

# Signs of Solidarity and Difference: *Kaçak* Tea, *Samimiyet*, and the National Public in Turkey

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## ABSTRACT

In Turkey, tea is a near-universally consumed beverage that also operates as a salient moral and political sign in social life. This article describes how tea functions as a “medium of value” in the country, circulating as both a physical commodity and a multivalent sign vehicle that is closely linked in popular imagination to modern modes of egalitarian sociability and the formation of Turkey’s postwar multiparty democracy. In describing the semiotic ideologies that inform tea’s uptake as a sign and its place in Turkey’s modern public culture, the article also traces the historical-material processes that have made tea into both a symbolic model of communal solidarity and a salient sign of national difference—a contested semiotic medium of representation that informs popular discourses on public virtue and democratic politics and that is prominently mobilized in divergent public making projects in contemporary Turkey and North (“Turkish”) Kurdistan.

At the height of the fighting between state security forces and Kurdish militants that followed the collapse of the peace process in Turkey in 2015, a brief public quarrel took place between Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Sırrı Süreyya Önder, a prominent member of parliament for the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). The spat unfolded over

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several days as an acrimonious, mass-mediated back-and-forth over responsibility for the ongoing violence in Kurdish cities and the sincerity of each other's commitment, along with that of their respective parties, to a common political project in Turkey. The exchange began in late December when Önder, together with fellow party members, publicly refused to meet with the prime minister concerning a constitutional reform package while Turkish security forces were still besieging Kurdish cities, trapping thousands of citizens in the cross fire and forcing many more to flee. Önder is reported at the time to have said: "If Prime Minister Davutoğlu's visit to discuss the constitution is to be meaningful or consequential in any way, the country must be brought back within a constitutional framework beforehand. . . . I mean, does he expect us to simply abandon the rights of the people living in the war-zone? If he comes to visit us without first recognizing the rights of [the people in the besieged cities] to breathe, to be able to bury their dead, well then, he will drink his *kaçak* tea and leave [without any agreement]."<sup>1</sup>

The Turkish prime minister responded to Önder's remarks at a press conference three days later, where he attacked both Önder personally and his party more generally. "Exploding with rage," as Önder would later characterize him, Davutoğlu launched into a five-minute tirade in which he accused HDP politicians of exhibiting a complete lack of *samimiyet* 'sincerity' and an undignified display of disrespect toward the prime minister as a future guest. Signaling out Önder's invocation of *kaçak* tea for special disapproval, finally, the prime minister dismissed Önder as an unserious man who should not have the right to sit in the Turkish parliament. If for Önder and his political constituency, *kaçak* tea (historically foreign tea smuggled into Turkey, now also a designation for many imported varieties of tea) was a symbol of Kurdish identity, for the prime minister and perhaps a large segment of his political constituency, it was taken as an affront to Turkish nationhood.

In his response to the prime minister at a press conference later that day, Önder picked through the events that had led to the breakdown in peace negotiations, all the while calling into question the prime minister's understanding of *samimiyet* as deeply corrupted by its nationalist insistence on the ethnolinguistic and cultural unity of the Turkish nation-state, while affirming his and his party's sincere commitment to peace, democracy, and coexistence as the fundamental

1. The account of the interaction was compiled from multiple press sources. For a fuller account of the exchange with a rough transcript, see Lewis's (2020) appendix. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

values underlying public life in Turkey. Önder concluded his remarks with a renewed plea for an end to the fighting, while also offering a token of his and his party's sincerity (in a manner that also happened to highlight the prime minister's pettiness): asserting that he had never refused to meet but rather had suggested that meeting would be meaningless under the circumstances, Önder offered to serve the prime minister Turkish tea (cultivated around the Black Sea region of Rize) instead of *kaçak* tea, if only the government would return to the rule of law and the negotiating table: "Peace, right away! Peace, right away! A democratic framework right away! Democratic practice! While there is still time, before it's too late. . . . Seriousness, responsibility, political analysis, these are just words, so start with this: come [and meet], and if it's the *kaçak* tea that has upset you badly, we will offer you Rize tea, but it's a matter of life [and death] that we bring our homeland back onto democratic foundations to discuss these issues."

This article begins by asking how tea has come to possess the capacity to signify competing national and political allegiances, on the one hand, and to invoke a shared moral universal of common values and sentiments, like the values of hospitality and democratic deliberation and consensus, on the other. In tackling this question, the article offers a semiotic analysis of how tea functions as a "medium of value" (Turner 1968; Munn 1986; Graeber 2001) in Turkey, highlighting how this value is mediated through linked ideological and material processes that connect and extend across tea's existence as a drink, a commodity, and a multivalent social sign.

The centrality of tea to Turkey's public culture became apparent to me during more than a half-decade spent living in Turkey as a student, teacher, and researcher between 2008 and 2019. But it was during eighteen months of study and ethnographic fieldwork with Kurdish-language teachers, students, and activists in and around Mardin province in southeast Turkey between 2015 and 2019 that the politics of tea and the importance of tea as a political sign in Turkey's Kurdish conflict most forcibly impressed itself on me. Mardin—one of the centers of the 1915 genocide of Anatolian Christian communities and a perennial target of the Turkish state's anti-Kurdish campaigns over the past century—is a contested space where this contrast in national taste is keenly felt. In drawing a connection between the semiotics of tea and public formation, I describe how the production and circulation of tea, both as a sensuous material object and a sign in social life, are implicated in the organization of publics, or large-scale, mass-mediated political subjects (Cody 2011). Such an approach requires an analysis of the semiotic ideologies through which tea mediates the construction of social relationships and

is linked to and mobilized in competing public-making projects, as well as the contested and manifold ways that people position and evaluate their own and others' social identities relative to popular ideologies of national taste.

This article's objectives are twofold. The first is to better understand the role that tea plays in Turkey as both a materially circulating good and as a medium of value that organizes national publics around historically configured and commonly shared notions of taste. This analysis builds on and synthesizes insights from two intertwined anthropological traditions, semiotic anthropology and the anthropology of value, to better account for the relationship between the political-economic forces that have historically shaped tea's production and consumption in Turkey with the "semiotic ideologies" (Keane 2018) that condition its uptake as a moral and political sign in social life. The second objective is to offer a new account of public culture and popular politics in Turkey and North Kurdistan by exploring tea as a corresponding medium of value through which social life is made and evaluated by its participants. On the one hand, it seeks to elaborate the meanings of tea in ideological representations of Turkey's modern democratic culture. On the other hand, it seeks to better understand how this culture reproduces forms of national difference in which tea now plays both a notable role.

The article is divided into three parts. The first section provides a preliminary sketch of tea's role in public life in Turkey and offers a brief conceptual overview of how tea's status as an omnipresent medium of value shapes its uses as a political and moral sign. The second section describes the relatively recent history of tea's transformation from an exotic and largely unknown product into a near-universally consumed beverage and a prominent token of national identity in both Turkey and Kurdistan over the past century. And it outlines the historical processes through which tea emerged as a symbol for a new democratic culture—defined, *inter alia*, by a new sense of social proximity and public intimacy (or what in Turkish and Northern Kurmanji Kurdish is called *samimiyet*)—in which tea became an important medium of both interpersonal sociability and mass solidarity. The third and final section describes how the economic and political pressures exerted by competing nation-building projects in post-Ottoman Anatolia, as well as the forces of the global market, have transformed *kaçak* tea into both a salient "sign of difference" (Gal and Irvine 2019). A central feature of this analysis is a semiotic approach to value that prioritizes the interrelated dimensions of politics, political economy, and public culture and that takes seriously the proposition that the consolidation of material things as social objects, imbued with social values and meanings, is a dialectal, processual and therefore open-ended phenomenon

mediated through semiotic ideologies and unfolding within a historically conditioned “representational economy” (Keane 2003).

### Tea as a Medium of Value

According to market researchers, consumers in Turkey drink more tea per capita than anywhere else in the world.<sup>2</sup> However, tea’s rise to popularity is a recent phenomenon: tea became an object of mass consumption in much of the territory of modern Turkey only between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. Despite its relative novelty, tea has become central to nearly every important form of private and public sociability in the country. The vast majority of people in Turkey drink tea every day—regularly with breakfast and sometimes after lunch and dinner, as well as on many occasions between meals. A ubiquitous and comparably cheap commodity, tea is routinely offered to visitors and guests, given freely to customers and clients in the course of business, and shared among colleagues at the workplace and among friends and family members in the home. More than just inexpensive and ubiquitous, tea is also universal. It transcends class, even as it configures it. It is drunk in the homes of the rich and the poor. It can be found in almost any cafe or restaurant, although its price can fluctuate greatly and thus can serve as a reliable, if one-dimensional, index of the establishment’s position in social space.<sup>3</sup> Tea also cuts across political, religious, and ethnic divisions. It is drunk by so-called secularists and Islamists, by leftists and fascists, by Kemalists and Kurds, by Alevis and Sunnis. And for the most part, they all prepare and drink it in the same way.

So central is tea to everyday sociability in contemporary Turkey that it can be understood as a generalized medium of value. Tea circulates not only as a popular drink or commodity but as a material and semiotic medium (Douglas 1987; Manning 2012) whose most salient properties are universally recognized, although not uniformly evaluated, across the entire country. Whatever the individual benefit to the drinker (whether from sensuous enjoyment, increased energy, or nutrition), tea’s value is social: it mediates the process through which people make and live social relationships. Tea can be taken as a token of hospitality, affection, or care within the household; a token of friendship in the cafe or

2. One widely cited report from Statista, for example, claims that consumers in Turkey drink between 45 and 60 percent more tea than consumers in Ireland and the United Kingdom and more than twice as much tea as consumers in Russia (the countries ranking second, third, and fourth, respectively, in global consumption). See “Annual Per Capita Tea Consumption Worldwide as of 2016, by Leading Countries,” Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/507950/global-per-capita-tea-consumption-by-country/>.

3. In many restaurants, notably, tea is less often sold and more often offered as an *ikram*—i.e., for free after the conclusion of a meal—thereby lending a veneer of nontransactional hospitality onto an otherwise commercial interaction.

coffeehouse; a token of collegiality in the office break room or factory cafeteria; or a token of a shared religious devotion in a Sufi *sohbet* ‘conversation’. At times, tea is even ascribed with the very qualities of the relationships that it mediates and by extension becomes positioned as an end unto itself. This is seen, importantly, in how tea is sometimes made to serve as a model for social intimacy and solidarity—or what in Turkey is discussed under the rubric of *samimiyet*—as if tea were the very material embodiment of these values, akin to a synecdoche for sociability (Limbert 2010, 68).

Beyond its role in everyday sociability, tea has played a notable role in the formation of Turkey’s modern political culture and national identity and is now routinely put forward as a symbol of this culture and identity. Domestically cultivated for close to a century, tea has taken on an outsize place relative to its narrowly economic value in the ideological construction of Turkey’s national market. Following Turkey’s transition toward competitive, multiparty elections and the rapid growth of Turkey’s domestic tea sector following the Second World War, moreover, tea has also become both an instrument and a symbol of democratic politics—a sign mobilized in political discourse and performances that seek to project *samimiyet* onto a wider, national public. At times, too, tea even serves as a token of Turkey itself.

Upon initial consideration, however, tea may seem an odd candidate to conceptualize as a medium of value. In their shared project to compare such media cross-culturally, for instance, both Graeber (1996, 2001) and Turner (2008) prefer to compare generalized media of exchange (e.g., beads or money) with those famous anthropological objects in nonmarket societies that are understood to be unique, indivisible, and caught up in the identities of the persons of those between whom they are transferred (e.g., heirloom jewelry made from precious metals, feathers, or shells or performances of chiefly chanting).<sup>4</sup> Nor is tea especially valuable by the metrics of Turkey’s modern market economy. As one friend from Mardin jokingly put it to me in a conversation on the topic of why Kurds drink so much tea, “Tea is cheap. . . . After water, it’s tea.” How then can something as commonplace and inexpensive as tea be conceptualized as a medium of value?

When I write of tea as a medium of value, I mean—drawing on Graeber’s (2001, 75–76) definition—that (1) tea circulates as a concrete material means through which value is realized; (2) tea serves a measure of difference allowing

4. These latter objects, anthropologists have observed, tend to exist at the top of a hierarchy of different types of goods in social life, wherein each type is assessed according to incommensurable value metrics, with perishable and generic goods like tea generally at the bottom (Graeber 1996; Munn 1986).

for qualitative distinctions; and (3) tea sometimes becomes positioned as the embodiment or the origin of the values for which it serves as a token. Tea is valuable in the sense that its qualities are realized in productive human action, whether in something like singular acts of market exchange or recurring relations of hospitality. Tea is also valuable in the sense that has become a semiotic medium of representation organizing “collectively institutionalized symbolic model” through which to evaluate social action relative to larger social ends (Turner 1968).

We observe several of these semiotic properties in a 2018 advertising campaign for Türkiye'nin Ödeme Yöntemi (Turkey's payment method), or TROY, the country's first and only domestic payment card scheme launched by the Turkish Interbank Card Center (BKM) in 2016. The campaign was designed to link TROY to a celebration of Turkey's history, economy and, public culture and, by extension, to position the new card network as more aligned with Turkish values than its major multinational competitors like Visa and Mastercard. Tea played a central role in the campaign, where it was deployed both as a symbol of Turkey and as a more multivalent token of value. One print advertisement from the campaign that ran in several domestic trade journals and magazines, for instance, drew a three-way connection between its new card network, “Turkey's tea,” and “Turkey's value” (see fig. 1).

In both the simplicity of its design and the banality of its symbolism, the advertisement communicates two forms of correspondence: the first between the value of tea as a commodified medium of value and of TROY payment cards



**Figure 1.** *Left*, graphic recreation of TROY's original advertisement as photographed by the author in AnadoluJet's inflight magazine, November 2018. *Right*, English-language translation. Source: Author's original drawings.

as a medium of exchange; and the second between both objects and Turkey, presenting both tea and TROY bank cards as more general tokens of “Turkey’s value.” In linking everyday acts of commodity exchange to a shared life in the Turkish nation-state, the advertisement interpellates its public as “consumer citizens” (Özkan and Foster 2005), seeking to orient their consumer preferences through a project of “nation branding” (Dinnie 2015). This orientation is given expression in the implicit evocation of Turkey’s national market—an evocation that is accomplished here through the union of this new consumer service with a beloved consumer good: tea is a domestically cultivated and processed crop as well as a ubiquitous beverage widely deployed as a token of Turkey. TROY is a new financial service whose relatively small market share and less prestigious branding would benefit, its designers likely hoped, from greater association with this popular national symbol. In buying Turkey’s tea with Turkey’s only domestically controlled card payment system, Turkey’s consumer citizens are invited by the advertisement to imagine that they are buying into the value regime of the Turkish nation-state by supporting Turkey’s economy, celebrating its culture, and thereby participating together with their compatriots as members of a common national public.

Tea also appeared prominently in a television spot produced for the campaign. The commercial features a jingle accompanied by images of friends and family dining together in public, consumers shopping in upscale cafés and traditional markets with TROY bank cards, and scenic shots from different regions of Turkey (including Rize’s nationally famous tea gardens). It opens with a close-up shot of a glass of tea. As the music begins, a hand is seen dropping a sugar cube into the glass before a graphic of a payment card with the slogan “Payments in every corner of Turkey are made with TROY” is superimposed over the image. Almost simultaneously, a woman’s voice launches into the first line of the campaign’s Turkish jingle: “We love the *samimiyet*” (*Samimiyeti severiz*; see fig. 2).

*Samimiyet* is often glossed in English as either ‘sincerity’ or ‘intimacy’. However, *samimiyet* is a more multivalent and commonly deployed social value than either of these English glosses suggest and can communicate nuanced differences in meanings between its popular uses and its deployment in explicitly pious or political discourses. It is a concept, for example, through which people talk about and evaluate their close personal friendships and family life, at school or in the workplace, and in their villages or neighborhoods. In the context of modern Turkish politics, moreover, *samimiyet* describes horizontal and nontransactional relationships and is used as much to evaluate the integrity of large-scale national societies as interpersonal relationships. Already widely





**Figure 2.** *Left*, original screenshot of TROY’s television spot. *Right*, English-language translation of screenshot. The entire video clip can be seen on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1H9-Y1dAyM>.

encountered in popular discourses on communal solidarity and Islamic piety, its continuous and increasingly vapid invocation by the government and members of the ruling party over the past two decades has now also conferred upon *samimiyet* the status of something like official state ideology (Bora 2018).

The co-occurrence of auditory (*samimiyet*) and visual (the tea and the superimposed text) cues in the commercial is therefore likely no coincidence of editing. Rather this temporal contiguity implies a connection made by the advertisers between tea, *samimiyet*, and Turkey’s national unity—here emblemized by a newly launched national payment system operated by a consortium of Turkish public and private banks (i.e., the BKM) covering “every corner of Turkey.” The TROY advertising campaign thus invites Turkey’s consumers to connect tea to collective life in the nation-state and to see its consumption as a patriotic act of consumer-citizenship signaling membership in a common national public. By extension, it also links life in the national community to everyday forms of face-to-face sociability and the corresponding modes of moral and political evaluation these entail.

### **A New Drink for a Democratic Society**

Wherever I walked around upper Mardin in the run-up to the June 2018 elections, as the fresh air and verdant vistas of spring were giving way to drabber landscapes and the dry, dusty heat of summer, the teahouses in the old city of upper Mardin were showing their political colors. Almost every teahouse was decorated with the flags and posters of the president’s ruling party or the pro-Kurdish opposition—the only two political parties with any substantial level of support in the city—and local politicians, candidates, and their campaign volunteers made frequent, well-publicized stops at the largest and best-known establishments, turning spaces normally difficult to distinguish from one another

by passing glance or brief acquaintance into visibly salient sites of political and ethnic differentiation.

Tea's connection to politics in Turkey is not limited to its presence in public spaces like the teahouse. It also figures centrally in the ritual of the *çay ziyareti* 'tea visit' wherein candidates, party organizers, and volunteers visit potential supporters in their homes—a practice that imitates routine tea visits among friends, family, and neighbors and that also constitutes a practice of grass-roots organizing that proved highly effective in the ruling party's rise to power two decades ago (White 2004; Tuğal 2009). The symbolism of such practices is not lost on Turkey's politicians. This is how one local mayor in the province of Samsun and a member of the ruling party, Erdoğan Tok, explained the connection between tea and Turkey's democracy to journalists after accepting a *çay daveti* 'invitation to tea' at the home of one of his constituents:

[This] is a reality of our culture: we know that the suggestion "Let's drink a tea" is not only about drinking tea, it's a suggestion that says, "Come, let's chat a bit and talk over our troubles." And so, we chatted with Uncle Hasan in a *samimi* [characterized by *samimiyet*] setting accompanied by freshly brewed tea. This is why we are always thinking of citizens when we make investments and when we try to give voice to their feelings. We know that those who truly understand the hearts of our citizens always come to do so through [participating in a] *çay sohbeti* [conversation over tea].<sup>5</sup>

The politician's remarks, however platitudinous, provide useful evidence for the social attributes of tea in Turkey under discussion: the drink, still uncommon in many parts of the country a century ago, has now become not only an omnipresent medium of face-to-face sociability but is also widely recognizable as an instrument of democratic politics and, by extension, an important symbol of Turkey's modern democratic culture. In this ideological constellation, face-to-face consultation and deliberation and intimate familiarity with one's electoral constituencies or political representatives—the kind of *samimi* relationship best built over tea—have come to represent an ideal of democratic governance.

An extended account of the history of tea in Turkey is beyond the scope of this article, but a basic familiarity of the main features of this history is required to understand the democratic values that tea now mediates and embodies. Here three points need to be emphasized. First, tea's introduction as a mass consumer item was shaped by its association with novel social institutions and practices that in

5. "Başkan Tok çay davetini kırmadı," *Samsun Haber*, September 18, 2018.

themselves reflected and were presented by contemporaries at the time as being emblematic of larger transformations in Ottoman and later Turkish society in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Second, tea's status as a new, "democratic" beverage was influenced by the way these new social institutions were integrated into the public culture and political economy of postwar Turkey and its transition to multiparty democracy. And third, tea's emergence as a symbol of Turkey as its modern democratic culture was overdetermined not only by its place in public life (a position it shares in many neighboring countries) but also by state efforts to develop a domestic tea sector in Turkey's eastern Black Sea region over the twentieth century and, subsequently, the appearance of a new, salient distinction between Turkish and foreign tea.

Tea, that is, a drink brewed from the leaves of *Camellia sinensis*, was known to some elite elements of Ottoman society as early as the mid-seventeenth century (Faroqhi 2000). Yet tea began to take on the status of a mass consumer good only during the last decades of the empire, when it largely displaced coffee as the primary beverage mediating public sociability and private hospitality alike. The mass consumption of tea began first in neighboring Qajar Iran and the Russian-controlled caucasus over the nineteenth century (Matthee 1996; Floor 2004). By the start of the twentieth century, tea had become popular across Ottoman Kurdistan and eastern Anatolia as well, and the relatively rapid transition from the coffeehouse to the teahouse as the primary site of public sociability in these regions beginning in the 1890s was accompanied, significantly, by the breakdown of feudal hierarchies and tribal identities and the rapid growth in the population of urban and rural proletarians (seasonal workers, informal laborers, sharecroppers) and the formation of a new urban middle class.

In comparison with coffee, the preparation of tea was less labor intensive and more flexible and scalable, making participation in the public life of the teahouse even more accessible than the coffeehouse, whose social functions the teahouse gradually took over and expanded in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Tea's relative ease of preparation also made acts of private hospitality more affordable for the masses; whereas prior to tea's introduction, it was generally only urban notables or village *aghas* who possessed the resources to host guests in

6. The introduction of tea over the twentieth century, like coffee four centuries earlier, worked to remake dominant institutions and their corresponding modes of sociability. However, Hann (1990, 100) argues that "because of its expense coffee could [not] possibly have had the same democratic implications as either home-produced or imported tea in twentieth-century Turkey." That said, calculating the economic costs of tea and coffee is more complicated than simply tracking their unit costs overtime and also requires us to consider volume of drink produced by equivalent quantity of both drinks, as well as the labor required for their preparation and service (e.g., the roasting and grinding of coffee beans prior to brewing)—an analysis I hope to develop in more detail elsewhere.

their private residences, tea democratized the capacity for private hospitality, positioning the *çay ziyareti* ‘tea visit’ as a feature of Turkey’s modern and egalitarian social order.<sup>7</sup> Finally, tea became widely used in novel Islamic rituals, such as the Sufi *sohbet*, which was transformed in this period from a devotional practice wherein worshipers primarily sought spiritual and physical proximity to a shaykh to a semipublic forum for religious discussion and guidance and, increasingly, a site of political deliberation and mobilization (Van Bruinessen 2009) in which tea also played in increasingly visible role.<sup>8</sup>

In Turkey as a whole, however, tea did not overtake coffee as the most popular drink until the late 1950s, after substantial state investments by the Democrat Party (DP) in a new domestic tea sector centered on Rize in the eastern Black Sea region (Tunçdilek 1961). Tea’s rise in popularity in the major urban centers of western Turkey, consequently, was concurrent with and closely linked in the public imagination, at least initially, to Turkey’s postwar transition to a multiparty democracy—a reality that positioned tea as a new symbol of Turkey’s political culture at the same time that tea was permeating, and in turn changing, established forms of public and private sociability.<sup>9</sup> The rapid dissemination of tea therefore had important cultural as well as economic effects, positioning the beverage, as Hann (1990, 54) observes, “as a most appropriate symbol of the new society that emerged in Turkey in the second half of the twentieth century”—a status that tea retained even after the 1960 coup and during the political turbulence of subsequent decades.<sup>10</sup>

7. Stirling’s (1965) observations about “guest rooms” in Anatolian village life, for example, describe a transformation in local practices of hospitality as trending away from hierarchal relations of redistribution toward more egalitarian relations of reciprocity. A similarly trend away from redistributive to reciprocal forms of hospitality (and from coffee to tea) is encountered in post-Ottoman Kurdistan/British mandate Iraq; see Leach’s (1940) depiction of the Agha’s “guest house” and Barth (1953)’s discussion of “rooftop society” in urban Iraqi (former Ottoman) Kurdistan.

8. The close association between tea and the practice of *sohbet* is evident in their now frequent appearance in the nominal compound “tea *sohbet*” (see, for instance, Tok’s remarks quoted above) and is nicely captured in a couplet of unattributed Ottoman Turkish verse, popularly deployed in internet tea memes (and likely of fairly recent origin): “Es-sohbetü bilâ çay / Kes semai bilâ ay” (The *sohbet* without tea is like a sky without a moon).

9. Over the decade that the DP was in power, state support for rural development expanded substantially and tea production expanded from just under 30,000 decare to over 100,000, boosting production to nearly 3,000 metric tons and accounting for close to 60 percent of domestic consumption by 1958. Moreover, increasing economic difficulties toward the end of the 1950s, marked by growing balance-of-payments crisis and a devaluation of the lira that was compounded by a reduction in US aid, resulted in a precipitous drop in coffee imports (to almost nothing in 1958) and a further uptick in tea consumption in the following years (Tunçdilek 1961).

10. In Rize, as Hann describes, tea was an appropriate symbol of Turkey’s postwar democratic society because, in contrast to much of Turkey’s agricultural sector, the majority of tea production in Rize was initially in the hands of small family farms, thereby bringing local civil society into close alignment with the central state (a process that Hann describes as state “domestication”). But as Hann also notes, tea’s democratic sensibilities extended beyond its zone of cultivation around Rize, also emerging as an index for the lifeworld of the teahouse and its association with new democratic values.

This is not to suggest that tea is necessarily taken up as a sign of democratic values regardless of how it is deployed. Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan once frequently integrated tea into his public enactments of his *samimi*, man-of-the-people persona,<sup>11</sup> and news media once routinely ran articles and television segments in which the president would casually drop in for tea at the home or small business of ordinary citizens. However, more recently (and more controversially)—as he has become increasingly ensconced behind throngs of security and the walls of his massive new palace in Ankara—Erdoğan has taken to distributing unopened packages of tea instead, sometimes hurling them into the crowd from the stage during rallies or tossing them to supporters from the open door of his campaign bus. In the aftermath of the 2021 wildfires in southern Turkey, videos of Erdoğan throwing tea to disaster victims provoked a pronounced backlash, with opponents of the president decrying it as a cheap gesture that exhibited his lack of concern for and an increasingly out-of-touch attitude toward ordinary citizens.

Nor has tea's role as a salient political sign been confined to those communities who identify with the Turkish nation-state as a political project or who prefer Turkish-grown tea, as it is encountered across Turkey's political-consumer spectrum. This was evident, for example, when imprisoned Kurdish politician and then-presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş organized a virtual *sohbet* with his supporters through Twitter under the hashtag #DemirtaşKetilSohbeti (#DemirtaşKettleSohbet) in the immediate run-up to the June 2018 elections. The event had grown out of a political joke. Several weeks earlier, Demirtaş's campaign staff had organized a similar virtual rally in which they live-tweeted prewritten messages from Demirtaş to his supporters. Turkish prison guards, the campaign's story goes, fearing that Demirtaş had suddenly acquired some undisclosed means to access the internet, turned over his prison cell searching for contraband, going so far as to disassemble his electric kettle. In the process, they transformed the kettle into a major symbol of his campaign (fig. 3).

In organizing the *sohbet* 'kettle', the campaign drew on both the contingent meaning given to the kettle during the campaign and a more widely circulating ideology that positions the tea *sohbet* as a paradigmatic democratic practice through which Demirtaş could listen and respond to the concerns of his constituents. The campaign played up the *samimi* qualities of the *sohbet* by tweeting printed photographs of supporters' questions (in the form of preselected tweets) with handwritten responses from Demirtaş designed to elicit an intimate and

11. For discussion of this persona, see Sehlirkoglu (2015) and Bora (2018).



**Figure 3.** Kaçak tea on the menu in front of Kurdish cafes in Beyoğlu, Istanbul. Photographs by author.

personal atmosphere. At the same time that the event enacted a widely accessible model of democratic politics, it also played on Demirtaş's oppositional stance as a Kurdish political prisoner. This stance was figuratively affirmed by Demirtaş himself at the time in an interview with Turkish journalist Cüneyt Özdemir. When Özdemir asked Demirtaş what he prepared in the now famous kettle, the latter responded that he brewed *kaçak* tea, adding that “it really hits the spot.”<sup>12</sup>

Prior to Demirtaş's response to the journalist's question, notably, tea had not been explicitly invoked in the event's imagery or language, although its implicit evocation was likely already perceived by the campaign's intended audience, owing to well-established indexical linkages: both the causal chain between heating water (the kettle) and brewing tea and, more significantly, tea's frequent co-occurrence with the social ritual of *sohbet*—a connection that partly accounts for tea's capacity to serve as a symbolic model for sociability and solidarity. As its mobilization by pro-Kurdish politicians makes clear, however, if tea unites everyone in Turkey within a common political and moral cosmology, linking the sharing of tea to modern democratic institutions and their corresponding egalitarian sensibilities, it can also index, and in some cases symbolically stand in for, salient forms

12. “Demirtaş'tan cezaevindeki konuşması için 'Demokrasi tarihinde bir ilk' diyen AA'ya: Demokrasi o kadar yükseldi ki,” *TR24*, June 21, 2018.

of social difference. In describing how *kaçak* tea emerged as a sign of Kurdish difference in the country and tracing the interlinked ideological and material processes through which this contrast first emerged, it is essential to emphasize both the relative novelty of this contrast and the evolving, contingent character of Kurdish difference in Turkey.

### Taste and the National Public

On a chilly evening in late autumn 2018, I sat down for an interview with a former classmate at a Kurdish book café in Ankara, under shelves of Kurdish-language books and amid a milling crowd of students and young professionals gathering for a concert by a Kurdish folk musician to be held later that evening. Melike, my interlocutor, was originally from the border province of Urfa, just west of Mardin, where we had both studied together in Turkey's first public Kurdish language department until her graduation the previous spring. Melike and her husband had moved to Turkey's capital for work in Kurdish-language state media, before both were fired in the purge of Kurdish public-sector workers that had followed the collapse of the peace process several years earlier. Out of work, but still wanting to contribute her time and talents to Kurdish-language activism, Melike was a regular presence at the café, giving free Kurdish lessons, mostly to young students in the Kurdish diaspora. As she explained to me what attracted local Kurdish students to the café, running through a list of the café's most popular cultural and social activities, Melike suddenly grew more animated. "Oh, I have forgotten something! Here they have *kaçak* tea" (*çaya qaçaq* in Kurdish), she said laughing:

You know how important that is for Kurds! You know I've heard, in fact ask Ms. Z. [the owner of the café] because she will be able to tell you even more: some students only come here for *kaçak* tea. Just think. They only come here for *kaçak* tea. Kurds love *kaçak* tea that much. . . . I also prefer *kaçak* tea. At home, everywhere. We are just used to it. That's the tea you drank in your childhood. For example, in my home we drank nothing but *kaçak* tea. We just can't drink Turkish tea. No one in my family can.

My own observations have largely confirmed Melike's assertion: in Mardin and along Turkey's southern border with Iraq and Syria more widely, *kaçak* tea is standard in most local homes and teahouses, and domestically grown Turkish tea is generally only available in upscale cafés or national patisserie chains and, even then, often as one of two options. However, *kaçak* tea's ubiquity in the region has the secondary effect of reducing its social salience relative to in the rest of

Turkey. Whereas a preference for Turkish tea in Mardin is a marked feature of nonlocal identity, a quality associated with civil servants or members of the security forces living temporarily in the province, it is not a major sign of local differentiation: the teahouses in Mardin's old city displaying pro-government and pro-Kurdish election propaganda, for instance, both primarily serve *kaçak* tea, and the drink remains the preferred variety of nearly all locals in the province.

If *kaçak* tea's social position along the border is so dominant as to be generally unmarked, however, its smaller market share in the rest of Turkey can, in many social spaces, transform into an explicit marker of a nonstandard, minority identity. Outside of Turkey's Kurdish-majority regions, cafés and coffeehouses are also important spaces where Kurdish counterpublics can enact and validate alternative identities (Günay 2019). In this context, tea serves not only as a medium of internal social cohesion but also as an instrument of external social differentiation—in particular, because one of the identifiable features of many Kurdish cafés or teahouses outside of Kurdistan is that they often, in contrast to most establishments, serve *kaçak* tea. This has the effect of making *kaçak* tea a recognized component of café branding, and many teahouses and cafés in western Turkey targeting ethnic Kurdish customers openly advertise on signs and menus that they serve *kaçak* tea—a promotion that functions, as in the case of the Kurdish book café in Ankara discussed above, both as an appeal to consumer preference and as the interpellation of an ethnic or regional identity (fig. 3).

There are two points to bear in mind here. The first is that whereas the designation *kaçak* originated as a formal legal distinction between duty-paid and contraband tea—"contraband" still being the primary meaning of *kaçak* in the context of other goods like electronics or gasoline (Oguz 2023)<sup>13</sup>—it has largely evolved in contemporary Turkey into a gustatory distinction between different methods of tea processing and resultant changes in coloring and flavor. The second is that the social meanings of this distinction in taste have changed over time and that, even today, a personal preference for Turkish or *kaçak* tea does not always neatly correlate with political orientation or ethnic background, even as this preference can be perceived to index, and in some cases is symbolically mobilized to represent, Kurdish identity in Turkey. A semiotic analysis of the material and ideological dimensions of the tea market in Turkey as they have developed historically can help us better understand this phenomenon.

13. As becomes clear in my discussion of the association between *kaçakçılık* 'smuggling' and Kurdish antistate politics below, the word *kaçak* has social resonances beyond its use as a label for a kind of tea. For a recent taken on the potential political meanings of *kaçak* in contemporary Turkey, see Ustundag (2023). For an account of the word's historical meanings and uses in the Turkic languages and neighboring languages of central Eurasia, see Lewis (2023).



In Turkey today, *kaçak* tea refers to various varieties of foreign tea processed using the CTC method, in contrast to Turkey's domestic tea which is processed through the "orthodox" method (Hann 1990). This means that *kaçak* tea has a taste and color that is quite distinct from Turkish tea—that is, *Türk çayı*, Rize, or *yerli* 'domestic' tea, as it is referred to among locals in Mardin.<sup>14</sup> These gustatory distinctions are mirrored by differences in the respective designs of their packaging and labeling. As *kaçak* tea—normally labeled as *Seylan çayı* 'Ceylon tea' even when not actually grown in Sri Lanka (a relic of British colonialism that has taken on new significance in modern Turkey)<sup>15</sup>—was historically smuggled to Turkey via wholesalers in Iraq or Syria, it was traditionally marketed under Arabic brand-names with English- and Arabic-language labeling and packaging. This has continued, notably, even after the relative easing of import restrictions beginning in the 1980s. In fact, today a large percentage of the *kaçak* tea consumed in Turkey is imported legally through Mediterranean ports like İskenderun or Ceyhan and packaged and wholesaled in cities like Gaziantep and Urfa—both border cities and formerly centers for the trade in smuggled goods like tea (Yıldız 2014). While legally imported *kaçak* tea often continues to be sold in its customary English- and Arabic-language packaging (often with Turkish-language labels now included as well), this packaging is no longer coincidental to a disequilibrium in economic value created by the interaction between global commodity chains and Turkey's national tariff regime. Rather, the ongoing use of English- and Arabic-language packaging bespeaks this phenomenon's objectification in a kind of national "brandedness" (Nakassis 2012), even if, in contrast to Turkish tea, its Kurdish quale (Munn 1986) is never explicitly invoked in its marketing or labeling. Tea's capacity to signify national difference, however, is quite recent,

14. It is notable that people deploy a conventionalized set of contrasts to talk about these differences. When I asked Melike what she thought was different about the taste of *kaçak* tea and "Turkish tea" (Turkish: *türk çayı*), for instance, she pointed to several "salient" (Kurdish: *zelal*) qualities, describing how *kaçak* tea was "more thoroughly brewed" (Kurdish: *bidem*), "bitter" (Kurdish: *tahl*) and "heavy" (Kurdish: *giran*) than Turkish tea, which she said tended to be served "weak" (Kurdish: *zeif*) and "without color" (Kurdish: *bêrenk*). I also often heard analogous contrast, albeit with inverted value metrics, made in Mardin (in Turkish) by Turkish tourists or civil servants, who routinely complained about the relative unavailability of Turkish tea in teahouses and other public venues in Mardin, as well as *kaçak* tea's "bitter" (Turkish: *acı*) flavor and "dark" (Turkish: *koyu renkli*) color, as if it had been "overbrewed" (Turkish: *fazla demlenmiş*). When locals in Mardin poke fun at Turkish tea in Turkish, moreover, they do in a way that mirrors Melike's Kurdish-language ascriptions, commonly citing its "lack of flavor" (Turkish: *tatsızlık*) and its production of "weak" (Turkish: *zayıf*) tea.

15. This was likely the result of British policy to expand tea production within its colonial territories and the corresponding rapid expansion of Ceylon's tea industry beginning in the late nineteenth century (Wenzlhuemer 2008), together with the British occupation of large swaths of the Middle East beginning in the first decades of the twentieth century, which tied Turkish Kurdistan to Ceylon through British mandate Iraq. Today a significant portion of tea imported to Turkey comes from East Africa, although almost all foreign tea as marketed as being "Ceylon" tea.

and until the 1960s the consumption of foreign tea was widespread throughout Turkey and seems to have carried little symbolic value for a Kurdish identity.<sup>16</sup>

Nor did the Turkish state's early efforts to cultivate a taste for tea among its citizens necessarily result in a preference for Turkish tea. Rather, the dramatic growth in domestic tea production beginning in the 1950s and the rapid transition from coffee to tea drinking over the same decade among consumers in western Turkey also had the secondary effect of actually boosting tea imports: in 1949 Turkey imported just over 1,300 metric tons of processed tea; by 1958 tea imports had risen to nearly 5,200 metrics tons even (Tunçdilek 1961). As Hann (1990) outlines, the preference by many of Turkey's consumers for foreign tea was strengthened by the high cost and low quality of the new domestic product, whose economic viability was only sustained through protectionists policies. Problems with domestic production further intensified in the 1970s following the transfer of responsibility for state supervision from the Ministry of Customs and Monopolies to a newly created public tea corporation, known as Çaykur. This was followed shortly thereafter by the relaxing of quality controls, the expansion of the area under cultivation beyond state guidelines, and the introduction of new harvesting methods (like the use of shears) that increased efficiency but reduced quality over handpicked methods.<sup>17</sup>

The crisis in domestic production in the 1970s resulted in further efforts by the Turkish state to control imports through high tariffs or outright prohibition on commercial imports. The smuggling of tea into eastern Anatolia is probably as old as its status as an object of mass consumption in the region, and already by the 1930s the Turkish state was taking significant steps to secure its border with its southern neighbors, as the Great Depression lowered global agricultural prices and threatened its most important source of foreign currency (Öztan 2020).

16. Tea cultivation along the Russian Black Sea coast began in the nineteenth century, but serious efforts by the Turkish state to promote domestic cultivation did not occur until after the foundation of the republic. In 1924 the Turkish parliament approved funds for the importation of tea seeds from Batumi, in the neighboring Georgian SSR, and for the establishment of a tea research center in Rize; and during the 1930s, Ankara continued to expand its support to tea growers and in 1940 approved a major plan to significantly expand the area of tea cultivation through state credits for farmers and the construction of a modern tea processing factory opened in 1947 (Hann 1990). Domestic tea production in Rize exploded from just 181 kilograms of processed tea to more than two hundred metric tons between 1939 and 1950—yet even by 1950 domestic production only accounted for less than 10 percent of the total tea consumed in the country and still stood well below the more than 6,000 tons of coffee imported annually (Tunçdilek 1961). Tea's displacement of coffee as the most popular beverage in western Turkey, as discussed earlier, occurred with Turkey's transition to a multiparty democracy and the election of the DP government after 1950.

17. By the end of the decade, Hann (1990, 28–29) remarks that “the product which had become Turkey's staple beverage and the symbol of its new society was declared to be rotten, full of bits of rubbish. Moreover, large quantities (officially 95,000 tons in 1979) delivered at the peak periods had to be dumped in the Black Sea, because the factories were stretched to capacity and could not process them.”

However, tea smuggling in particular took on new dimensions in the 1960s and 1970s, as the acquisition of legally imported tea became prohibitively expensive for most people and state actors sought to control, increasingly through outright violence, access to its national market.<sup>18</sup> Owing to the predominance of Kurdish-speaking communities in Turkey's eastern border regions, significantly, *kaçakçılık* 'smuggling' had already become closely associated with Kurdish ethnicity in Turkey's popular imagination, while ongoing state violence against impoverished Kurdish border communities in the name of interdicting the movement of contraband goods became a rallying cry for the Kurdish movement in Turkey (Özgen 2003). Among many members of these Kurdish border communities, moreover, *kaçakçılık* is sometimes presented as a form of antistate resistance (Bozcali 2020).

While the Turkish state's securitization of its borders and its increased capacity to enforce a national tariff regime, together with increased subsidies for the domestic tea sector, eventually reduced the relative quantity of smuggled tea consumed into Turkey, this was not in itself sufficient in changing the preferences of Turkish consumers, many of whom continued to prefer foreign-grown tea.<sup>19</sup> To this end, the state developed new forms of gustatory disciplining that actively sought to link *kaçak* tea in the public imagination with unhealthy, dangerous, and unpatriotic consumption. By the 1970s, state officials and public figures were openly attacking *kaçak* tea as not only illegal but unsafe and immoral;<sup>20</sup> and efforts

18. This change was noted by contemporaneous commentators, who observed with alarm the desperation of Turkey's impoverished border communities living in the southeast and the violence of the state's border regime, whose effects were felt in the increasing frequency of incidents in which low-level smugglers were injured or killed by Turkish security forces (see, for instance, reflections of Turkish journalist Sadun Tanju [1975, 11] on his experiences along the border during his military service). As Beşikçi ([1969] 2014, 283) describes, the expanded security regime along the border enabled networks of state actors in security forces together with an increasingly small number of powerful landlords and merchants to control illicit cross-border trade through their control of *kaçak pasajlar*—or markets selling smuggled goods in border towns such as Nusaybin in Mardin province—as well as their increased capacity to police movement across the border and control traffic on roads in and out of the border region. By the late 1960s, Beşikçi observes that the political economy of the border region was shaped as much by the immediate needs of the states in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria as by Cold War politics more generally, with Turkish state policy making smuggling into an “integral element of the state.”

19. Ayfer Tunç (2001, 310), for instance, recalls the following details in her memoir of her childhood in western Turkey during this decade: “In the 1970s the range of drinks available was very small and both hot and cold drink choices were limited. Everyone brewed tea at home. Earl Grey, Ceylon tea, and various kinds of tea bags had not yet entered into our lives. You could find such things in upscale stores in the big cities, but those living in smaller towns usually first encountered them through migrants [visiting from] Germany. There was no variety or imported [tea], but people would look for good tea and its qualities were understood. Some tea addicts loved *kaçak* tea, and they would ask those they knew who traveled to the southeast to bring some back for them, as *kaçak* tea was easily found there.”

20. Thus, for example, does a state intellectual slip the following remarks into a pedantic commentary on the necessity for citizens to follow food safety regulations: “There are even people who, showing absolutely no respect for the law, are known to transport *kaçak* tea into our country. No one knows if this tea is safe for consumption, or how it has been prepared. Our people must do their shopping at places under the control of

at gustatory disciplining only expanded in subsequent decades following the liberalization of Turkey's tea market in 1984 and the beginning of the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) armed insurgency that same year. On the one hand, a new private tea sector made up of both domestic and international players (such as Unilever) joined Çaykur—since 2017 itself a semiprivatized company under the control of Turkey's Sovereign Wealth Fund—in a common front to preserve the integrity of Turkish tea (and their own shares in the domestic market) against encroachment by foreign competition. Today, Turkish news media, government agencies, and business organizations associated with the tea sector routinely publish material highlighting the damage done by *kaçak* tea to the national economy and public health alike.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, growing violence in the conflict between Turkish state security forces and PKK militants in late 1980s and the 1990s, together with the perception that the Kurdish militant group was directly profiting from the smuggling of tea, lent emotive force to a state discourse linking *kaçak* tea to criminality and terrorism. This phenomenon was on full display in a broadcast by TRT1 (Turkey's official state news channel) in 2012 during coverage of a meeting of provincial state and military leaders in the province of Osmaniye close to Turkey's border with Syria.<sup>22</sup> At some point during their meeting, the assembled statesmen called upon a passing beverage peddler to serve them tea. As they were being served, Osmaniye's *vali* 'provincial governor', Celalettin Cerrah, asked for confirmation from the peddler that they were to be served Turkish tea. The peddler's response—whether it was out of a sense of rebellion, honesty, or simple habit is unclear<sup>23</sup>—was that he served both Turkish and *kaçak* tea, according to his customers' preferences. The initial reaction from most of the assembled military and state officials, as later confirmed by the Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) narration, was amused laughter. However, Cerrah, moving quickly to regain control of the situation, began to berate both the tea peddler and, through his performance before the assembled cameras, a larger, more amorphous public. "If you're helping the PKK, then drink *kaçak tea*," Cerrah declared, continuing: "If you want

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municipal government or else designated by our laws. This is necessary in terms both of what is right and what it means to be a good citizen" (Çubukçu 1977, 77)

21. In an interview with state media in 2016, for example, Çaykur general manager İmdat Sütüoğlu highlighted the dangers posed by *kaçak* tea both to an individual's physical and mental well-being and to Turkey's national economy. Linking it to everything from cancer and circulatory issues to psychological illness, while also noting the economic damage caused to the nation's tea growers by the estimated 60,000 tons of *kaçak* tea still smuggled into the country annually, he is reported to have said: "Let this money stay in our country and go to our farmers. I mean, let's not lose either our health or our money."

22. The TRT report can still be found on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/0tvmGX83hiL>.

23. Although it is worth noting that Osmaniye is located close to the Syrian border and, as provincial governor Cerrah confirms with his own words, a preference for *kaçay çay* is widespread in the province.

to help the PKK, if you want Turkish police and soldiers to be killed, if you want Turkish citizens to be killed, smoke *kaçak* cigarettes, use *kaçak* gasoline, what else can I tell you? I mean, could there be such a Turkish citizen? On the one hand, you say ‘Damn the PKK’; on the other hand, you support them. You support them by smoking *kaçak* cigarettes and by drinking *kaçak* tea. Wherever I go there is *kaçak* tea. It just can’t go on like this.”

In his equation of the consumption of *kaçak* tea with support for the PKK, Cerrah (like the pro-Kurdish politicians discussed earlier) draws an indexical connection between the former beverage and Kurdish identity, even as in this case any explicit mention of such an identity is erased and replaced with vague references to criminality, separatism, and terrorism—a well-described feature of Turkish state discourse (Yeğen 1999).

The relationship between *kaçak* tea and the quale of Kurdishness thus operates in multiple dimensions, with the *vali*’s formulation of the connection unfolding across a distinct vector of indexicality than those animated in the Kurdish book café or by Kurdish politicians. Cerrah does not, like Melike, trace the taste or preference for *kaçak* tea to common origins and experience of life in the border region through which it was historically smuggled—a kind of geographic contiguity often invoked by friends and informants in Kurdistan—and by further indexical extension, to membership in a common ethnic or national community. Indeed, Cerrah speaks only of Turkish citizens. Instead he points to a causal contiguity based in an alleged relationship of value between the consumer of *kaçak* tea and the PKK as its alleged primary trafficker, seemingly obvious to the possibility that the tea in question was duty-paid and legally imported.<sup>24</sup> And Cerrah reframes an economic relationship between buyer and seller as a relationship of support of the former for the latter’s political project (the description of which here, of course, is limited to attempts to kill Turkish soldiers and divide the country).

Yet even the ideological metrics that position *kaçak* tea as an affront to the integrity and honor of the Turkish nation-state—an instance of “semiotic transgression” (Theng and Lee 2022)—can themselves be taken up and redeployed by Kurdish actors in a way that serves, through a mode of comedic ridicule akin to “stereotype inversion” (Bermúdez 2020), to subvert these metrics. Thus, for

24. Just to drive the point home, the TRT narrator concluded the segment by noting that the PKK earned two billion liras annually from the trafficking of smuggled tea and cigarettes. While the PKK is credibly alleged to be involved in cross-border smuggling, the claim that the entire economy of cross-border tea smuggling is controlled by the group is absurd, as is the assumption, as explained above, that the trade in *kaçak* tea necessarily unfolds on the black market. Much of it is now legally imported and packaged in factories in Turkey.



**Figure 4.** A Kurdish-language cartoon contrasting Turkish and *kaçak* tea that originally appeared on the Hestucomics Instagram page and was drawn by Ronî Battê. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

instance, did a recent Kurdish-language comic strip poke fun at the absurdity of the exaggerated offense taken by many in Turkey at the mere existence of *kaçak* tea (fig. 4). The comic's first frame depicts a personified, seemingly self-satisfied glass of tea. The tea is identifiable as stereotypically Turkish owing to its service in a traditional tulip shape glass accompanied with a red and white saucer (Turkey's national colors) and is ironically labeled in Kurdish as “an honorable tea.”<sup>25</sup> The second frame depicts the same glass of tea, now seemingly outraged by the arrival of a second tea whom the former glass insults as a *qehpo* ‘(male) prostitute’. This second tea, in contrast, comes in a paper cup (a comparatively déclassé mode of drinking tea) and with a tea bag labeled “Mahmood Tea”—a popular brand of *kaçak* tea. While labeled “a dishonorable tea,” moreover, it remains cool and seemingly unbothered by the insult or the judgment of the Turkish tea—a kind of self-deprecation whose effect is group affirmation.

If *kaçak* tea can be mobilized as a symbol of Kurdish identity, it does so within a dynamic “indexical order” (Silverstein 2003) in which its precise meanings are contingent on framing and context and remain subject to renegotiation. In 2020, for example, Çaykur launched a new brand of domestic tea named “Mezopotamya Çayı” ‘Mesopotamia tea’ that explicitly targets consumers in east and southeast Turkey. In its method of processing, the brand seeks to mimic the look and taste of Ceylon (i.e., *kaçak*) tea, while its name plays on recognized associations between *kaçak* tea and Turkey's southeastern border

25. Compare this with the image of “Turkey's tea” in the TROY advertisement shown in fig. 1.

region, since *Mesopotamia* functions both a coded designation for Kurdistan and a contested geographic designation for multiethnic regions like Mardin province. Introduced in a conscious effort to encourage the consumption of Turkish over foreign tea, the brand plays upon *kaçak* tea's status a sign of social difference at the same time that it seeks to assimilate this difference and capture its value for the domestic market. If successful, this effort promises not only to reduce the share of foreign tea consumed in the regions but also to recreate—in a process of “fractal recursion” (Gal and Irvine 2019)—the distinction between “Kurdish” and “Turkish” tea within the domestic sector.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

In this article I have shown how tea functions as a medium of value in contemporary Turkey, paying close attention to how its status as a popular drink and domestically cultivated commodity shape its uses as an ethical and political sign and its role in the formation of competing national publics within Turkey's modern borders. In describing tea's role in public formation, I focused analytical attention on the value relations aligning people and ideologies of taste with the nation as a larger horizon a value—an end toward which other activities, like sharing a glass of tea (or sharing a cartoon about tea on social media) can be socially oriented. Concurrently, I examined the historical connection between tea and modern ideologies of democracy and nationhood in the country, paying special attention to the ways that tea is connected to *samimiyet* as a social value with intertwined ethical and political meanings; and I considered what *kaçak* tea's mobilization as a political sign in the context of Kurdish politics in Turkey can reveal about the semiotic dimensions of Kurdish difference in the country. More broadly, I have tried to show how things, in becoming social objects, likewise become semiotic media of value whose contingent properties, when examined as such, allow us to elaborate on their social histories and better understand their social meanings.

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26. The success of this effort is currently unclear, although its relatively lower cost undoubtedly offers an advantage. One close friend from Mardin, a lifelong drinker of *kaçak* tea, admitted to me that many in the city, including himself, are increasingly blending *kaçak* tea with Turkish tea, given the rapid inflation of the Turkish lira and the prohibitive costs of the former. Anecdotally, however, I have yet to encounter among my friends and acquaintances in the region anyone who consumes Mesopotamia Tea.

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