

Story 745 (1985 Tape 1)

Narrator: Hülya Kırkıcı, 25

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in Denizli Province

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all | *shrewdness all*
Why Laz People Are So Shrewd

Many of the Laz people¹ make their living by fishing. Black Sea is rich in fish, and most Lazes live right on shore of that sea. They not only make their living from fish but they also make fish the principal food in their diet. Laz people are also known for their shrewdness.²

One day a scholar who had heard of their shrewdness decided to study this reported quality of the Lazes. He wanted to find out if they were really as intelligent as they were said to be. And if they were really smarter than other people, then he wanted to discover why this was so. In order to do this study, he went to live for a while in a

¹Originally of different ethnic origin from the Turks, the Laz people have long been a well-assimilated minority group in Turkey. Most of them live in extreme northeastern Turkey along the narrow coastal plain of the Black Sea.

²There are sharply divergent views of Laz intelligence expressed in Turkish folktales. Sometimes, as here, they are thought to be exceptionally shrewd people. More often, however, they are pictured as being stupid. Urbanization often makes newcomers to the city seem stupid because of their ignorance of urban technology, and many tales about Lazes tell of their ineptness in Istanbul.

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Laz village on the Black Sea coast.

One morning he saw a Laz getting his fishing boat fishing equipment ready for his day's work. He decided to talk with this fisherman, and so he approached him and greeted him, "Ṣelâmünaleyküm."

"Aleykümṣelâm," the fisherman responded.³

After the two had talked for a few minutes, the scholar asked the Laz if he could accompany him that day. "I never seen people catching fish in large quantities, but I should like to learn about this. May I go fishing with you today?"

"Certainly you may, and we can have lunch together, too," said the Laz.

When lunchtime arrived, the two men decided to cook some of the fish they had caught. Since the Laz was the host, he cleaned several fish and started cooking them. The scholar thought that this was an appropriate time to question his companion about the Laz reputation for shrewdness

"Please tell me, if you will, why Laz people are so intelligent," he said.

"They are so intelligent because they eat fish most of the time

³This is the traditional Moslem greeting between strangers: "Peace be with you," "And peace be with you also."

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Not satisfied with that explanation, the scholar said, "You may eat a great amount of fish, but there are many other groups of people in the world who do the same. Why aren't those other people as smart as the Laz?"

*Eat heads —
or some of
intelliger*

"Well, that is because we eat the heads of the fish as well as the flesh, and other people do not do that." When this answer did not convince the scholar, the fisherman added, "If you do not believe me, we can test to see whether or not this is true."

"Yes, let us do that," the scholar said.

The fisherman said, "All right, I shall give you all of the heads of these fish and I shall take the bodies of the fish." The fisherman then put all of the fishheads on the scholar's plate and the rest of the fish on his own.

The scholar ate one of the heads, but he did not like it, for it was almost all bone. He ate a second head, but he didn't like that any better than he had the first, and so he complained, "These fishheads are nothing but bone!"

"Just continue your eating," said the fisherman

The scholar started on the third head, but it had neither flesh nor flavor, and again he began to complain: "I don't understand this bargain," he said. "You have eaten all of the flesh of the fish--the good part--and left me only bones! I have not really tasted any fish, and I am still

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hungry. I don't want any more of these heads, for they are really almost inedible.

The fisherman answered, "You see, those heads are working already! Here you have eaten only three fishheads, but you have already grown so much smarter. You are right: fish heads are inedible!"

Surprised by this answer, the scholar concluded that reality cannot always be traced to understandable causes. When he returned from this fishing trip, he left the Laz village