"A Home Away from Home": The Case of the Yurt Homeland Association in Gebze[1]

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Abstract

This article addresses the question of how hometown associations (HTAs, hereafter) transform into meaningful spaces, or homes, for internal migrant groups in Turkey and how they are perceived within this context. While previous research has primarily focused on the functions, transnational and translocal interactions, and contributions of HTAs to the migrants' origin, spatial factors have often been overlooked. Utilising ethnographic research conducted from 2013 to 2018 and a review of existing literature on the topic of 'home' studies, this study examines how migrants create a sense of 'home' in HTAs, with a particular focus on the role of face-to-face interactions, objects, and practices. The research findings demonstrate that the transformation of HTAs into a 'home' is achieved through the actions of the association leaders and the utilisation of home-making practices and objects. These processes and interactions are crucial for fostering a sense of familiarity and comfort among migrants. Furthermore, the article underscores that migrants seek this sense of belonging, which significantly influences their identities. Ultimately, the spatial analysis of fellow townsmen associations demonstrates that the associations are not merely a physical structure; they are also an emotional labour, the implementation of which, objects, and interactions play a crucial role.

Keywords: *Migration, hometown association, home, identity, belonging, Giresun, Gebze*

"Memleketten Uzakta Bir Memleket": Yurt *Hemşehri* Derneği Örneği[3]

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Öz

Bu makale, Türkiye'deki iç göçmen grupları için hemşehri derneklerinin nasıl anlamlı bir mekâna, bir eve, dönüşmesini ve algılanmasını incelemektedir. Mevcut literatür, genellikle hemşehri derneklerinin işlevleri, ulusötesi ve yerel ötesi etkileşimleri ile bunlara katkıları üzerineyoğunlaşırken, mekânsal faktörlerin bu süreçteki rolü genellikle göz ardı edilmiştir. Bu çalışma, 2013-2018 yılları arasında yürütülen etnografik bir araştırmanın ve mevcut 'ev' çalışmaları literatürünü kullanarak, göçmenlerin hemşehri derneklerinde 'ev' duygusunu nasıl inşa ettiklerini, özellikle yüz yüze etkileşimler, nesneler ve uygulamalar üzerinden incelemektedir. Araştırma, hemşehri derneklerinin bir 'ev mekânına dönüşmesinin dernek liderlerinin eylemleri ve göçmenlerin gündelik yaşamlarında kullandıkları nesneler aracılığıyla gerçekleştiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu süreç, göçmenler arasında aşinalık ve güven duygusu yaratmada kritik bir rol oynamaktadır. Makale ayrıca, göçmenlerin kimliklerinin şekillendiği bu aidiyet duygusuna dönüştüğünü vurgulamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, hemşehri derneklerinin mekansal olarak incelenmesi, derneklerin yalnızca fiziksel bir yapıdan ibaret olmadığını, aynı zamanda duygusal bir emeğin, uygulanmasını, nesnelerin ve etkileşimlerin önemli bir rol oynadığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Göç, hemşehri dernekleri, mekân, kimlik, aidiyet, Giresun, Gebze*

Introduction

In recent times, Turkey has seen significant demographic changes, with increased migration both internally and externally. The number of migrants between the years 1945 and 1950 was approximately 214,000, whereas the figure rose to 904,000 between 1950 and 1955. There has been a notable increase in internal migration since the 1980s. The number of individuals who migrated internally was approximately two million in 1980, and this figure increased to five million by 2000. However, from 2008 onwards, these figures began to decline, reaching two million in 2008 and approximately three million in 2015 (Turkish Statistical Institute [TURKSTAT], 2022). While the data indicate an overall increase in the total number of migrants, a more detailed examination of the ratio of migrants to the total population reveals a more complex trend. In 1950, migrants constituted a mere 1% of the population. This figure rose to 4% by 1955 and reached a peak of 11% in 1980. Subsequently, however, this ratio has remained relatively stable at approximately 3% in the 2000s (Aksoy, 2016; TÜRKSTAT, 2024). These figures illustrate that internal migration has been a persistent feature throughout Turkish history. The data from the Turkish Statistical Institute for the year 2023 indicates that the proportion of the population residing in rural areas, which constituted 75.78% of the total population in 1927, has decreased to a mere 7% in 2020. In contrast, the urban population has increased to 93% (TURKSTAT, 2024). The shifts in rural and urban population dynamics over these decades demonstrates that the factors driving migration across provinces have varied significantly over time. This demographic change also highlights the importance of conducting research on internal migrants.

Migration creates a sense of rupture, displacement and separation that includes both emotional and material/physical dimensions, and also brings with it nostalgia or homesickness (Ahmed et al., 2003). These emotional, economic and social consequences lead to the emergence of hometown associations (HTAs, herafter) in the neighbourhoods where migrants live. HTAs can be defined as organised groups where people who have migrated from specific regions come together in a specific physical space to maintain and preserve their regional culture (Kıray, 2002, pp. 216–217). The number of HTAs in Turkey has continuously

increased especially after the 2000s (416 in 1989, 1,922 in 1997, 3,325 in 2004 and 15,287 in 2016). The number of registered HTAs in Kocaeli province, where fieldwork took place, in 2017 is 591 (T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı Sivil Toplumla İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü, 2024).

HTA studies have highlighted the functions of HTAs for migrants. Firstly, HTAs assist migrants in adapting to their new life by lessening the negative effects of migration and maintaining their rural values and social relations. Secondly, HTAs have practical roles that involve aspects such as housing, employment, health, education, and ensuring a certain level of security. These functions contribute to the integration of migrants into their new surroundings (Kurtoğlu, 2005). Internal migration literature often refers to HTAs as "buffer mechanisms," temporary institutions used during the transitional phase of migration (Kıray, 2002, p. 216). Similarly, research on international migration shows that associations help migrants adapt to their new settlements, bringing them together and providing them with friendship and emotional support (Boccagni & Pilati, 2015, p. 64; Mazzucato & Kabki, 2009, p. 229). However, these studies see the emergence of HTAs as an accidental part of urbanisation and migration processes (M. H. Yavuz, 2003, pp. 80-81) and as a temporary intermediate mechanism created by migrants in the process of holding on to the city. However, contrary to this view, the statistics presented above demonstrate that the number of associations has increased over the years, indicating their continued importance for the migrants.

The formation of associations is attributed to several factors, including the rural-urban dichotomy, emotional experiences such as separation, loneliness and alienation resulting from migration, and cultural influences. However, recent research suggests that urban and rural spaces are more interconnected and relational (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Hedberg & Carmo, 2012; Hersant & Toumarkine, 2005). In addition to this, the transnational approach has shown that HTAs have translocal effects, with resources circulating between origin and destination societies and influencing social, economic, and political aspects (Ambrosini, 2014; Guarnizo et al., 2003; Kurtoğlu, 2005; Lamba-Nieves, 2018; Mazzucato & Kabki, 2009; Portes & Landolt, 2000; S. Yavuz, 2016). However, studies focus on migrants' experiences but fail to explore the spatial aspects that HTAs offer for migrants. Overall, there is

a need for a more comprehensive understanding of HTAs that goes beyond current paradigms.

This study fills these gaps in the current literature on HTAs by exploring how migrants cultivate a sense of home within these spaces. The concept of 'home' extends beyond a physical location, encompassing various elements that evoke feelings of being at home, such as face-to-face interactions, objects, activities, and practices (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Wise, 2011). These elements, referred to as 'home-makings,' generate emotions like comfort, control, freedom, intimacy, and security. The study investigates how objects, artefacts, and interactions can transform an HTA into a home, aiming to enhance understanding of the territorialization of migrants, the spatial dynamics of HTAs, and the role of individual agency. Ultimately, this research offers insights into the transformative processes through which migrants create meaningful spaces within HTAs.

The study will be divided into four sections. The initial section of the paper presents an overview of the current debates surrounding the concepts of home and migration. The second section presents the methodology employed for data collection, including details of the interviews conducted and the participants involved. The third section provides a summary of the findings of the analysis. The conclusion offers a summary of the findings and the contributions of the research to the literature on hometown associations. It is hoped that this study will stimulate further research and debate on the role of hometown associations in the lives of migrants.

Conceptualising the 'Home' and Migration

The concept of 'home' becomes complex in the context of migration, as it often involves shifts in the understanding of 'home' or the existence of multiple 'homes' (Kochan, 2016). Blunt and Dowling (2006) define 'home' as a dynamic concept that encompasses the relationship between home and homeland, the existence of multiple homes, and the interplay of 'home' with memory, identity and belonging (p. 199). The concept of 'home' can be understood in different ways: as a theoretical idea, a metaphor, a lived experience, or an idealised place of longing in the diasporic imagination. Scholars of translocality argue that it is crucial to closely analyse the fundamental aspects of migrants' lives, as well as the different spatial dimensions and layers involved, when considering

'home' and migration. This is because 'home' is a more complex concept than simply designating a migrant's place of origin or settlement as 'home' (D. Brickell & Datta, 2011; Kochan, 2016). Studying 'home-makings' reveals how migrants create a sense of belonging through connections, interactions, objects, and practices.

Research has explored how migrants create 'homes' in different places through their practices, use of materials and direct interpersonal interactions (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Kabachnik et al., 2010; Rose, 2003; Wise, 2011). For example, in her research into South-Asian women living in London, Tolia-Kelly (2004) employs an ethnographic approach to examine the religious and non-religious objects that migrants utilise in their domestic spaces, which are associated with their homeland. Tolia-Kelly's research reveals that women often create a dedicated space, often referred to as a "religious corner," within their homes to display objects that symbolize moral values, the stories of religious leaders, and reflect different aspects of their lives. Moreover, Tolia-Kelly (2004) posits that the utilisation of handmade cultural artefacts, drawings, and mundane objects is predicated upon recollections of the homeland, functioning as a conduit for the migrants' connection to their homeland. In her view, the artefacts serve to evoke memories of individuals, occurrences and locations that collectively represent and signify the homeland. Consequently, a 'home away from home' in foreign lands is (re)membered and (re)created through the use of these objects and practices.

In another study, Kochan (2016) examines the processes of belonging and identity formation among rural-urban migrants in Xinjiang and Beijing, China, within the framework of the concept of home. In his study, he employs a variety of methodologies, including interviews, cognitive mapping, and city photo tours, to demonstrate how the concept of home is perceived as heterogeneous, complex, and conflicting in the minds and words of the participants. Kochan (2016) finds that migrants do not always replicate their cultures in the destination or depict their pre-migratory experiences. This shows that home-makings are used to express the migrants' aspirations of being connected to the external urban environment. In other words, migrants not only establish a connection to their former place of residence but also cultivate expectations for the future. In light of the aforementioned literature, this

article examines the construction of the concept of 'home' and its relationship to memory and aspiration.

Home-making practices, objects and interactions link migrants and their living spaces across different places, dimensions and scales, embedding both spatial and temporal meaning. Photographs, for example, can trigger memories of home(land) (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). When migrants use objects, perform practices, or interact with fellow townspeople, they create a "virtual dwellingness" (Urry, 2000, p. 134). Urry (2007) suggests that to dwell is to be constantly moving and sensing, inhabiting both physical locations and imagined spaces. It can be suggested that places are not isolated and fix in a specific time. Instead, places are connected with the past, the present, the imagined, and the future concept of home (Datta, 2008, p. 529). Thus, home-making involves "finding a place" and "moving across space," with practices that connect the present location to imagined spaces and even otherworldly realms (Tweed, 2006, p. 56). These spaces allow migrants to maintain connections across the divides of time and space.

The creation of spatial and temporal connections through imagination and memory can evoke a sense of familiarity and comfort, similar to the feeling of being 'at home'. In her research on internal migrants in the United States, Allen (2008) describes 'home' as a space of refuge, safety, relaxation, self-expression and control. While Allen's (2008) study emphasises individual perceptions of home, research on transnational migrants highlights the material aspects of 'home-making' as central to fostering familiarity and comfort (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 22; Hage, 1997, p. 105; Wise, 2011, p. 99). For example, Hage (1997) posits that the process of "home-building" entails the utilisation of "affective building blocks" that serve to provide a sense of security, familiarity, community, and hope. This article examines the home-making practices of the hometown association for the people from Yurt[5] Village (The Culture and Mutual Aid Association for Villagers from Yurt, *Dernek*[6]). *Dernek* in order to ascertain whether migrants feel at 'home' – that is to say, whether they experience comfort, security, freedom and familiarity.

These associations are inhabited by people, and this study examines the role of personal interaction with '*hemşehris*' (hometowners) in

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5 Yurt, a village in the Dereli District of Giresun province.
6 The term "dernek" translates to association in English. The term "*Dernek*" will be used to refer to the village association, as this is the term employed by the migrants themselves.

fostering a sense of belonging and attachment to the place, which is crucial in understanding how HTAs perceive their environment as a 'home'. The term '*hemşehris*' denotes relations between individuals who have emigrated from the same place of origin, and who have settled in the same town (Tezcan, 2011).The concept of '*hemşehris*' (hometowners) emphasises a sense of belonging among individuals who share a common local history, geo-spatial origin, physical appearance, and dialect (Gedik, 2011). This relationship, which is grounded in memories of one's origins, serves to foster intimacy and a sense of home (Tezcan, 2011). Such interactions result in the creation of "spaces of intimacy" and a sense of belonging (Fortier, 2006, p. 76), with a sense of "place belongingness" becoming attached to these interactions (Antonsich, 2010, p. 647). This paper explores how these interactions among '*hemşehris*' transform *Dernek* into social spaces where migrants feel at 'home.'

In addition, as Fortier (2006) claims, 'the community cannot be a spontaneous and organic outcome of an already existing physical building, but it must be continually re-created by the leaders to produce a sense of connectedness and belonging' (p. 70). This paper looks at the roles of HTAs' leaders and migrants in relation to their everyday lives and the process of creating a homely environment.

The concept of identity is of paramount importance in the process of understanding the formation of a sense of home. A substantial body of research on Turkish HTAs of internal migrants indicates that migrants frequently identify with their hometowns of origin, conceptualising them as 'home' (Hersant and Toumarkine, 2005; Kurtoğlu, 2005). However, scholars like Brah (2006) and Ahmed et al. (2003) challenge the idea that 'home' is solely linked to origins. Brickell and Datta (2011) posit that migrants maintain connections to multiple spatial registers, including family, childhood homes, neighbourhoods, and cities, which influence their sense of home in new places. It is therefore essential to consider the relationships between different localities and scales when studying migration.

By examining various spatial dimensions and multi-scalar translocal activities, this article explores how migrants express, develop, and experience their identities and sense of belonging through their home-making practices, social relationships, and face-to-face interactions within HTAs.

Research Methodology

The goal of this research is to investigate how HTAs are transformed into 'homes' for migrants and to analyse the reorganisation of spaces of belonging. This will be done through examining practices, objects, face-to-face interactions, narratives, and expressions. The qualitative ethnographic study was conducted through in-depth interviews with 12 participants and participatory observations in Gebze, a district of Kocaeli province, in 2015. The methodology section is organised into four parts: Data collection techniques, participant selection and sampling, insider/outsider debates, and data analysis.

Gebze, located 45 km east of Istanbul, is an industrial hub at the intersection of major transport routes. The location of the region in question affords it a strategic position, which has attracted both domestic and international investors. As a result, it has become a favoured destination for rural migrants from the Southeast, East Anatolia, and East Black Sea regions of Turkey (Tezcan, 2011). Gebze's population grew from 27,000 in 1973 to 521,000 by 2007, later adjusting to 371,000 by 2018 after administrative changes (TURKSTAT, 2024). This influx of migrants has made Gebze a microcosm of Turkey's diverse Islamic, ethnic, and cultural identities, making it an ideal site for studying internal migration.

The study employs an ethnographic approach to examine the processes through which migrants transform HTAs into 'homes'. This involves the utilisation of diverse data-collection techniques, including interviews and observations. The study is based on 12 semi-structured interviews, during which participants shared their migratory experiences, settlement processes, and thoughts on the association. Additionally, unstructured interviews were conducted with the same male participants to ascertain their perceptions of the practices and objects at HTAs. The male participants were selected on the basis of the fact that HTAs are primarily utilised by male migrants. During the course of the fieldwork, photographic documentation was undertaken of the materials and practices observed, with the permission of the relevant parties. This was done in order to provide additional data to supplement the observation and interview data. Observations and interviews showed how the association was shaped into a home. Throughout the process, questions were asked about the objects and practices observed within the associations.

The participants were recruited through personal contacts developed during frequent visits to Gebze since 2006. The sampling technique employed was snowball sampling, whereby initial contacts were asked to suggest other potential participants. Individuals who met the eligibility criteria were invited to participate in the study and to recommend other individuals who might also be suitable for inclusion. The table shows information on the participants. The study focused on members of Yurt Köyü Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği ('The Culture and Mutual Aid Association for Villagers from Yurt'), which is frequented primarily by men from Yurt, a village of Dereli District in Giresun. The *Dernek*, which is renowned for its rich visual displays of Giresun's landscapes, was selected for investigation in order to gain insight into the processes through which HTAs are transformed into meaningful spaces.

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristic of Participants

	Pseudonyms	Sex	Age	Date of migration	Date of interview
1	Metin	M	53	1989	14/4/2015
2	Osman	M	56	1995	9/4/2015
3	Hüseyin	M	58	2003	21/2/2015
4	Necip	M	48	1993	12/5/2015
5	Kemal	M	49	1981	28/2/2015
6	İsmail	M	35	2001	3/2/2015
7	Salih	M	38	1989	27/4/2015
8	Mehmet	M	40	1995	22/4/2015
9	Selim	M	65	1999	16/5/2015
10	Ergün	M	66	1971	17/3/2015
11	Emre	M	64	1986	18/5/2015
12	Asil	M	34	2004	9/5/2015

Positioning myself in relation to the research participants was complex. Although we shared certain backgrounds, such as religion and geographical identity (Giresun), my role as a researcher made me an outsider in their eyes. Nevertheless, as a partial insider on account of my geographical origin, I was able to establish a rapport with them and gain a deeper insight into their experiences. This insider/outsider status had both advantages and disadvantages (Davies, 2008). Participants sometimes skipped questions, assuming I already knew the answer, but I repeated or rephrased them to get the information I needed. They were also cautious about sharing sensitive information, but I assured them of

confidentiality. The rationale for selecting Gebze as the research site was twofold. Firstly, my close relative resides in this district, which would reduce the cost of the study and facilitate the recruitment of participants. Secondly, my relative's presence in Gebze enabled the efficient recruitment of participants and the minimisation of study costs.

The limitations of this study include the typical challenges associated with qualitative research, such as recruitment and transcription issues, as well as the constraints of time and financial resources. The study offers only a narrow historical context and no information on management or membership. No female participants were included in the study, as women do not typically visit the *Dernek*. This might be probably due to cultural norm among Muslims that discourages men and women are discouraged from spending time together in private spaces if they are not related (Küçükcan, 1999). Furthermore, this research does not include other religious, ethnic, and hometown associations in Gebze, such as those of Alevis, Shia, Crimean Tatars, and Syrians.

The data were analysed using a thematic method. Themes were created using two approaches: inductive (based on the data) and deductive (based on theory, research questions and previous research) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After all data were transcribed, themes were created in the following ways: (1) data were categorised on the basis of spatial aspect of narratives of the participants. (2) Codes were generated from the written material. (3) Relationships between codes were identified. Based on these relationships, themes and associated sub-themes were created. (4) Significant relationships and patterns between the generated codes were examined. As a result of analysis, the research questions were formulated as follows: How do Turkish internal migrants in Gebze make the *Dernek* as a home, where a sense of feeling or being at 'home' prevails?

Findings

Dernek
On 27 March 2015, an obervation was conducted at *Dernek*, a local organisation consisting of two rooms: a teahouse and an office. Upon arrival, it became apparent that this association and teahouse shared similarities with other such establishments in Gebze, where patrons

enjoyed tea and played card games. Nevertheless, the establishment exhibited a distinctive character, evident in its unique decorations, which included photographs, traditional kitchen utensils, and an assortment of everyday items. (Field note, 27 March 2015).

Dernek is visited by emigrants from Yurt (a village in Dereli, a district of Giresun). Metin, the elected president of the association, was born in Yurt and migrated to Gebze in 1994. He founded *Dernek* with two male friends in 1998. Ahmed explains the purpose of establishing the *Dernek*:

> The purpose of this *Dernek* is to provide our villagers with living together, solidarity and unity. Before this *Dernek*, we did not know many people, but through this Dernek, we met many of our villagers. And we bring many of our villagers together through this *Dernek*.

The purpose of establishing *Dernek* was to foster solidarity and unity among his *hemşehris*. However, an ordinary building alone cannot provide feelings and emotions, such as solidarity and togetherness for the visitors. As Fortier (2006) notes, the mere presence of an ordinary building is insufficient to foster feelings of solidarity and togetherness. Conversely, such sentiments are not an immediate consequence of the physical space; rather, they must be consistently nurtured by community leaders. It is therefore crucial to examine Metin's practices and strategies in order to gain insight into how *Dernek* fosters feelings of solidarity among its members.

'A Little Giresun': Metin's home-making at *Dernek*

After our interview, Metin showed me artefacts in the *Dernek* and shared their stories. He told me that he paid more than twenty thousand Turkish liras (approximately £5000) for interior decoration of the *Dernek*. A dried pumpkin cup, once used by Metin's father's *hemşehris* to offer buttermilk to soldiers during World War I, hung from the ceiling. His father also used an oil lamp before electricity reached Yurt. The belt and prayer beads belonged to his mother, and a wooden basket was used for picking hazelnuts. Metin also showed me animal bells his father had given him (field note, 27 April 2015).

The domestic objects on display at *Dernek* are personal family items belonging to Metin, which were previously used for practical purposes in his village. In the present day, however, these items have assumed a nostalgic and aesthetic role, becoming 'memorabilia' linked to Metin's

parents, the war, tradition, and his hometown (Boym, 1998). These objects demonstrate that migrants do not merely transfer or replicate their cultural and religious materials in their new locations. Instead, the meanings attached to these materials evolve. Rather than being utilised in daily life, these items have become symbolic, evoking old memories associated with the hometown.

In addition to the roof, Metin had decorated the walls and pillars of the building (left, right and front) with photographs of Giresun. The photographs display a variety of landscapes, including forests, streams, hazelnut gardens, villages and high plateaus (such as Kümbet, Karaovacık and Bektaş) (field note, 27 April 2015).

For Metin, the province of Giresun is notable for two distinctive features. Firstly, it is notable that the province does not observe an Independence Day, in contrast to the majority of other Turkish provinces. Secondly, there is a cemetery for Giresunian martyrs in Afyon, a province in the Aegean Region, which is unique in that other provinces do not have such cemeteries. These aspects of Giresun may influence Metin's strategies for establishing a sense of place, driven by his regional patriotism and pride in his regional identity. Regional patriotism can be defined as a strong and clearly 'articulated attachment to a particular region' (Smith, 2011, p. 197). Pride, on the other hand, is characterised by a profound sense of identification with Giresun and a sense of honor in being from there. This supports the argument that individuals from their place of origin may not always necessarily engage in nationalism, but instead cultivate what might be termed 'regional patriotic loyalties' to their hometown (Yavuz, 2003, p. 84).

According to this text, Metin's decorations in *Dernek* can be related to his desire to create a sense of 'home', referring to his familial origins and his attachment to the village in Giresun. By creating a home-like environment in Gebze, Metin symbolically and physically recreates the space. The relationship between the photographs and Metin can be further clarified by distinguishing between 'autocentric' and 'allocentric' spatial references (Burrow, 1927, as cited in Tweed, p. 2006, p. 93). From an autocentric perspective, photographs evoke memories and imagined experiences of past homes, evoking nostalgic feelings and a sense of being 'at home' in a remembered place. From a holocentric perspective, photographs embody spatial memories and transport imagined communities, thus creating a kind of 'virtual dwelling' (Urry, 2000, p.

134). The images provide a metaphorical connection to the houses that Metin both remembers and imagines. In this way, the concept of 'little Giresun'[7] is both mentally and physically constructed through the individual's desire to experience a sense of belonging and the tangible elements that contribute to the formation of a domestic space.

Metin's identity is expressed through the decorations in the Association. The decorated photographs aim to preserve memories and tell stories associated with individuals (Digby, 2006, p. 185). The photographs and objects in the *Dernek* are used to emphasise Metin's unique identity and his position within the social and cultural context of Gebze. Such items help to identify individuals who are and are not part of the group. As the photographs and artefacts on display are also indicative of Metin's belonging to his family. The decorations in the association building are an example of Metin's sense of belonging and distinguish him from other migrants in Gebze, while at the same time reflecting a multifaceted sense of belonging that encompasses his village, province and place of residence. In the next section, the reactions of Osman and his friends to Metin's domestic practices will be discussed.

Feeling of being at 'little Giresun'

At the association, I had the opportunity to introduce myself and provide an overview of my project to Osman. We discussed my place of origin and the location of my family. Upon learning that I was from Giresun, a sense of regional affinity emerged between us. Our mutual familiarity with the area's distinctive characteristics, including its tea and hazelnut production, forest resources, and high-mountain pastures, reinforced this bond. It could be argued that our interaction was not shaped by our physical presence, social status, or occupations (student versus worker), but rather by our memories and emotional and physical ties to Giresun – a shared geo-spatial history (field note, 15 April 2015). In this manner, the act of envisioning one's place of origin enables the establishment of a "home away from home" in an environment such as *Dernek*. The concept of "home" is thus constituted by the interactions and emotions experienced in such a setting. This situation engenders in HTAs a sense of "being at home" that is shaped by social interactions

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[7] This concept is frequently used in migration literature to describe how migrants concentrate in a region and reflect their identities through cultural and religious expression. In this study, participants also referred to the dernek as "little Giresun" or "like Giresun".

and emotional bonds, extending beyond the mere physical environment.

> I come here every day after my work finishes. I do not go home without visiting here. I have two homes: one is my own home [where I live] and the other is the *Dernek*).

In Gebze, hometown associations are one of the everyday physical/social spaces that Turkish internal migrants visit as their own spaces on a daily basis. This frequent visiting leads me to ask the question why hometown associations are popular everyday physical spaces and what constitutes them as a 'home'/ 'homely space' for the internal migrants, like Osman. In this section, the *Dernek* will be used as a case study to address this question by focusing on the perceptions of the emigrants from Yurt.

The relationship between Osman and *Dernek* began before he migrated. In Gebze, he found out that his migrant friends from Yurt village stopped by the *Dernek* every day. He felt that he had to follow them.

> I knew most of the people from Dereli [a district of Giresun]. I have been coming here for six years. I could not give up coming here. Before this *Dernek* was established in 1998, I used to go to the tea shop next to it. We have to follow our friends. Doesn't it?

In a two-hour interview, Osman discussed the questions and his responses with his acquaintances afterwards, revealing that their main motivation for meeting was not to play cards, but rather to socialize. Hüseyin emphasized that their primary purpose was to connect and chat with each other. Scholars have noted that such interactions among individuals who share a common dialect and geographic background can alleviate feelings of isolation, anxiety, and loneliness experienced by migrants. These interactions foster a sense of home, belonging, "ontological security" (Giddens, 1991, as cited in Wise, 2011, p. 99). This could explain why Osman referred to the *Dernek* as his "home" and why he visited it daily.

> When you know your friends and their cultural backgrounds, you can easily sit and have conversations with them. However, if your friends were from Eastern Turkey, you wouldn't be accustomed to their habits. How could you engage in a dialogue with them? A familiar environment is necessary for interaction. The presence of

> *hemşehris* creates this sense of familiarity, naturally drawing you in, whether you're aware of it or not.

Osman maintains a certain distance from other migrant groups, given his lack of familiarity with their respective cultures and activities. The concept of *hemşehrilik* provides him with a sense of familiarity, as he is aware of the topics that are appropriate to discuss with his fellow villagers and the manner in which such discussions should be conducted. Such familiarity fosters a sense of comfort and belonging within the community. Also, this observation is significant for the research as it demonstrates the striking absence of social interaction between diverse internal migrant groups in Gebze. The lack of social interaction can be attributed to a pervasive lack of trust and unfamiliarity with other cultures. Consequently, individuals tend to interact primarily with those who adhere to their own cultural norms and practices. In this context, HTAs like *Dernek* become highly sought-after social spaces because they facilitate the sharing of familiar experiences, cultures, and customs. While these associations primarily serve the needs of their respective communities, they inadvertently limit interactions with individuals from other backgrounds.

Furthermore, one of Osman's acquaintances, Necip, asserts that one of the factors that contribute to his attachment to *Dernek* is the ability to easily communicate with his acquaintances across the tables. Given the strength of our acquaintance, we are able to converse at a raised volume. Hage (1997) posits that a person can only feel at home if they have autonomy and the capacity to make their own rules. Conversely, they argue that when the law of another party is imposed, this negates the possibility of feeling at home. Osman and his friends perceive a sense of belonging at *Dernek*, as they are able to exercise control over their interactions. Kemal pointed out the decorations, saying:

> At the association, the view reminds me of the culture of our region. This, both wittingly and unwittingly, attracts you. [I came here because] the decoration and friendship are so important. For me, firstly, the interior decoration is important and, secondly, the behaviour of the owner is important.

Kemal sat beside a pillar adorned with a series of photographs titled 'Villages of Dereli' (the district where Yurt is located). When I asked him, which photo depicted his village, he promptly pointed to one and said:

> This is the photo of my village. That, [in the photo], is our high plateau. When I look at them, my feelings overflow [*içim dolup taşıyor*]. I spent my childhood there [the high plateau]. We played there. My home is there [pointing to the photo]. I built it four years ago.

It is evident that photographs hold significant meaning and value for Kemal. The visual representation of his village and the high plateau narrates his biography, providing insight into his origins, childhood experiences, and the locations where his parents resided. As Urry (2007) asserts, such objects 'structure people's capacities to reminisce about the past, to fantasise about what might have been, and to imagine alternative histories' (pp. 136–137). They make the past vividly present. Upon viewing the photograph of *Dernek*, Kemal is able to recreate and recall the memories of his childhood, thereby evoking a sense of nostalgia for his home. When Kemal looks at pictures, the smells and feelings they evoke remind him of many places he knows, like his homes, towns, and the mountains. This creates a sense of being "home away from home". By making his new place in Gebze feel like home, he can be comfortable even though he's far from his usual home.

I had the opportunity to visit *Dernek* on several occasions in late April 2015. During these visits, Salih was engaged in conversation with his relatives residing in the surrounding villages via mobile phone. I inquired as to the nature of their discussion. He informed me that, due to the recent snowfall in Giresun, there is a possibility that this year's harvest will be significantly reduced following the adverse effects of the frost, which can lead to the destruction of the hazel flowers and leaves. He expressed concern regarding the condition of his hazelnut orchards in Dereli (field note, 27 April 2015). This emotional connectedness demonstrates that Salih's mobile phone serves as a crucial mediator in his translocal interactions, facilitating communication with individuals residing in Yurt. This leads to a similar conclusion reached by Brickell (2011) in her research on Cambodian migrants, namely that mobile phones serve as a medium through which migrants can maintain familial relations across geographical boundaries. This result demonstrates that the mobile phone facilitates a sense of connectedness to one's place of origin and emotional attachment to relatives, contributing to the Dernek's role as a site of translocal belonging.

Discussions and Conclusion

This research project examines the ways in which *Dernek* has become a 'home' for its members, investigating the diverse practices that contribute to a sense of belonging among them. These practices encompass a multitude of dimensions, including the imaginative, emotional, spiritual, material, and social, as well as activities that transcend local boundaries. The migrants at *Dernek* experience a sense of home, which is cultivated through the performance of these various home-making practices. The study emphasises the pivotal role of community leaders in transforming associations into a home for migrants. These leaders foster a sense of belonging by facilitating the expression and redefinition of identities and by creating attachments to specific locations within Gebze. Of particular importance is the research's assertion that identities, daily life, and efforts to create a home are not static; they evolve over time and space, influenced by social interactions in Gebze, connections to their place of origin, and mental associations with different spaces.

The sense of *hemşehri* bonds and belonging, both within the walls of the *Dernek* and beyond, highlights the importance of community in fostering a feeling of being at home. This sense of belonging involves residing in a space where one knows that there are at least some people, such as family and friends, who can be morally relied upon for support. The feeling of 'community' provides individuals with a better base for confronting life's challanges and difficult experiences, such as losing a loved one in Gebze, where only the *hemşehris* can help to reduce feelings of loneliness and sadness. Therefore, the feeling of community and living among his *hemşehris* likely leads Ibrahim and his friends to see the *Dernek* as a home. It is notable that such practices and interactions do not necessarily foster a sense of belonging to the homeland per se; however, the hometown does continue to represent a pivotal node of belonging, serving as an indispensable source of identity formation for migrants.

This study contributes to migration literature by critiquing reductive instrumental and functionalist approaches, which view HTAs merely as responses to migration and urbanisation. It highlights how migrants' emotions, desires, and memories drive the creation of spaces of belonging, emphasising individual agency over institutional factors. Additionally, it addresses gaps in research on the material aspects of HTAs and the role of

leaders in shaping these spaces. Unlike previous studies (e.g. Hersant and Toumarkine; Tezcan; Kurtoğlu), this study examines HTA decorations and practices, showing that leaders actively craft a sense of home through artefacts and events. Moreover, while HTA research often views hometown connections as bonding forces (Kurtoğlu, 2005; Gedik, 1998), this study reveals that belonging and identity are multi-faceted and include familial, national, and spiritual dimensions. It also explores how artefacts at HTAs facilitate social interactions across cultures in Gebze, illustrating how the *Dernek* becomes home through daily religious practices.

This study adds to the research on the idea of 'home' in literature on internal migration. Home studies look at physical building and families in relation to the idea of 'home' (K. Brickell, 2011; Kabachnik et al., 2010; Kochan, 2016). However, scholars argue that the houses and families show only one aspect of 'home' (Rapport & Dawson, 1998). As (Mallett, 2004) suggests, "homes can be multi-scalar; they can be community centres, events, or nations or places of origin for migrants" (p. 68). This article illustrates how associations can feel like 'home', which is produced by feelings, temporal and spatial connectedness and home-making.

Migrants view their hometown associations as a 'home' because they feel safe, comfortable, familiar and connected. These interactions help them form attachments to specific places in Gebze. How migrants experience being 'at home' and create a 'home' is linked to their desires, aspirations, emotions, imagination, and memories tied to their concept of home. These feelings connect them to geo-spatial histories and time.

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