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### ETHNOCULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE ABSENCE OF ETHNOLINGUISTIC VITALITY: A STUDY OF HEMSHIN HERITAGE COMMUNITIES IN TURKEY'S EASTERN BLACK SEA REGION \*

Gülay AKIN\*\*

**Abstract:** This research delves into the sociocultural dimensions influencing the preservation or decline of ethnocultural identity within Hemshin heritage communities situated in the Çamlıhemşin and Hemşin districts of Rize province, Turkey. Despite being recognized as a heritage community of the Hemshin language, this group remains relatively understudied. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to explore the maintenance of ethnocultural identity within these communities, characterized by low ethnolinguistic vitality. This ethnographic study employs face-to-face interviews with 103 participants, direct observation, and detailed field note collection conducted between 2021 and 2022 to explore the mechanisms through which Hemshin heritage communities maintain a strong ethnocultural identity. Despite the minimal use of the Hemshin language within these communities, identity preservation is achieved through a combination of contemporary cultural practices and traditional lifestyles. The members demonstrate a deep attachment to their community, reflecting a steadfast commitment to their ethnocultural identity despite their perceptions of low ethnolinguistic vitality. This study further supports Edwards' (1992) assertion that the loss of language within heritage communities does not necessarily result in a decrease in group membership, solidarity, or sense of belonging. The Hemshin heritage communities exemplify this phenomenon. Additionally, the research underscores the resilience of ethnocultural identity, which persists despite linguistic shifts, thereby illustrating the intricate dynamics of identity preservation in such contexts.

### ETNODİLBİLİMSEL CANLILIĞIN YOKLUĞUNDA ETNOKÜLTÜREL KİMLİK: TÜRKİYE'NİN DOĞU KARADENİZ BÖLGESİ'NDEKİ HEMŞİN MİRAS TOPLULUKLARI ÜZERİNE BİR ÇALIŞMA

**Öz:** Bu araştırma, Türkiye'nin Rize ilindeki Çamlıhemşin ve Hemşin ilçelerinde bulunan Hemşin miras toplulukları içinde etnokültürel kimliğin korunmasını veya zayıflamasını etkileyen sosyokültürel boyutları incelemektedir. Hemşin dili miras topluluğu olarak tanınmalarına rağmen, bu grup nispeten az incelenmiştir. Bu nedenle, çalışmanın birincil amacı, etnodilbilimsel canlılıkları düşük olan bu topluluklarda etnokültürel kimliğin nasıl sürdürüldüğünü araştırmaktır. Bu etnografik çalışma, 2021 ve 2022 yılları arasında 103 katılımcı

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ile yapılan yüz yüze görüşmeler, doğrudan gözlemler ve detaylı saha notlarının toplanması yoluyla Hemşin miras topluluklarının güçlü bir etnokültürel kimliği nasıl koruduklarını araştırmaktadır. Bu topluluklarda Hemşin dilinin kullanımının minimal olmasına rağmen, kimlik korunması çağdaş kültürel uygulamalar ve geleneksel yaşam tarzlarının bir kombinasyonu yoluyla sağlanmaktadır. Topluluk üyeleri, düşük etnobilimsel canlılık algılarına rağmen, etnokültürel kimliklerine güçlü bir bağlılık göstererek topluluklarına derin bir

bağlılık yansıtmaktadırlar. Bu çalışma ayrıca Edwards'ın (1992) miras topluluklarındaki dil kaybının grup üyeliğinde, dayanışmada veya aidiyet hissinde bir azalma anlamına gelmediği iddiasını desteklemektedir. Hemşin miras toplulukları bu olguyu örneklemektedir. Ayrıca araştırma, dilsel değişimlere rağmen süregelen etnokültürel kimliğin dayanıklılığını vurgulayarak, bu tür bağlamlarda kimlik korunmasının karmaşık dinamiklerini ortaya koymaktadır.

## Introduction

The precise number of living languages in the world remains indeterminate due to the dynamic and variable nature of languages, which undergo constant changes in response to the rapidly evolving global environment (Ethnologue, 2000). Additionally, distinguishing between what constitutes a language and what constitutes a dialect of another language poses a significant challenge.<sup>1</sup> The ambiguity extends to the data on speaker numbers, which are typically based on self-reports that lack accurate information on actual language proficiency. These self-reports can be influenced by various factors, including attitudes, ideologies, and the status of the language in question.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these uncertainties, there is a consensus among linguists that there are approximately 6,000 to 7,000 known languages worldwide, with at least half of these languages classified as endangered because they are not being acquired as first languages by children.<sup>3</sup> Projections suggest that 50 to 90 percent of these languages will disappear within this century as older generations, who are the primary speakers, pass away, thereby hindering the transmission of these languages to future generations.<sup>4</sup> Language transmission is predominantly facilitated by older individuals, whereas younger generations often exhibit a shift towards more dominant national and global languages.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, if these threatened languages continue to be supplanted by more powerful languages, it is estimated that by 2100, 90 percent of the world's languages will be either severely endangered or extinct.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. The Significance of Language Endangerment

Language endangerment is a critical issue due to its implications for both linguistic diversity and cultural identity. The phenomenon involves the disappearance or replacement of languages, often resulting from contact between different linguistic groups or extensive communication across distances.<sup>7</sup> Historically, this has been viewed as a natural process. However, the increasing number of languages not being transmitted to younger generations, leading to language death, has become a pressing concern.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the Ubykh language, once spoken in the Caucasus, exemplifies this loss; it had eighty-four consonants and only two phonologically distinct vowels. The language's unique features would have remained unknown without the documentation efforts prior to the death of its last fluent speaker, Tevfik Esenç, in 1992.

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<sup>1</sup> Grenoble, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Bradley, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Austin and Sallabank, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Krauss, 1992; Grenoble, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Austin ve Sallabank, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Krauss, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Dalby, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Austin ve Sallabank, 2011.

Language endangerment also signifies the loss of cultural heritage. According to UNESCO, cultural diversity fosters not only economic development but also intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual fulfillment (UNESCO, 2010). Many cultural traditions, including oral literature such as stories, narratives, poetry, and songs, are transmitted through language. The extinction of languages thus results in the loss of this cultural richness for both the communities and humanity as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, languages offer unique perspectives on the world.<sup>10</sup> The extinction of a language eradicates the distinct worldview and cultural identity of its speakers. In contexts where communities experience political or social pressures that threaten their identity, language can serve as a vital symbol of identity.<sup>11</sup> Despite the fluid nature of identity in postmodern contexts, where individuals navigate multiple roles and settings daily,<sup>12</sup> language remains a fundamental component of identity formation. Paradoxically, speakers of endangered languages often strongly identify with their native tongue yet fail to transmit it to their children, even as their ethnic identity persists despite language loss.<sup>13</sup>

In a similar vein, Dorian (1999) argues that while languages are vital, they constitute only one of many identity markers and can be substituted by other symbols such as dress, religious practices, customs, and traditions. Nevertheless, language continues to play a pivotal role in the formation and expression of identity.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, considering all these factors, it is evident that the ethnolinguistic vitality of endangered languages is significant and deserves greater attention.

## 2. Ethnolinguistic Vitality

The examination of ethnolinguistic vitality and its implications for the maintenance and shift of minority languages has been a focal point of research within various multilingual settings. This endeavor has led to the development of several frameworks aimed at analyzing the intricate interaction between a language and its sociocultural environment, as detailed in preceding discussions. Despite subsequent refinements to Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory<sup>15</sup> through tools such as the Subjective Vitality Questionnaire (SVQ)<sup>16</sup> and the 'Beliefs on Ethnolinguistic Vitality Questionnaire' (BEVQ),<sup>17</sup> the vitality framework has yet to establish itself as a distinct scholarly domain bridging sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and social psychology.<sup>18</sup> This is attributed, in part, to the inherent complexity of assessing and comprehending language vitality, which presents challenges in providing a comprehensive understanding of language shift, maintenance, and vitality dynamics.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, despite the methodological and conceptual challenges inherent in vitality research, a substantial body of scholarship has been dedicated to addressing language vitality issues globally, motivated by the pressing need to counteract the pervasive trend of language loss, as underscored by the distressing language endangerment landscape worldwide (Lewis and Simon, 2010).

Vitality frameworks assert that groups with low vitality are likely to diminish as distinct collectivities (Giles et al., 1977). However, the findings of the present study challenge this assertion within the context under examination. In heritage communities where ethnolinguistic

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<sup>9</sup> Harrison, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Dalby, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Lanza and Svendsen, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Omoniyi and White, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Yagmur and Kroon, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Giles et al., 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Bourhis et al., 1981.

<sup>17</sup> Landry & Allard, 1986.

<sup>18</sup> Ehala, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Grenoble and Whaley, 2006.

vitality is low, the strong commitment to the Hemshin identity defies the expectations of vitality framework theories. This commitment serves as a crucial anchor for the social identity of these communities,<sup>20</sup> shaping their intergroup behaviors and contributing to the maintenance of their ethnocultural identities. Despite not being active speakers, their reported attitudes and practices indicate a significant role of traditional lifestyles and cultural heritage in sustaining their cultural and ethnic identities.

### 3. History of the Hemshin Region

The Hemşin region, located between the Black Sea to the north and the Pontic Mountain chain to the south, spans less than fifty kilometers in width and encompasses the contemporary provinces of Rize and Trabzon, as well as the coastal part of Artvin.<sup>21</sup> This area is home to several ethnic groups, including the Hemshin, also known as Hemshinli.

Historical records from the Middle Ages indicate that the original Hemshin district comprised a small area around the watersheds of the twin branches of the Fırtına River, situated on the northern side of the Barhal/Kaçkar Mountain Range, including the present-day Çamlıhemşin district in Rize province.<sup>22</sup> This hilly and forested area is rich in Armenian toponyms, evident in the names of villages, summer settlements, rivers, springs, hills, and meadows. The Hemshin people have two primary settlements: the first covers areas under Ottoman rule, including modern-day Çamlıhemşin, Hemşin, the Kaptanpaşa district of Çayeli, and the Cimil Valley of İkizdere. The second settlement is in the eastern part of Artvin province, where the eastern or Hopa Hemshin group resides.<sup>23</sup>

### 4. Geographical Characteristics of the Region and Hemshin People

The traditional Hemshin area encompasses “the watersheds of the twin branches of the Fırtına River, running on the northern slopes of the Barhal/Kaçkar Range, and includes today’s county of Çamlıhemşin”,<sup>24</sup> extending into the adjacent valleys of Cimil (in İkizdere county), Zuğa (in Hemşin county), and Şenoz (in Çayeli county).

Çamlıhemşin County possesses the steepest and most rugged topography within Rize Province. Situated within the Kaçkar Mountains range, which averages an altitude of 3000 meters in the eastern Black Sea region, the county experiences significant rainfall in its deep valleys due to the extensive network of water flows. Consequently, the Fırtına River, originating from the Kaçkar Mountains and traversing Çamlıhemşin to the Black Sea, stands as one of the principal rivers of Rize Province.<sup>25</sup>

The region endures harsher winters compared to the coastal areas. Conversely, the summer season is characterized by high rainfall, resulting in elevated humidity, rugged terrain, and dense vegetation, all of which influence the lifestyle of the Hemshin people.<sup>26</sup> These climatic and topographical conditions necessitate adaptation in both winter and summer. The challenging landscape has prompted the Hemshin people to favor higher elevations over river valleys, which are prone to unpredictable water flows. Settling in elevated areas allows them to maximize sunlight exposure. Additionally, the predominance of animal husbandry as their primary means of subsistence further necessitates their residence in hilly regions.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mullen, Calogero, and Leader, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Hachikian, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Hachikian, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Vaux, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Hachikian, 2007: p. 145.

<sup>25</sup> Ersoy, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Ersoy, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Hachikian, 2007.

The counties of Çamlıhemşin and Hemşin in the highlands of Rize province are the heartland of the now Turkish-speaking western Hemshinli, or Bash Hemshinli.<sup>28</sup> This group is isolated by the exclusively Lazi county of Arhavi from the Armenian-speaking eastern Hemshinli, or Hopa Hemshinli, who predominantly inhabit the Hopa and Borçka counties of Artvin province.<sup>29</sup>

Simonian (2007) provides a comprehensive overview of the Hemshin population. According to his estimates, the Bash Hemshin number approximately 29,000 individuals in Rize Province, while the Hopa Hemshin are estimated at around 26,000. He also notes that Hemshin communities established in the northwestern provinces of Düzce and Sakarya during the late nineteenth century have a population of about 10,000. Beyond these regions, Hemshin people can be found in cities such as Trabzon and Erzurum, as well as in major urban centers in western Turkey, including Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Simonian (2007) suggests that the number of Hemshin individuals residing in these larger cities likely exceeds those living in their native villages. Additionally, considering an estimated 3,000 Hemshin individuals living in the former Soviet Union, Simonian (2007) posits that the total Hemshin population may realistically be around 150,000. Among these communities, the Hopa-Hamshens are noted as the only Muslim Hamshens who speak Homshetsma.

## 5. Hemshin Culture

Despite the ambiguity surrounding the origins of the Hemshin language and people, Hemshin culture is distinguished by its rich oral traditions, encompassing songs, tales, jokes, and riddles.<sup>30</sup> These cultural elements significantly contribute to the richness of the region and its inhabitants. Furthermore, the traditional Hemshin houses, including some mansions, exemplify how people adapt their living spaces to the constraints of their natural environment.<sup>31</sup> The traditional house complexes, which incorporate structures such as the nalya (a vital food storage annex), kenaf or kınaf (grass container), and kalif (a simple cottage), showcase Hemshin folk architecture. This architecture reflects their traditions, customs, beliefs, values, way of life, and cultural identity.

Distinctive cultural elements include colorful traditional clothing and patterned headscarves made of silk or synthetic materials. These traditional garments, particularly headscarves, are prominently worn during the yayla festivals (e.g., the Vartevor festival), weddings, and even in daily life, symbolizing Hemshin women.<sup>32</sup> The headscarves, known as puşi in the region, are donned by Hemshin women, including those who reside in towns and cities, when they return to their villages, demonstrating their strong identification with Hemshin heritage.<sup>33</sup>

Supporting this notion, Benninghaus (2007) noted that the traditional way of wearing the headscarf is not practiced among the Hopa (eastern) Hemshin women. In contrast, for the western Hemshin people, it is a significant cultural symbol, almost regarded as a national dress. In addition to the puşi, the handcrafted knitted stockings, known as iki telli çorap, are another common and characteristic element of traditional Hemshin attire.<sup>34</sup>

Transhumance remains integral to Hemshin life. Despite substantial migration to urban areas, people continue to ascend to the yaylas every summer.<sup>35</sup> Yaylas serve not only as retreats from

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<sup>28</sup> Simonian, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Simonian, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Vaux, 1996.

<sup>31</sup> Balıkçı, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Balıkçı, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Balıkçı, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Blasing, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Ersoy, 2007.

the routines of winter or city life but also as crucial for preserving Hemshin culture, encompassing folk songs, traditions, and the Hemshin language.<sup>36</sup>

## 6. The Hemshin Language

The Hemshin language is recognized by various names. UNESCO and Ethnologue designate it as Western Armenian, while the Endangered Languages Project (ELP) lists it under four alternative names: Hamshen, Hamschen, Homshetsma, and Hemşince. Linguist Vaux (2007), who has conducted the most extensive study of the language, refers to it as Homshetsma, whereas the Endangered Languages Project uses the name Homshetsi. Regarding its endangerment status, the language is classified as Potentially Vulnerable by UNESCO, Stable by Ethnologue, and Vulnerable by the Endangered Languages Project.

Vaux (2007) categorizes the Hemshin people into three groups based on the languages they speak. The first group, the western Hemshinli, are Turkish-speaking Sunni Muslims residing in the Rize province and other parts of Turkey. The second group, the eastern Hemshinli, are Homshetsma-speaking Sunni Muslims located in the Artvin province, with smaller populations in Turkey, Central Asia, and Europe. The third group, the northern Hemshinli, are Homshetsma-speaking Christians descended from non-Islamized Hemshinli from the provinces of Samsun, Ordu, Giresun, and Trabzon, currently residing in Georgia and Russia.

Although the western Hemshinli speak only Turkish, they retain numerous Homshetsma words, toponyms, and family names.<sup>37</sup> Vaux (2007) also notes that while Homshetsma is generally considered a dialect of Western Armenian, it is not mutually intelligible with it due to several factors that have made Homshetsma one of the most divergent and interesting varieties of Armenian.

## 7. Research Design

This study explores the preservation of ethnocultural identity among the Hemshin people in Çamlıhemşin and Hemşin, despite the diminishing ethnolinguistic vitality of their heritage language. The Hemshinli community in these regions, particularly the western Hemshinli group, sustains their identity through contemporary cultural practices and traditional lifestyle customs.

Employing an ethnographic approach, the study focuses on capturing individuals' lived experiences, the meanings they derive from these experiences, and the social contexts that influence these meanings.<sup>38</sup> This methodology is well-suited for investigating the evolution of cultural patterns, values, and beliefs through collective human experiences.

Ethnography is fundamentally concerned with exploring the beliefs, values, and attitudes that influence the behaviors of specific groups.<sup>39</sup> It involves immersing oneself deeply in the daily lives of culturally defined groups to uncover the underlying meanings behind their behaviors and interactions.<sup>40</sup>

In this study, achieving such immersion required the researcher to engage intensively with the social culture over an extended period. This process involved interacting with participants, observing their behaviors, and meticulously documenting their daily activities within their natural settings.<sup>41</sup> By both participating and observing, the researcher acquired firsthand experience, which was systematically recorded in detailed descriptive field notes. These notes

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<sup>36</sup> Ersoy, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Vaux, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 2016: p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> Creswell, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Watson, 2008.

serve as a valuable tool, allowing readers to indirectly experience the culture. Consequently, this method enabled the researcher to develop an in-depth, long-term understanding of the community from the perspective of its members, providing rich insights into the complex social dynamics at play.

By employing a comprehensive ethnographic approach, the researcher successfully captured the nuanced and complex ways in which the Hemshin people articulate their ethnocultural identity. The extended engagement with the community, along with meticulous documentation of their daily activities, facilitated a deep understanding of the community's practices, beliefs, and values. This approach not only provided profound insights into the Hemshin community but also offered a thorough and nuanced portrayal of their social and cultural dynamics.

Data collection involved twelve field visits to the two regions conducted between 2021 and 2022. The methods utilized included face-to-face interviews with 103 participants, participant observation, and the compilation of extensive field notes.

In Çamlıhemşin, the participant group comprised 52 individuals: 29 females and 23 males, with an average age of 65 for both genders. Regarding education, seven female participants had no formal schooling, whereas all male participants had attended school. Among those who received primary education, there were 17 females and 12 males. Educational disparities emerged at the secondary and high school levels, with three females and seven males attending these institutions. University graduates included two females and four males. Occupation-wise, most females (N=27) were housewives, with two students. In contrast, males had more varied occupations, including bakers, hotel owners, restaurant owners, workers, and retirees (N=13).

In the Hemşin region, there were 51 participants: 32 females and 19 males, with average ages of 65 and 69, respectively. Females predominated in the no-schooling category, with 15 females compared to no males. Primary education was more common in both groups, with eight females and ten males. Secondary and high school attendance was similar, with four females and six males. University graduates numbered five females and three males. Occupational profiles showed that most females (N=27) were housewives, while five were employed as officers, teachers, or secretaries. Most males (N=16) were retired, with two engineers and one coffee house (kahvehane) owner.

## 8. Data Analysis

This study employed content analysis, following the guidelines outlined by Lieblich et al. (1998) and Riessman (2016). Adhering to the iterative model of data analysis proposed by Miles et al. (2014), the initial step involved compiling all interview data and reviewing post-interview notes. To establish and organize the database, verbatim transcriptions of the audio recordings were manually undertaken. This was necessitated by the participants' distinctive regional accents, which significantly deviated from standard Turkish, rendering transcription software impractical. Consequently, the transcription process, spanning seven months, was personally conducted by the researcher, leveraging their familiarity with the accent stemming from their regional background.

Thematic content analysis, suited for the inductive examination of ethnographic data, was employed in the current study. This analytical approach entails scrutinizing data to identify and categorize emergent themes and key issues.<sup>42</sup> To ensure methodological rigor and credibility, several strategies were implemented. These included data triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement with participants, reflexivity in the researcher's approach, and peer

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<sup>42</sup> Reeves, Kuper, and Hodges, 2008.

debriefing. These measures were undertaken to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the study's findings.

## 9. Findings

The ethnolinguistic vitality framework, introduced by Giles et al. (1977), offers a conceptual tool for examining sociocultural factors that impact the strength of ethnolinguistic groups within an intergroup context. Aligned with this framework, the current study focuses on heritage communities, specifically Çamlıhemşin and Hemşin, which historically served as speech communities but now operate as distinct collective entities within an intergroup setting.<sup>43</sup>

Upon analyzing the data, four recurring themes emerged for both the Çamlıhemşin and Hemşin communities, with one theme being the 'Loss of traditional Hemshin lifestyle and cultural practices.' This theme will be further elucidated in the present study.

Interview data revealed specific cultural practices that hold significant importance in shaping the Hemshin cultural identity. These practices encompass seasonal migrations to mountain pastures, wedding ceremonies, and various seasonal activities, including those observed during New Year's Eve and/or Day. Moreover, particular occupations and the architectural heritage of the Hemshin people play crucial roles in molding the cultural landscape of both Çamlıhemşin and Hemşin, where these heritage communities are situated.

Expanding upon the aforementioned cultural practices, the subsequent sections will delve into the following topics: (i) traditional practices inherent in the Hemshin lifestyle, (ii) the cultural significance of Hemshin Folk Architecture, and (iii) perceptions regarding the intricate relationship between traditional lifestyle practices and the preservation of Hemshin ethnocultural identity.

The traditional practices inherent in Hemshin culture encompass various facets such as transhumance, imece (collective labor for mutual assistance), festive gatherings, and the practice of endogamy. In an inquiry concerning perceptions of Hemshin culture, a substantial majority of respondents (95 out of 103) highlighted associations with mountain pastures, daily communal activities (e.g., imece), and ancestral occupations such as animal husbandry and beekeeping. These cultural elements were described by participants from Çamlıhemşin and Hemşin regions, emphasizing the historical prevalence of transhumance and the seasonal rhythms associated with it. Additionally, the annual three-day festival known as Vartevor, observed in late July, emerged as a significant communal event, serving as a unifying occasion for Hemshin people dispersed across different locales, indicative of enduring bonds of solidarity and belonging.

Moreover, the discourse underscored the longstanding tradition of endogamy within Hemshin society. While acknowledging its continued prevalence, participants noted a decline in its frequency, attributing this shift to the evolving preferences of younger generations in choosing marital partners. It was also noted that endogamous unions were historically motivated, in part, by a desire to prevent the division of familial lands. This elucidates the intricate interplay between cultural practices, socioeconomic considerations, and generational dynamics within the Hemshin community.

The Hemshin Folk Architecture, known as Hemşin Konakları, emerged as a prominent emblem of cultural heritage and identity among all participants (N=103), alongside other cultural practices. The consensus among participants was that those who migrated to Russia as laborers returned with substantial wealth, evidenced by the construction of opulent residences, referred to as konak, within the Hemshin region. As articulated by a participant (P17) from

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<sup>43</sup> Giles et al., 1977.



Hemşin, "Here, our ancestors had also ventured to Russia for employment, and the mansions were built with Russian funds... there are stone mansions."

The study uncovered participants' firm perceptions regarding the correlation between traditional lifestyle practices and the preservation of Hemshin ethnocultural identity, which emerged as a pivotal aspect of the research. All participants underscored the indispensable role played by these cultural elements in upholding their ethnocultural identity over time. However, the findings also revealed a unanimous sentiment among participants concerning a decline in adherence to various facets of Hemshin culture, a trend that evoked dissatisfaction.

This sentiment was echoed by participants from both the Hemşin and Çamlıhemşin regions, who expressed shared concerns regarding the gradual erosion of Hemshin cultural traditions. Despite recognizing the significance of preserving Hemshin ethnocultural identity, participants observed a lack of concerted efforts toward cultural preservation within their communities. They lamented the prevalent apathy toward the future of Hemshin culture and stressed the imperative of transmitting cultural heritage to future generations.

The consensus among participants underscores the significance of preserving Hemshin cultural heritage, integral to their collective identity. However, the prevailing sentiment suggests a disconnect between individual interests and communal responsibilities, resulting in a dearth of proactive measures to safeguard cultural heritage. Ultimately, the findings underscore the intrinsic link between cultural elements and heritage identity, emphasizing the need for concerted efforts to prevent the erosion of both.

The findings of this study diverge from the assertion posited by Giles et al. (1977) that low-vitality groups are prone to eventual dissolution as a distinct collective entity. Instead, the results suggest a pronounced attachment of the Hemshin people to their heritage identity. This steadfast commitment to their Hemshin identity aligns with the proposition advanced by Mulen, Calogero, and Leader (2007) that autoethnonym significantly influences intergroup dynamics, serving as a pivotal anchor for social identity.

Despite residing on opposing sides of a mountain range, both Hemshin and Çamlıhemşin communities maintain analogous traditional lifestyle elements, such as transhumance, communal activities (i.e., imece), and traditional vocations like animal husbandry and beekeeping. This convergence also illustrates a remarkable absence of cultural divergence between the two groups.

Furthermore, both communities share specific ceremonial practices and rituals, observed during events such as wedding ceremonies and New Year's Eve celebrations, along with customs and beliefs integral to their daily lives. Additionally, the prominence of traditional Hemshin musical instruments and attire underscores their significance as indispensable components of Hemshin culture.

The enduring vitality of Hemshin culture is not solely attributed to the enjoyment derived from traditional practices but also to their pivotal role in nurturing a sense of community and cultural identity. Particularly, the annual "yayla festivals" serve as central focal points for communal gatherings, thereby reinforcing the collective heritage and cultural identity of Hemshin communities. These longstanding traditions, festivals, and cultural practices serve as vital avenues for individuals to express their identity and perpetuate customs reflective of their values and beliefs, as underscored by Ersoy (2007). Consequently, they play a crucial role in fostering cohesion within the community, demonstrating the significance of culture and cultural activities in maintaining ethnocultural identity, even in the absence of ethnolinguistic vitality. This corroborates Edwards' (1992) assertion that the decline of language within cultural heritage settings does not inherently result in the loss of group cohesion, solidarity, or a shared sense of belonging.

## Conclusion

This research illuminates the remarkable resilience and intricate nature of ethnocultural identity within communities experiencing low ethnolinguistic vitality. While language undeniably exerts a profound influence on cultural identity formation, the findings of this study underscore that the waning dominance of a language does not inevitably lead to the erosion of ethnocultural heritage.

The sense of belongingness to one's cultural roots, the continuation of traditional practices, and the preservation of shared values and customs all serve as vital components that sustain ethnocultural identity. Even amid linguistic decline or endangerment, individuals and communities often exhibit a strong attachment to their cultural heritage, seeking to uphold and celebrate their unique identity.

Understanding the complexities of ethnocultural identity in such contexts is crucial for fostering inclusivity and promoting cultural diversity. Initiatives aimed at revitalizing endangered languages must extend beyond mere linguistic preservation to encompass the broader socio-cultural dimensions that contribute to a community's collective identity. By recognizing and honoring the diverse manifestations of ethnocultural heritage, societies can cultivate a climate of enhanced respect, appreciation, and unity among their members.

In essence, this research underscores the paramount importance of acknowledging ethnocultural identity as a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon transcending linguistic confines. Embracing the richness of cultural diversity and supporting endeavors that promote cultural preservation and revitalization are pivotal in cultivating vibrant and inclusive communities wherein every individual finds profound resonance with their ethnocultural identity.

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