehmet Bilgin, the author of the work titled, opposes this view and states, based on the Land Registry Books of 1486-1523, that the Christian population in the region is much more than the Muslim population. According to Bilgin, the Laz people did not accept Islam immediately when they came under Ottoman rule, and this process took about 200 years. Even during this period, 30% of the region's population was Christians. After the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the region completely adopted Islam as Christians in this region migrated to Greece (Bilgin, 2008).

It should not be thought that the Laz live only in the lands of the Eastern Black Sea region that were under Ottoman rule and later joined to Türkiye. The existence of Laz people outside Türkiye who have different beliefs other than Islam should also be taken into consideration.

## **LAZ IDENTITY AND MULTICULTURALISM IN TÜRKİYE**

The policies pursued by Türkiye towards being a nation-state became evident especially after the 1930s. In this period, with the construction of the modern nation-state, population and settlement policies began to be implemented, and ethnic identities were mostly ignored (Serdar, 2015: 96). In the understanding of the nation-state, ethnic identities appear to have an important role in determining the hierarchy within society. Whether ethnic identity is distinct or not is related to the national policies of the state. In this context, Laz people in Türkiye have set limits on living their ethnic identity (Serdar, 2015: 93). Although Laz people see themselves as having a different ethnic identity from their neighbors, they define themselves as Turks at the national level (Taşkın, 2016: 63). Many Laz people accept the Laz identity as a local culture and think that this culture is complete when combined with Turkishness (Yılmaz, 2013). Ayşe Serdar (2015) stated that Laz people want to achieve integration at the national level by depoliticizing their identities. However, this does not mean that the Laz people do not make any efforts to keep their language and culture alive. On the contrary, Laz people have carried out various works since the Ottoman period to keep the Laz language and culture alive (Yılmaz, 2015).

The first important studies on Laz language were made in the reign of Abdulhamid II. The book called Nananena, written by Faik Efendi and published in Laz, is one of the first works on Laz language, but the book dates back to World War II. It is claimed that it was burned by the order of Abdulhamid II (Yılmaz, 2015). During the Ottoman period, Laz people took important steps to defend their identity. In this process, between 1914 and 1920, Laz Ahmet Tevfik emphasized the need to fight for the rights of the Laz and published the brochure titled *My Dear Citizens, Ricâ-yı Mahsûsum* to the Laz and *Târîhten Şanlı İki Sahîfe* in 1918 (Bucaklışi, 2015). In addition, the Laz National Development Society, founded in 1918, emphasized the importance of the Laz language to the Laz people and advocated establishing a semi-independent homeland (Bucaklışi, 2015).

In the Soviet Union, it was easier to preserve local culture. In 1929, they published the newspaper *Mchita Murutsxi* (Red Star) under the leadership of Iskender Tzitashi of Laz origin. This newspaper, published with the support of Lenin, encouraged the Laz people to write in their native language and also explained the achievements of the Soviet Revolution (Aksamaz, 2014). However,



in 1930, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Türkiye banned the entry of this newspaper into the country (İlk Laz Gazetesi: Kızıl Yıldız). In the Soviet Union, Laz people were given language and cultural rights, and Laz language began to be used in education. Tzitaşi wrote textbooks such as Alboni (Laz Alphabet), Okitxuşeni Supara (Reading Book) and Çkuni Ç'ara (Our Writing) to improve the Laz language (Aksamaz, 2014). However, after the death of the President of Abkhazia in 1936, Tzitashi was accused of being a Turkish agent and the rights of the Laz people were taken away and they were recorded as Georgians (Aksamaz, 2014: 133-134).

In Türkiye, during the single-party period, it was aimed for minority languages to remain only as domestic languages, so that these languages would be forgotten over time. In 1938, a draft law was prepared to establish a Struggle Against Laz Speakers in schools and pressure was put on students who spoke Laz in schools (Aksamaz, 2008: 924). In a report prepared by The Republican People's Party (CHP) in the 1940s, concerns were expressed that the preservation of the cultures of small communities whose mother tongue was different from Turkish posed a threat to the integrity of the nation-state, so it was recommended to settle the Turkish population in the Laz settlements (Aksamaz, 2014: 123).

The development of tea agriculture and the acceleration of economic activities after the 1950s strengthened the connection with the center of the region, and this caused the Laz culture to slowly become involved in the nationalization process (Taşkın, 2016: 46-47). The 1980s were the years when multiculturalist movements rose and ethnic identity awareness increased (Kakışım, 2016: 15-16). The privatization policies carried out during the Özal period also affected the tea industry and the survival of the Laz language and culture was prevented. However, the working group called Lazebura, founded in Germany in 1983, has carried out various studies on the Laz language and culture. The 1990s mark a period when the Laz identity movement was revived and important steps were taken both in Türkiye and abroad. Initiatives such as the Laz Institute and the Laz Foundation, published in 1992, reinforced efforts to keep the Laz identity alive (Yılmaz, 2015). In addition, Ogni Magazine, published in 1993, defended the existence of the Laz identity and saw speaking Laz as a condition for keeping this identity alive (Aksamaz, 2008: 116).

In 1997, Birol Toplaoğlu modernized Laz music by presenting Laz songs and epics in his album Heyamo (Taşkın, 2016: 123-125). In the same years, the rock band named Zuğaşi Berepe broke the perception of Laz as a traditional peasant language and showed that Laz was a language compatible with the city. In 1998, the Abkhazian Parliament requested the return of the identities of the Laz people (Aksamaz, 2014: 134). In the 2000s, studies on Laz language and identity continued to increase, and Laz publications and academic research gained momentum (Kavaklı, 2015).

Istanbul-based Laz Cultural Association (LKD) was founded in 2008 and aims to keep Laz culture alive in many areas such as literature, economy, education, culture and art (Laz Cultural Association). The association started publishing the magazine Skani Nena in 2009 but could only publish four issues. As a result of the divisions that occurred within LKD in 2010, one group continued its activities in Ankara, while the other group continued its activities in Istanbul under the name of Lazika Publishing Collective (Yılmaz, 2015). Established in 2010, Lazika Publishing Collective published the book Daçxuri (Fire), written by Murat Ercan Murğulişi, which is the first novel written in Laz language, and published the Laz translation of the novel The Little Prince (Tuzcuoğlu, 2014). In the same year, Lazika Publishing Collective published the magazine called Tanura, and the first issue of the magazine included Helimişi Xasani, who made a great contribution to Laz literature. The slogan of the magazine is "This is a study for enlightenment. "A collective effort to keep the Laz language alive." (Lazika Yayın Kolektifi, 2011). However, Tanura has only been able to publish three magazines. Following Tanura magazine, Lazika Publishing Collective published the

essay book *Si Giçkin* written by Osman Şafak Buyuklişi. The book contains more than 70 essays, generally evaluating Laz culture and current events in Arhavi (Tanura, 2011: 5-6).

In 2011, at Boğaziçi University, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, under the guidance of İsmail Avcı Bucaklişi, Laz language beginner, intermediate and advanced level courses started to be taught as electives (Tanura, 2011: 1).

Although the first Laz newspaper published in Sukhumi, *Mchita Murutsxi*, could only publish two issues, it has an important place in terms of Laz language and Laz culture. After 84 years, the newspaper called *Ağani Murutsxi*, published in Laz language for the first time in Türkiye, started to be printed (Yılmaz, 2013). In the same year, the local channel named *Gelişim TV* started broadcasting programs in Laz language, based on the law on broadcasting in different languages and dialects (Kavaklı, 2015: 141). 2013 was a productive year for Laz studies. The Laz Institute was established in 2013 and stated its purpose as follows:

*The language of the Laz people (Laz and Mingrelian) and all their cultural elements: history, tales, epics, literature, folklore, beliefs and values; geography, ethnography and archaeology; architectural understanding and practices; their traditions and customs; handicrafts; livelihoods and modes of production; family and other social structures; their understanding of nature and environment and their behavior in this regard; their relations with other peoples, their interactions, their awareness and practice of living together; understanding of human and animal rights; their interest in science and technology and their habits of using them; all kinds of consumption concepts; their proximity to education, sports and art; world realities and understandings of modernity; their approach to not damaging the environment and nature and leaving a livable world to future generations its closeness to the fact that women are the basis of society, its awareness of positive discrimination towards women, children, disabled people and the elderly; traditional Laz cuisine; Laz collective work and solidarity habits; To examine, research and promote all other areas related to Laz culture, to produce projects to develop all these and to strive for the implementation of these projects (Laz Institute).*

In 2013, the curriculum prepared for the Laz language course, under the coordination of the Institute President İsmail Avcı Bucaklişi, was accepted by the Board of Education and Discipline of the Ministry of National Education. This curriculum, under the name of Living Languages and Dialects Course, allows Laz language to be taught as an elective course in primary schools, as well as Kurmanci, Zazaki, Abaza and Adyghe languages (Kural, 2013). In 2015, the Laz language teaching material written by İsmail Avcı Bucaklişi, Ömer Faruk Demirok, Özlem Yazıcı Dalbeler and Ömer Eren was published by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) publishing house. This textbook consists of 11 units, and the first unit is determined as Lazuri Alboni (Laz alphabet). In the second unit, the subject of Xela Üaoba (meeting and greeting) is covered, and the last unit of the book is a small dictionary (Avcı, Demirok, Dalbeler Yazıcı, & Eren, 2015).

The year 2015 also witnessed another important development in terms of Laz culture. Laz language elective courses, which started at Boğaziçi University, were taught by İsmail Avcı Bucaklişi at Bilgi University in the same year. Again in 2015, in Murat Village of Çamlıhemşin, the villagers applied to Çamlıhemşin District Governorship with the signatures of 140 out of 200 voters to change the name of the village to Komilo, which means goddess in Laz, and with the decision taken by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the name of the village was changed to Komilo. This is the first village with a Laz name (Cumhuriyet Gazetesi, 2015).

In 2016, the e-magazine called *Kiana*, which aims to keep Laz culture alive, started to be published on *Lazca.org*. In the first issue of the magazine, Ramazan Kosanoğlu, in his article titled “My Mother and the Laz Language”, emphasized that the Laz language began to disappear with

globalization (Kosanoğlu, 2016: 3). Additionally, in the magazine, classroom teacher Ali Gümüş was thanked for driving to a distant school to teach Laz language, since Laz language lessons could not be offered in his own school (Kiana Dergisi, 2016: 5). In his article in the magazine, Kosanoğlu stated that the name of Mekaleskirit Village was changed to Dikkaya in 1958 and that such place name changes indicate assimilation (Kosanoğlu, 2016: 10). The magazine also featured an exchange of views on the protection of the Laz language with the Mayor of Arhavi in an interview conducted in Laz language. Previously, an interview was held in Laz with Ardeşen Mayor Hakan Gültekin, and in this interview it was emphasized that the Laz language should be protected.

In 2017, Klemurişi Ramazan Kosanoğlu started writing articles about Laz culture in the Ardeşen'in Sesi newspaper and also wrote articles in Laz (Lazca.org, 2017). In the same year, GOLLA, the culture, arts and ecology association, published calendars in Laz language and these calendars were distributed free of charge (GOLLA, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Although the history of the Laz people cannot be fully elucidated through written sources, it can be said that it dates back to a very ancient past, in line with the works of the Roman and Persian Empires. In the last periods of the Ottoman Empire, Hopalı Faik Efendi, who worked on Laz language, and later Laz Ahmet Tevfik Bey, made various efforts to keep the Laz identity alive. However, these efforts were prevented and failed due to the social and political conditions of the period.

During the nation-state building process, the Laz people could not make their voices heard enough to protect their identity. In areas where Laz people live collectively, practices such as migrating to the interior or settling Turks in Laz villages have come to the fore. Speaking Laz language was banned in schools and efforts to keep their cultural heritage alive were weakened. During the Democratic Party period, cash flow was provided to the region with statist policies and the work done through collective labor began to be forgotten. With infrastructure investments, the region's connection with the center has been facilitated, and this has made the use of Laz language no longer mandatory, causing the language to be less preferred. With the influence of the media, Laz people became more familiar with Turkish and Laz language began to be perceived as a language spoken by low-income segments.

During the 1960s and 1970s, when ethnic identities began to revive, there was no significant development in keeping the Laz identity alive. In the 1980s, a working group called Lazebura, established in Germany, started to conduct research and studies on Laz identity, and these studies also resonated in Türkiye. Lazebura's activities gained significant momentum regarding Laz culture and identity in Türkiye in the 1990s, and these years were the peak periods for Laz studies. During this period, magazines such as Ogni, Mjora, Skani Nena and Tanura were published to keep the Laz culture alive and made significant contributions to the preservation of the Laz language.

In the 2000s, publications on Laz language increased and Laz language began to be taught as an elective course. However, although there is not enough perception about Laz language and Laz culture in Türkiye, the developments made since the establishment of the Republic have been an important step towards the recognition and protection of this culture.

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