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Tafra: A Source of Cultural Intimacy in Novi Pazar

Abstract: This paper is an analysis of the social regulation of pride through the power of naming in Novi Pazar, southwest Serbia. One of the words commonly used to label what the community sees as exaggerated pride is *tafra*, which comes from Turkish. It is argued here that *tafra* is an ambivalent and antagonistic performative label which, through gossip, regulates what is perceived by the community as the practice of boasting, as well as functions as a reference for communal sociality (cultural intimacy).

Key words: *tafra*, pride, boasting, gossip, cultural intimacy

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Tafra: vir kulturne intimnosti v Novem Pazarju

Izvleček: Članek analizira družbeno regulacijo ponosa s postopkom imenovanja v Novem Pazarju v jugozahodni Srbiji. Za označevanje tistega, kar skupnost dojema kot pretiran ponos, običajno uporabljajo besedo *tafra*, ki je turškega porekla. V članku pokažemo, da je *tafra* dvoumna in antagonistična performativna oznaka, ki s pomočjo obrekovanja uravnava samohvalo, ravno tako pa se nanaša na kulturno intimnost.

Ključne besede: *tafra*, ponos, samohvala, obrekovanje, kulturna intimnost

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The Turkish language and Ottoman socio-cultural legacy have influenced the perception and naming of the different ways of disclosing one's pride in Novi Pazar. The word regularly used to indicate that someone is satisfied or happy with his or her individuality, family, personal and professional success etc. is the Serbian word *ponos*. This term is used to describe what is seen as a reasonable positive self-evaluation. On the other hand, if someone's pride is perceived as groundless, then his or her behaviour or speech will be labelled as *tafra*, which is the Turkish word for 'pompous pride'.

Drawing on Niko Besnier's account of *gossip* as a multiparty form of social interaction which embodies the complexities of social life, and on Michael Herzfeld's account of *cultural intimacy*, I will examine *tafra* as an ambivalent *performative*² label which has to do with the social regulation of what is perceived as *showing off*, and which simultaneously functions as a reference for communal sociality. *Tafra* as a specific way of boasting is seen by the community as a 'challenger' to the communal *diurnality*³ and communally prescribed egalitarianism.

The ethnographic part of this study involves an analysis of the information received from the open interviews I conducted among 16 adult individuals from Novi Pazar (Bosniak-Serb ratio: 80-20%). The interviews revolved around Novi Pazar as a community, *tafra* as a local 'phenomenon', the 'gossip culture' in Novi Pazar, and the

² 'Performative' here refers to the social performance of the Self, which is 'interactional in nature and involving symbolic forms and live bodies, provides a way to constitute meaning and to affirm individual and cultural values'. More in: Stern, Henderson, 1993, 3.

³ The term *diurnality* is borrowed from ethology and used here as a label for everyday habits and dynamism in the relationships between individuals living in the same community (how they see themselves and others with whom they share their communal lives).

perceptions of success in Novi Pazar. I also interviewed 10 teenagers from Novi Pazar (8 Bosniaks and 2 Serbs, aged 17-19 years), asking them to define *tafra* and explain at least one situation in which certain behaviour, speech and acts could have been described as *tafra*.⁴ Their quotes are presented in italics.

Background information about Novi Pazar: the Ottoman legacy to the periphery

‘A tafradžija is a person who likes to compete with others, and also likes to show off his car, his mobile phone. In Novi Pazar there is a club famous for being the meeting point of the so-called čaršijski ljudi (čaršija⁵ lads). The place is full of people with brand name shirts, shoes, belts, mobile phones etc. Once I was told by an acquaintance of mine that he and his friends ‘downed more than 2000 euros’ the night before. Nowadays, tafradžije⁶ do not count the bottles of alcoholic drinks they’ve had. They prefer to present the amount in the euros they’ve spent on drinks.’

Novi Pazar is a municipality located in southwest Serbia. This area is of special importance for Serbian statehood, since Serbian medieval capital Ras was located close to Novi Pazar. The Ottoman colonisation in the XIVth and XVth centuries introduced Islamic culture, which is nowadays visible in the architectural appearance of Novi Pazar as a place with more than 30 mosques (some of them older than four centuries), as well as in the ethnic and religious structure of the town (Muslim Bosniaks at around 80% out of around 85,000 residents).

⁴ My thanks to Z. Ž., A. B., H. Č., M. P., Š. Đ., H. B., A. Č., I. B., E. S., L. Z. K., M. J., Đ. B., A. S., and to their families.

⁵ Çarşı (Turkish): the city centre which is a place of socialisation.

⁶ *Tafradžija* (sing.), *tafradžije* (pl.).

The Ottoman culture and language have left a significant impact on the culture of the Novi Pazar population, regardless of their current religious or ethnic affiliation. The local variant of the language spoken in Novi Pazar is heavily influenced by old Turkish; that is, it is marked by the usage of Turkish words which are neither found in the language spoken by Serbs elsewhere, nor regarded as standard lexemes of the Bosnian language, spoken by Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁷ The language spoken in Novi Pazar is labelled as *zetsko-raški* or *zetsko-južnosandžački* by Serbian linguists, which means that this language variant is shared by the population living in Novi Pazar, its neighbouring municipalities of Sjenica and Tutin (with Bosniak majorities), and the Christian Orthodox and Muslim Slavic population in much of Montenegro.⁸

The Serbs and Bosniaks from Novi Pazar nowadays call the language they speak either Serbian or Bosnian, whereas its spoken production is almost identical, with certain sociolectal differences. Despite the sociolectal, cultural, and political differences between the Serbs and the Bosniaks, the two communities have been drawn closer in their world views by their coexistence, similar socio-economic standing, and language, especially regarding what is good

⁷ The 'Serbian' and 'Bosnian' languages are labels for the successors of the Serbo-Croatian language (the official federal language of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia), which were politically separated after the breakup of socialist Yugoslavia. Alongside Serbian and Bosnian, two other successors of Serbo-Croatian are Croatian and Montenegrin. These four names are political labels for variants of one language. All variants of this language had adopted a number of words from Turkish (or from Arabic and Persian through Turkish), which are nowadays known as words of foreign origin only by linguists and those interested in languages. Such words are *čobanin* (shepherd), *dugme* (button), *veđa* (eyebrow), *kašika* (spoon) etc.

⁸ Okuka, 2008, 170.

or bad or what is 'normal' or 'not normal' (for example, general views on the position of woman in the household, treatment of elderly people, preference for sons as descendants, adultery, etc.).⁹

Many townspeople believe that Novi Pazar is a social, cultural and economic periphery, and that *the good life* is somewhere else.¹⁰ The majority of both Novi Pazar communities lives in similar economic conditions, and both communities prize getting out of the region and starting life elsewhere as a success (be it Istanbul or Sarajevo for the Bosniaks, Belgrade for the Serbs, or Switzerland, Germany etc. for both communities). For this reason, staying in Novi Pazar is considered to be a kind of *failure*, which, I would argue here, has a significant impact on the collective perception of success (economic, political, personal etc.) as well as on the communal understanding of the notions of pride and boasting.¹¹ Such views are arguably related to the communal discourses on egalitarianism, which shape the people's views of the means (such as boasting) by which one seeks to 'show' to the community that one has done something extraordinary.

All my respondents, regardless of age, claimed that they lived in a community in which one's failure is never forgotten.¹² On the other hand, almost all of them claimed that success was unforgivable as well,¹³ which means that they considered social envy om-

⁹ The Novi Pazar local society is, in fact, diverse in its lifestyles and world views. However, many residents would describe the town as a place that is socially more conservative than other places in Serbia or Bosnia.

¹⁰ These are the views that my respondents shared with me as an insider (I was born and grew up in Novi Pazar). When talking to outsiders, on the other hand, some of my respondents tended to embellish their views of life in Novi Pazar.

¹¹ This perception comes from the experience of living on the periphery.

¹² In Serbian: '*neuspeh se ne zaboravlja*'.

¹³ In Serbian: '*uspeh se ne prašta*'.

nipresent in Novi Pazar.¹⁴ This is why most of them (especially the girls and women) ‘need to take *good care*’ of their public image, in order to avoid gossip and possible negative labels from the community. As one of my respondents said, ‘Whatever one does and talks about should be well balanced and modest, so that the community (*čaršija*) will not label it negatively’. Even if one is successful and does something extraordinary, he or she should avoid bragging about it because what is seen by the community as overt pride may come in for communal gossip and mockery.

Pride is, therefore, an emotion often subjected by the community to thorough *gossip scrutiny* and to attempts at social regulation through the power of naming. On the other hand, even though *boasting* is seen on the surface as something undesirable, the majority of my respondents feel that bragging is actually a characteristic of their community. ‘We like to brag about everything, especially in front of outsiders,’ said one of my respondents. In such a context, *tafra* as a ‘phenomenon’ and as a label holds an ambivalent position in the Novi Pazar communal narratives about the communal notions of ‘Us’.¹⁵ Attaching the *tafra* label to someone’s behaviour and speech functions as a communal corrective, but at the same time *tafra* is seen as something omnipresent, ‘belonging’ to the Novi Pazar residents despite the official ethos of modesty. Hence the *tafra* label is an interactional way of constituting meanings and affirming ambivalent and antagonistic individual and cultural attitudes to boasting v. egalitarianist ethos in the community.

¹⁴ The respondents who disagree with the latter view actually believe that an individual’s success is embraced only when it serves the community.

¹⁵ The respondents who more or less disagree with such a view (15%) suggest that it is not appropriate to generalise or to speak ill of ‘ourselves’.

Gossiping about *tafra* as a social regulation strategy of communal life

A tafradžija is someone who likes to show off his manliness. Once I introduced a friend of mine to someone who immediately felt the need to emphasise how brave and strong he was, and said: 'Bro, you are new in this town, if anyone threatens you and you feel threatened, you just tell me, I will sort things out for you. No one will dare even to touch you.'

In contemporary Turkey, *tafra* stands for ostentatious speech used to portray oneself as wealthier or more successful than one actually is. *Tafra* is not confined to speech acts but can also describe bodily performance (clothing, grand gestures, etc.). The Turkish colloquial language uses the phrase *afra tafra*¹⁶ to describe pompous behaviour and conceit,¹⁷ and the local context in Novi Pazar uses *tafra* in exactly the same sense.

As noted above, *tafra* in Novi Pazar stands for the practice of 'showing off', i.e. for what is locally understood as ostentatious and unjustified 'talk' about oneself. Here is one of the definitions of *tafra* offered by one of my respondents:

Tafra is when you go to Germany, and you live there in slums, and you do the dirtiest jobs, and then during the summer vacation you spend your savings renting an expensive shiny luxury car, and then you come to Novi Pazar and brag in front of your friends and neighbours, to show them that you have succeeded in your life.

¹⁶ I thank my Turkish friends Can Öztaş and Başak Ertür, London Birkbeck College PhD students, for sharing their personal accounts of *tafra* with me.

¹⁷ It seems that the word *tafra* exists only in the Novi Pazar area, as it is not known either in Bosnia and Herzegovina or in Kosovo, areas heavily influenced by the Ottomans.

Tafra is not only about ‘talking’; it is also about acting with the aim of telling something significant and exceptional about oneself to others. The person who practises *tafra* is called *tafradžija*, which may be loosely translated as *boaster*. Thus the *tafradžija* is, in the community’s view, a performer who takes part in a locally coded and *staged* performance, which consists of both sending out messages and receiving feedback from the environment. This is because *tafra* is seen as something that is meant to provoke reactions: the performance of *tafra* is believed to be something that is intentionally initiated in order to allow others to react, and to start responding to what the *tafradžija* does and (or) speaks about. However, rather than with admiration or positive evaluation (which are presumably expected by one who speaks positively about oneself), the others may react either by labelling those acts and speeches as *tafra*, thereby mocking and dismissing them, or by accepting *tafra* as the way the *tafradžija* copes with his/her social environment.

Tafra is about acting out, about pretending that you are someone else and not yourself. A tafradžija is someone who lives his/her life trying hard to build a positive image of him/herself, and to provoke admiration from others. A tafradžija cares more about what others think of him/her than about his/her needs, desires, genuine happiness. For example, my aunt was about to throw a party on the occasion of her son’s wedding. They are quite poor, but it did not prevent her taking bank loans and buying piles of clothes and gold jewelry for her future daughter in law. She did this just to show off, and to make people talk about her. And she succeeded! Everyone is talking about how much she spent on clothes and gold jewelry.

Even though all my respondents agree that *tafra* exists ‘in reality’, and that it has its place in Novi Pazar as a mode of social communication, its performance is still viewed by my respondents as a

practice involving a two-way exercise of social control. On the one hand there is the *tafradžija*, who wishes to control his or her own position in the community and thereby to control the community's treatment or view of him/herself; on the other hand, his or her actions prompt the community to resort to the power of naming, imposing a label on him/her and pushing him/her back within the locally acceptable frames of cultural expectations. *Tafra* is defined as one's attempt to posit oneself above the community and as the community's attempt to reintegrate them and show them their proper place. The awareness that labelling something as *tafra* may be a means of social control and maintenance of communal egalitarianism comes, as my respondents testify, from the awareness that anyone may at some point of his or her life be labelled as a *tafradžija*. This awareness springs from the conviction that whatever one does is noticed and evaluated by others.

Hence *tafra* is associated with two processes: with an ostentatious performance of pride through speech and actions, and with the process of naming some speeches and acts as *tafra*. While the former is about bragging (showing off), i.e. self-evaluation, the latter involves the social labelling of certain speech and behaviour as exaggerated acts of pride. My interest here lies primarily in *tafra* as a practice of social labelling, which helps to enforce the social reproduction of locally understood egalitarianism in terms of abilities, social standing etc. This kind of social regulation involves gossip since *tafra* is an external label – what is uttered about someone.

Tafra is a kind of 'special politics'. For example, a tafradžija is a middle-aged man who used to have a high status in our community (he was wealthy), was respected etc. At some point he went bankrupt, but he will still pretend that nothing has changed. He will still walk around in his best suit, with a shiny gel on his hair, and brag about himself, just to prove that he is still 'someone important'.

The community wants to talk about the bankrupt middle-aged man who is seen as a pretender to *importance*. Moreover, as my respondents say, the community wants to talk about anyone who commits a possible object of mockery or dismay. 'Gossip' is understood here as a form of interaction through which, in the words of Amsterdam-based anthropologist Niko Besnier, people 'make sense of what surrounds them, interpreting events, people, and the dynamics of history'¹⁸ In Besnier's view, gossip is a multiparty production which crucially depends for its effectiveness on the cooperation and participation of the audience.¹⁹ Gossiping about someone's *tafra* involves the gossipers themselves and their audience's approval or disapproval. If the audience approves of the gossiper's label, we enter into a dynamic political economy of gossip, which helps to maintain acceptable and unacceptable models of behaviour. Besnier calls these discussions the *discourse on egalitarianism*, which aims at flattening out the social differences in abilities and social worth.

As noted above, *tafra* is predominantly understood to involve uncritical self-reflection and is therefore associated with those unable to keep within the scope of communally regulated views on modesty. Such a view of *tafra*, again, is not necessarily negative, but does involve a certain degree of mockery. When *tafra* is seen as a coping strategy, the *tafradžija* will be looked at with a patronising pity.²⁰ On

¹⁸ Besnier, 2009, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ Naming certain acts and instances of speech as *tafra* can also express a teasing or gossiping sympathy or empathy with someone who practises *tafra* as a self-recognition strategy. In this case, declaring an act or instance of speech as *tafra* is an *excuse* for the performer's behaviour. This may happen in situations when someone praises his own children, talking about how they care for him or her, whereas 'in fact they do not give a damn about him, they never come see him, they do not provide anything for him'. In such cases, *tafra* is seen as a *coping* strategy, and therefore as forgivable.

the other hand, when the *tafradžija* is seen as someone who goes beyond 'decent' boasting and showing off, s/he will be subjected not only to harsh mockery, but also to communal gossip.

In a closely knit community such as Novi Pazar, negative labels are difficult to shake off, according to my respondents. Negative labels through communal gossip are the means by which the community establishes its standards of the acceptable and unacceptable. The *tafra* label is almost indispensably linked to the gossip *discourse on egalitarianism*. Being proclaimed a *tafradžija* by the community may involve long-lasting mockery, and may also expose someone to communal jokes, especially when the target is assessed not only as a *tafradžija*, but also as a bad person who does not respect others. In such cases, the community (immediate neighbourhood) will keep an eye on the *tafradžija* and look for anything that might be a source of his or her embarrassment.

Gossiping about *tafra* or making fun of someone's *tafra* serves, I would argue here, as a local corrective arising out of the understanding that no one should reach beyond his or her communally presumed abilities or role in the local society. According to my respondents, it is a kind of social control that aims to undermine what is perceived as a digression from the ordinary. Therefore, naming certain acts and instances of speech as *tafra*, be they boasting or not, is at times parallel to the so-called *uravnilovka*, loosely translated as 'flattening out the social difference', which corresponds to what Besnier called *discourse on egalitarianism*.²¹ Behaviour which is locally understood as blatant boasting and 'showing off' is identified as the need of some individuals to draw a line between them-

²¹ *Uravnilovka* may also be described as *equalisation* or *levellisation*. The term comes from Russian, and is primarily used to describe the Soviet economic policy of *levelling out* inequalities through interventions in economy, ignoring thereby the principles of merit and knowledge.

selves and the rest of their immediate social environment, so as to enhance their own significance and attract attention. In this respect, *uravnilovka* is a social pressure aiming to suppress the individual's need to be 'better' than the rest of the community. However, it is not specifically defined what is and what is not 'boasting', or by what criteria *tafra* could be distinguished from regular pride (as a positive self-evaluation) or from a lifestyle that disregards public opinion.

A communal discourse on egalitarianism that seeks to suppress the exceptionality of the individual can be found in different cultures and groups, both in those heavily industrialised and in those that are regarded as economically underdeveloped (by 'western' standards). According to Besnier's account of the *discourse on egalitarianism* among the Nukulaelae people,²² for example, this discourse proclaims that 'everyone is on the same footing and that no one is entitled to have access to more resources than others or exert any type of authority over others, thus leaving little room for hierarchy and leadership'.²³ In the case of the Nukulaelae, this discourse involves a widespread belief that everyone is equal, but it also involves gossiping about and ridiculing those who, in the eyes of the community, attempt to posit themselves above the community. Similarly, the majority of my respondents from Novi Pazar oppose hierarchy in the local society (*čaršija*, *Gemeinschaft*) but do approve of it in the political society (*Gesellschaft*).²⁴ The label of *tafra* through gossip primarily seeks to deny a hierarchical structure in the local society, and thereby serves as a tool to enforce communal egalitarianism.

²² The inhabitants of a Polynesian island, who are part of the Tuvalu nation.

²³ Besnier, 2009, 77.

²⁴ I use Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as *termini technici* only to emphasise the communal understanding of the difference between primary – societal – and secondary – political – ties.

The label of *tafra* through gossip is somewhat similar to the so-called *Jante Law*, said to exist in Scandinavian countries, which is best described as a *groupthink*²⁵ ‘suggesting’ that one should never try to be, or consider oneself to be, different or more valuable than the other members of a community.²⁶ The term *Jantelagen* (Swedish) or *Janteloven* (Danish and Norwegian) was first coined by a Danish/Norwegian author, Aksel Sandemose (1936), who wrote a book called *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks*, depicting the life in a small village where successful people become victims of malicious gossip.²⁷ The *Jante Law* is believed to come out of a communitarian and egalitarian culture in which the traditional individualistic entrepreneurship is received negatively,²⁸ and which requires its members to put the community before the individual. Such practice ‘functions internally as well as externally; it is propagated not only through the policing of one’s own behavior but policing the behavior of others’.²⁹

The main similarity between the *tafra* label and the communitarian *Jante Law* is that both criticise positive self-evaluation. The main difference, on the other hand, is that the *tafra* label does not

²⁵ *Groupthink* here does not stand for something that exists in ‘reality’, but refers to features which a group of people is believed to have in common.

²⁶ I thank my friends Mirna Stevanović, a Scandinavian Studies scholar at the Belgrade University, and Zlatana Knežević, a Swedish Bosnian Gender Studies student at the Lund University, for clarifying the details of the *Jante Law*.

²⁷ The ten *Jante law* commandments: Do not think that *you* are something; Do not think that *you* are as good as *us*; Do not think that *you* are wiser than *us*; Do not fancy *yourself* better than *us*; Do not think that *you* know more than *us*; Do not think that *you* are superior to *us*; Do not think that *you* are good at anything; Do not laugh at *us*; Do not think that anyone cares about *you*; Do not think that *you* can teach *us* anything.

²⁸ Fuglsang, 2009.

²⁹ Turausky, 2011, 8.

prioritise the community over the individual: rather, it claims (at least according to my respondents) that the individual is *watched* by the community and not allowed to be *better* than the other community members.

Tafra awareness as cultural intimacy

Being a Pazarac without being a tafradžija is like going to the beach without going into the sea. Everyone says that they hate tafra, but I believe that every single inhabitant of this town has at least once in his or her life acted as a tafradžija. People think that they will build a positive image of themselves in the eyes of others if they practise tafra. It seems that tafra feeds us in a way. Here people send their kids to expensive universities abroad and pay a bunch of money for their living expenses, not for the sake of their child's education, but for the recognition that will come from their social environment.

This is the view of an 18-year old respondent, shared more or less by all my other respondents. They all say that *tafra* is a 'Novi Pazar thing', and that this is something 'we do'. *Tafra* is thus perceived as a local practice which is, to their knowledge, not applicable to other regions or other acts connected with the public display of one's pride in oneself, one's family, community, and one's personal or family education and/or wealth. As noted above, my respondents are aware that this particular naming of certain types of speech and certain actions by certain people is actually a communal corrective, dependent on the local standards about what is ethical or not. It is this type of communal *policing* that is perceived as unique by my respondents, and even though they all seem to scorn *tafra* behaviour and label other persons as *tafradžije*, they still see the *tafra* gossip as something that 'connects' the residents of Novi

Pazar and gives them a sense of common sociality. The locals themselves label the display of ostentatious pride as *pazarska tafra*, which they see as a distinctive feature of Novi Pazar as a community. Thus they understand *tafra* as something arising from their local condition, different from the rest of Serbia (and former Yugoslavia) and even from the surrounding area, which is regarded by many as culturally cognate to the local culture of Novi Pazar.

Such views indicate, I would argue, that the awareness of *tafra* is constitutive of *cultural intimacy* in Michael Herzfeld's terms. Herzfeld defines cultural intimacy as 'the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality'.³⁰ Herzfeld also writes that cultural intimacy does not simply 'mean close acquaintance with a culture but, rather, the zone of internal knowledge whereby members of a society recognise each other through their flaws and foibles'.³¹ The fact that anyone could be labelled as a *tafradžija* is not viewed by my respondents as something to approve of or be proud of, but they do seem to find *tafra* a *funny* feature of the Novi Pazar communal life.

The *tafra* awareness, as my respondents' answers show, stems from a constant collective inclination of many individual members of the community to evaluate and, as some of my respondents say, mould themselves in accordance with the desirable, communally *approved* model. Furthermore, it is inspired by the fear of possible communal jokes about one's behaviour (either negative or patronisingly positive). In such a context, the *tafra* label functions as a performative enforcing communal norms about the appropriate and inappropriate, desirable and undesirable. At a more general

³⁰ Herzfeld, 1997, 3.

³¹ Herzfeld, 2009, 133.

level, i.e. at a level that goes beyond individual *tafra*, labelling certain acts as *tafra* is performed through jokes about the ‘character’ of the Novi Pazar residents. This character is represented in the fables about the *Pazarac*,³² a metonymic *creature* that embodies both self-stereotypes and stereotypes coming from the outsiders.

Jokes are, in fact, an essential part of the *tafra* gossip. Sometimes the jokes about someone’s *tafra* are individualised. However, most of them are generalised and tell *funny* tales about the *Pazarac*, an embodiment of the collective Novi Pazar *funny* person, who is seen by my respondents as *loveable* but not very bright. Internal jokes about the *Pazarac* are told in the form of picaresque fables, in which the ‘hero’ of the jokes is laughed at for his naïve character, or is mocked for not being too bright. The ability to laugh at one’s community, without distancing oneself from that very community, suggests that the awareness of the communal flaws arises from a strong feeling of intimacy among the community members. Therefore, the label of *tafra* for the performance of the Self is there to affirm that the bragging person is a *tafradžija*, and by no means better than others; but at the same time this label constructs a field of common sociality, since it comes from the members of the community and is directed at a member of the same community.

Here are some of the jokes that one of the respondents shared with me; they are also found on the Internet:

- *Why does a Pazarac drive his Mercedes Benz³³ in the summer dressed in a wool sweater, with the car windows closed?—*

³² *Pazarac* (demonym): a resident of Novi Pazar.

³³ The *Mercedes Benz* has been a status symbol since the 1970s, when it was introduced to the community by members of the Diaspora. It showed that the car owner had ‘made good’ in Germany or elsewhere. In the Novi Pazar colloquial language, a *Mercedes Benz* is called ‘mečka’, ‘female bear’, which suggests that the car represents something rare, big and strong.

*Just to show the people around that his car has an air conditioner.*³⁴

- *A Pazarac broke his wrist, and went to the doctor's. After a thorough examination, the doctor says: 'We will need to apply a plaster cast'. At this the Pazarac cries out: 'No, no, no way! Nothing short of a marble cast for me!'*³⁵
- *This is how a Pazarac threatens to embarrass his son for being a sloppy high-school student: 'If you fail at school this year, I will buy you a Volkswagen Golf, and then the whole community will make fun of you!'*³⁶

These jokes are seen by all my respondents as *tafra* jokes, although several interviewees said that the last joke does not necessarily refer to *tafra* but to something 'worse', which has to do with 'the need to show off and denigrate others'. There is another label used by the male (and lately female) population in Novi Pazar to describe the ostentatious pride arising from a person's *hubris*³⁷ – *kurčenje*. *Kurčenje* may be literally translated as 'penis gasconade'.³⁸ In everyday life in the Serbo-Croatian-Bosnian-Montenegrin-speaking regions, *kurčenje* denotes ostentatious bragging about one's abilities and personal power. In Novi Pazar, the *kurčenje* label may go together with the *tafra* label, but according to my respondents

³⁴ In Serbian: 'Zbog čega Pazarac u sred leta vozi svoju mečku obučen u džemper i zatvorenih prozora? - Da pokaze narodu da ima klimu.'

³⁵ In Serbian (local variant): 'Povredio Pazarac ruku, i posle silnih snimaka, doktor uviđa da je slomljena i kaže: Bogomi, morace gips. Na to Pazarac odgovara: Kaki gips, ni govora, samo mermer!'

³⁶ In Serbian (local variant): 'Eve kako Pazarac grdi sina što neće da uči: Samo ti ponavlja razred, pa ću ti kupit golfa, da ti se smije cijela čaršija!'

³⁷ *Hubris* (Greek): arrogant and unwarranted pride.

³⁸ In the colloquial successors of the Serbo-Croatian language, the word 'kurac' means 'dick'.

there is a difference and these two labels cannot be used interchangeably. The *kurčenje* label is employed by some community members to dismiss or downplay the public ‘posturing’ of the Novi Pazar *nouveau riche*, whose acts, public behaviour, wealth, and family members’ lives are themes of extensive local gossip.³⁹ If the behaviour of the Novi Pazar *nouveau riche* is associated with *hubris*, the *tafra* label will not occur, whereas the *kurčenje* label will be used in its *fullest* meaning, i.e. to describe behaviour and speech that involve overt self-assertiveness and vanity.⁴⁰

As mentioned above, all my respondents see boasting as a feature of the Novi Pazar ‘mentality’. When asked why the townspeople like to brag about themselves, some answered that this is ‘who we are’ or ‘I do not know’; however, more than 20 answers revolved around the overall position of Novi Pazar within the current constellation of power in the region. In the case of Novi Pazar, the communal awareness of living on the periphery, i.e. the view that decisions ‘on our behalf’ are being made elsewhere, has influenced the townspeople’s perception of their place in the social system, as well as their perception of others’ alleged or real attempts to overcome their peripheral position.

Novi Pazar and the surrounding area had been underdeveloped for many centuries. Socialist post-WW II regime brought industrialisation and somewhat raised the standard of living. Still, the area remained comparatively underdeveloped, which forced many peo-

³⁹ Grey economy, organised crime, corrupt privatisations of former public enterprises, and drug smuggling have led to fast money-making since the early 1990s. Some residents from Novi Pazar have gained substantial wealth through controversial trading and arrangements with the government.

⁴⁰ Unlike *tafra*, *kurčenje* as a label can take the forms of a verbal noun and of a verb. Therefore it is used to describe phenomena as well as to ascribe a certain action to an individual.

ple from both ethnic communities to leave and either settle in other parts of former Yugoslavia or go abroad (to Germany, Switzerland, etc.). Indeed, there lingers a feeling in both communities that the area is still being ‘forgotten’ by the authorities of Serbia, or that it is used only for the purposes of political power struggles. The Bosniaks feel marginalised because they feel deprived of decision-making powers over the issues which concern them, whereas the Serbs feel marginalised and *minorised*⁴¹ at the levels of both town and state, believing themselves ‘forgotten’ by the state. As noted previously, the majority of both communities live close to the poverty line and below, with many people lacking steady jobs. A marginalised position, as one of my respondents claims, drives people to build narratives about themselves – and, conversely, drives the community to scrutinise what other people do or think. Another respondent suggests that external prejudices have been internalised, which makes people look for strategies to surpass their low-class position, but at the same time forces the community to police those who think ‘they are better than the others’.

Being underdeveloped and, on average, less educated than the inhabitants of the areas these communities aspire to (Sarajevo, Belgrade etc.), both Serbs and Bosniaks have to face stereotypes imposed from the outside; it seems, however, that the Bosniaks are subject to stereotyping more often than the Serbs are. For example, the Novi Pazar Serbs are usually not mentioned in jokes about the Sandzak people in Bosnia and Herzegovina,⁴² whereas the Novi Pazar Bosniaks’ alleged over-religiousness, ‘corrupt and primitive’

⁴¹ Due to emigration and lower birth rate, the number of Serbs living in Novi Pazar is decreasing.

⁴² The reason may be that the Serbs from Novi Pazar have far less family ties with Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that there are far fewer Serbs migrating to Bosnia than vice versa.

nature, 'peasant' and 'redneck' accent, 'mafia' mentality, etc. are often mocked not only in 'ordinary' discourse, but also in the printed and electronic media.⁴³ Jokes about the Novi Pazar *Sandžaklije* (seen in most cases as Bosniak Muslims) are far less prominent in Belgrade and elsewhere in Serbia, whereas jokes about the Serbs from Novi Pazar are almost absent. The reason is that, unlike Sarajevo, the rest of Serbia credits the Novi Pazar residents with no influence on politics, economy, or other aspects of social life outside their home town. In Bosnia, by contrast, the media treatment of people from this area usually revolves around their alleged political connections and wealth, which produces the image of a 'tribal' kind of people, controlling the town politics, economy and crime.

All my respondents are aware of the stereotypes and prejudices *outsiders* might harbour against the people from Novi Pazar, and almost all of them are able to laugh at these stereotypes without being seriously offended. The responses by most of my interviewees indicate that the stereotypes coming from the outside are to a certain degree internalised. However, my Serbian respondents feel that the stereotyping coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina has nothing to do with them but with their Bosniak neighbours

⁴³ I lived and worked in Sarajevo from 2003 to 2006. Even though I never experienced discrimination based on my ethnic background (Serbian), I did witness many prejudices towards the *Sandžaklije*, who were, in the view of my interlocutors, usually perceived as Muslim Bosniaks (the Serbs from Novi Pazar were not seen as *Sandžaklije*). The prevailing view was that the residents of Novi Pazar and the surrounding area were patriarchal, tribal, corrupt, and politically very well connected. Such views are shared by some citizens of Sarajevo, regardless of their own ethnic background. Interestingly, even a few Bosniak friends of mine were surprised that there should be Serbs living in Novi Pazar, and one of them asked me: 'How does it feel living with *those* people there?' When I asked: 'What people?', she said: 'Well, the *Sandžaklije*.'

only. On the other hand, all my Serbian respondents see that *Pazarac* jokes tell stories about what they label as the ‘mentality’ of the people from Novi Pazar, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation, even though few of them envisage the protagonist of the jokes as Muslim.

Conclusion

On the surface, boasting is considered inappropriate behaviour in Novi Pazar. On the other hand, the majority (more than 80%) of my respondents claim that ‘we like to show off’, ‘we like it that other people see our success’, ‘here, we like other people to talk about us, even though everyone denies it’. As I suggested above, my respondents’ answers about *tafra* tell that labelling someone as a *tafradžija* is linked to the communal strategies of policing other people’s behaviour. This comes from the communally enforced discourses on egalitarianism, according to which everyone living on the periphery is equal, or rather, no one is better than the others. On the other hand, most of my respondents claim that *tafra*, as a way of acting as well as gossiping about it, is something that ‘belongs’ to the people from Novi Pazar since, as one of the interviewees puts it, ‘we like to show off’. Therefore, even though *tafra* as a label is seen by my respondents as a source of embarrassment (both internal and external), it also gives a sense of common sociality to the Novi Pazar residents. Being labelled as a *tafradžija* is not desirable, but if the label should stick, it will most likely not cause resentment because being a *tafradžija* does not entail being a bad person. To sum up, the *tafra* label functions as an ambivalent regulatory mechanism: a mechanism of confirming sociality among the Novi Pazar residents, and – as a performative – an interactional way of constituting meanings and affirming individual and cultural values.

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