

Hemshinli: The Forgotten Black Sea Armenians*

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1. Introduction to the history, language, and culture of the Hemshinli

If asked to identify the inheritors of the Black Sea coast region once inhabited by the Pontic Greeks and the Trabzon and Artvin Armenians, many would correctly identify the Laz in Turkey and the Abkhaz and other Caucasian tribes in Georgia and southern Russia. However, few know of the existence of one of the most widespread and populous groups in this area, which has a population of as many as several hundred thousand worldwide. This group, the *hemshinli* or residents of Hamshen¹, occupies a continuous area stretching from the Black Sea province of Trabzon, Rize, and Samsun in north-central Turkey to southern Russia in the north. There are also significant Hemshinli communities in the northwestern provinces of western Turkey, in various cities in Central Asia, and amongst the guest workers in Germany.

One is immediately struck by two facts about the Hemshinli: they are originally Armenian, and the Hemshinli in Turkey are Muslim.

The presence of these enigmatic Armenians in the Black Sea area raises many interesting and difficult questions:

- Who exactly are the Hemshinli?
- When did they come into the area?
- Where did they come from?
- Why are they generally unknown to the outside world?
- What effect has Islamicization had on their language and culture?

In this paper I develop the beginnings of an answer to these questions, based on my fieldwork with a number of young Hemshinli as well as some of their Christian counterparts in Abkhazia. My primary Hemshinli informant is a young man in his twenties named "Cengiz"², who was born and raised in the village of Köprücü, located 5 kilometers from the Georgian border and from the Black Sea coast in the Artvin province. On the other side of the border my main source of information is a man of the same age named Avik Topchyan, whose family comes from the town of Novyj Afon in Abkhazia.

1.1. Who are the Hemshinli?

There are three basic subgroups of Hemshinli:

* Thanks to Hagop Hachikian, James Russell, and audiences at Columbia University (April 1996) and Southfield, Michigan (November 2000) for comments on earlier versions of this paper. Throughout this paper I transcribe all Homshetsma forms in both (Western) Armenian orthography and the native Homshetsma orthography, which is based on the Turkish system. (For details of this system see Vaux 2001.)

¹The term in their language is actually հոմշե(ն)ցի *homshe(n)tsi*, plural հոմշեկնցիք *homshe(n)tsik*; the Turkish term *hemshinli* technically refers only to Muslim Homshentsik. I use *hemshinli* rather than *homshentsik* throughout this paper because it is better known outside of the local community.

²Names have been changed to protect the innocent.

- **western Hemshinli**, who live in the Turkish province of Rize and dispersed elsewhere in Turkey, speak Turkish, and are Sunni Muslim. (This group, which refers to itself as hemshinli, is well-described in two books by Uwe Bläsing (1992, 1995) and in Benninghaus 1989.)
- **eastern Hemshinli**, who live in the province of Artvin (with smaller numbers dispersed elsewhere in Turkey, Central Asia, and Europe), speak a language called Homshetsma, and are also Sunni. (This group, which refers to itself as either *hemshinli* or *homshetsi*, has been studied by myself (1996, 2001), Marr (1925), Dumézil (1963, 1965, 1967, 1986), Benninghaus (1989), and Vardanyan (1993).)
- **northern Hemshinli**, the descendants of non-Islamicized Hemshinli formerly of the provinces of Samsun, Ordu, Giresun, and Trabzon, who live in Georgia and Russia, speak Homshetsma, and are Christian. (This is the group studied by Ačaryan 1947, Torlakyan 1986, Vardanyan 1993, and Kuznetsov 1995, 2001. They refer to themselves as homshentsi.)

The primary traditional occupations of the Turkish (i.e. western and eastern) Hemshinli are cultivating tea and corn, animal husbandry, and beekeeping. The Homshetsma lexicon includes a special term for ‘honey sickness’, a peculiar condition that afflicts unfortunates who have consumed a special type of honey found in the eastern Black Sea region.³ Their folklore reflects the daily concerns of the Hemshinli as well as the mountainous coastal milieu in which they exist: it is replete with tales of protecting their fields from bears, wolves, wild men, ghosts, and their Laz neighbors. According to Cengiz, until recent times traveling bards would congregate in the village square to compete in composing songs dealing with local trees, mountains, and foods, as well as more familiar topics such as wooing and lost love.

Their riddles encapsulate the world of life in a Black Sea village, as one can see in the following examples elicited from Cengiz’s mother:

- (1) Q: *կալաթ մէ քաք պատէ թեւի*
galat me kak bade tevi
‘I threw a basket of dung against the wall’
A: *օնկուչ*
onguç
‘ear’
- (2) Q: *մաղ մէ հակվիթ ցախքէ թէի*
mağ me hagvit tsaxke tei
‘I put a sieve full of egg on the roof’
A: *աստաղ*
asdağ
‘star’

³ Honey sickness is also mentioned as having afflicted the Greek army, and in the Bible (Dan Miron, personal communication).

- (3) Q: *կ' երթա կ' երթա իզ շունի, ետ քու քա աշվի շունի*
 gerta gerta iz çuni, yed ku ka açvi çuni
 'it goes and goes and has no footprint; it returns and has no eye'
- A: *գետ*
 ked
 'river'
- (4) Q: *ճոմփոռ վաան հաշնած սենտուք*
 compu vaan haşnadz senduk
 'a locked lockbox on the road'
- A: *մազարլուխ*
mazarlux
 'cemetery'⁴

The first riddle, for example, reflects the Hemshinli tradition of using cow dung (*kak* or *axp*) to fill in the cracks between stones in the temporary homes they erect during their summer stays in summer camps (*yayla*) several days to the south. The other riddles display features that I will touch on below.

Interestingly, the ethnicity of the Hemshinli is no longer easily determined by consulting the Turkish Hemshinli. The Hemshinli in Turkey are Muslim, and are considered by many Turks to be a variety of Laz (Benninghaus 1989:497). Younger Turkish Hemshinli apparently consider themselves to be a Turkic tribe, an opinion shared in print in various Turkish publications by older members of their community (Benninghaus 1989:486-7). Their personal names are generally of Turkish origin, but many have nicknames of South Caucasian origin; some typical Hemshinli nicknames and their Georgian counterparts are given in (5).

(5) Hemshinli names	Homshetsma	Georgian
	Çita	<i>çita</i>
	Boko	<i>boko</i>
	Çute	<i>çute</i>
	Xavula	<i>xavila</i>
	Mapu	<i>mabu</i>
	Dukşi	<i>tukhsi</i>
	Gunti	<i>gundia</i>

The Hemshinli also share with the Laz their preference for the *tulum*, a sort of bagpipe, the *horon*, a particular style of dance, and a certain amount of vocabulary, such as *lazut* 'corn', *digina* 'a device that children use to carry tea on their backs', and so on.

However, though the Turkish Hemshinli often present themselves as Laz for convenience, it is important to notice that they do not intermarry with the Laz (Benninghaus 1989:491; confirmed by Cengiz). Furthermore, they rarely know more than a few words of the Laz language (Benninghaus 1989:491), and they do not refer to the Laz as Hemshinli, but rather as *megreli* 'Mingrelians' (Benninghaus 1989:491) or *jon* 'Laz', related to the Georgian name for the Laz, *č'ani* (cf. also Middle Armenian *ճեն* *çen*, Byzantine Greek *tsánoi*).

⁴ The Northern Homshetsma word for cemetery is *մեռեխնեց* *merelnets*.

The Laz themselves refer to the western Hemshinli as *ermeni* ‘Armenian’ (Benninghaus 1989:131), suggesting their true origins. Interestingly, though Cengiz reports that the same term *ermeni* is used by some of the young eastern Hemshinli to refer to drunkards, elder members of this community in fact seem to be aware of their Armenian origins, but discourage discussion of them.

The Armenian origin of the Hemshinli becomes clear when one examines Homshetsma, the language spoken by the eastern and northern Hemshinli. As we will see later, though Homshetsma contains many Turkish and Laz lexical items, genetically it is in fact closely related to the western dialects of modern Armenian.

The Armenian heritage of the Hemshinli becomes even clearer when one considers the northern Hemshinli, who acknowledge their Armenian roots, have Armenian names, belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, and do not employ Caucasian instruments such as the *tulum*. In fact, some of the younger generation of northern Hemshinli are not even aware that they are of Hamshen descent, and know only that they are Armenian and their ancestors came from somewhere in Turkey⁵.

So far, then, we know that the Hemshinli are a western Armenian group, who are in the process of assimilating to their Turkish and Caucasian environment. Our next question is where they came from, and when.

1.2. Where did the Hemshinli come from, and when?

As one can guess from their name, the Hemshinli originally come from the region around the town of Çamlıhemşin (‘Piny Hamshen’) in the Rize province of northeastern Turkey. The Armenian name of this area is Համիշէն (Hamshen). In order to refer to a resident of Hamshen in Homshetsma, one adds the Armenian provenance suffix *-ցի* (-tsi). (The form Hemşinli is the Turkish equivalent; it means literally ‘(resident) of Hemşin’.) Homshetsma furthermore changes *a* to *o* before nasal consonants (*m* and *n*), as we already saw in the derivation of *jon* ‘Laz’ from *tsan*, and then deletes the *-n*; the end result is the form հոմշէցի homşetsi mentioned earlier.

The name Hamshen itself appears to derive from an earlier form Համամաշէն (Hamamashen), which means roughly ‘Hamam’s hamlet’. We have reason then to believe that the Hemshinli moved to their current location under the guidance of a certain man by the name of Hamam. But where did these original settlers come from? There is a tradition in Cengiz’s village that the Hemshinli are the descendants of the offspring of a Turkish general and his Armenian wife, who originally lived in the Van area and eventually migrated to Hamshen via Kars and Ardahan. Various other local traditions are surveyed in Benninghaus’ excellent 1989 article on the Hemshinli: for example, certain Turkish nationalists have suggested that the Hemshinli are the descendants of a Turkic tribe from Central Asia, or even neo-Akkadians.

In reality, it seems that the original inhabitants of Hamamashen migrated to the area together with a certain prince Hamam Amatuni in the second half of the eighth century (Edwards 1988:404). Xachikyan (1969:118) suggests that these migrants came from Kotayk and Aragatsotn in the province of Ayrarat, which accords well with the linguistic facts, as we will see later. This initial migration may have been augmented by an influx of refugees from the fallen kingdom of Ani in the second half of the eleventh century (Benninghaus 1989:482).

We can also get an idea of the historical movements of the Hemshinli from their language. For example, the fact that all Hemshinli (both Christian and Muslim) have substantial

⁵ This belief was related to me by Artak, a twenty-something Hemshinli from Gagra.

Turkish and Laz components in their lexicon, whereas only the northern Hemshinli have Russian loans, suggests that the original Hemshinli lived in a Turkish-Laz milieu, and the northern group later split off from this original homeland and established itself in an area of Russian dominance. Similarly, the Homshetsma consonant system suggests that the community originally had close ties with the Armenians who ended up in the area around the city of Akn on the Euphrates river, and that both of these communities migrated from somewhere in the Ayrarat region. I'll return to this topic below.

1.3. The conversion

To summarize thus far, we know that we are dealing with a single original Christian community centered around the city of Hamshen, which subsequently split into the three modern Hemshinli communities: two Muslim and one Christian; two Turkish and one (ex-)Soviet. These facts raise three interesting problems:

- (i) How did the Hemshinli come to be distributed over such a large area after beginning with such a restricted distribution?
- (ii) Secondly, we know that it is highly unusual to come across Armenian-speaking Muslims. Many Armenians over the centuries have converted to Islam, but this conversion generally entails loss of the language and of Armenian identity within two generations. Conversely, some members of neighboring ethnic groups have acquired the Armenian language, but these minorities are typically Christian, such as the Assyrians, and they do not necessarily assimilate into the larger Armenian polity. The question then is: what conditions have enabled the Hemshinli to preserve their Armenian language and culture after converting to Islam, and how have they been affected by this conversion?
- (iii) Finally, how did the division between the Muslim and the Christian Hemshinli develop?

The answers to all three of these questions revolve around a single important event in the history of the Hemshinli community, which has had profound and lasting effects on their culture, identity, and language.

Beginning in about the sixteenth century, a large portion of the Hemshinli converted to Islam. This trend assumed a significantly larger scale in the eighteenth century, and continued to a lesser degree up to the beginning of the twentieth century. Those Hemshinli who converted to Islam were allowed to remain in situ, and have essentially been left undisturbed since that time. Those who refused to convert had in effect the choice of fleeing or taking their chances where they were. The first wave of refugees fled westwards to Trabzon, Giresun, Samsun, and so on. Their descendants successfully established new communities along the Black Sea coasts of Georgia, Abkhazia, and Russia, and in the western Turkish provinces of Bolu and Sakarya in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some of the Hemshinli in western Turkey relocated to Armenia after the First World War.

Throughout this sequence of conversions and emigration small pockets of Christian Hemshinli survived in Turkey, until 1915. We have reason to believe that the eastern Hemshinli in Cengiz's area, isolated in the mountain fastnesses of northern Hopa subprovince, were among the last to convert en masse, in the late seventeenth century. To the best of our knowledge, though, there are currently no Christian Hemshinli left in Turkey.

We do not know when the eastern Hemshinli, the least studied of the various Hemshinli subgroups, extended into the Hopa region and southern Georgia (Benninghaus 1989:482). We

do know, however, that the Hemshinli who had converted and then established themselves along the Georgian coast fell victim to Stalin's deportation of some 200,000 residents of Georgia's southern border to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1944. These Central Asian Hemshinli communities remain distinct and alive up to the present day, and at least some members retain Homshetsma (Robert Krikorian, personal communication; Kuznetsov 2001). It is interesting to note that some members of the Central Asian Hemshinli community petitioned to relocate to Armenia near the end of the Soviet period, and were refused on account of their religion (Robert Krikorian, personal communication).

1.3.1. *The impact of Islamicization*

Having accounted for the distribution of the various Hemshinli communities, I would now like to consider the impact that the conversion to Islam had on the Turkish Hemshinli. In addressing this problem I will draw primarily on my work with Cengiz, who belongs to the eastern Hemshinli community.

The overall effect of the conversion among the eastern Hemshinli is quite striking: though they essentially preserve their pre-Islamic language and culture intact--presumably because they live in isolated mountain villages with few Turks around--both the language and the culture have been almost completely stripped of their Christian elements. For example, weddings are still performed in the traditional Armenian fashion, except that no priest is present. Similarly, the native Armenian words for Christian terms such as 'priest', 'cross', 'church', and so on have disappeared (though see the discussion of *xaçuş* below).

A striking example of this de-Christianization can be seen in a Hemshinli folktale that Cengiz once recited for me, called 'Temel's Head'.

(8) Temel's Head

յիյեք հաստիք էնկեր ցախուղն իվէ քայրդ էնուշ կ'երթոն: ցախուղին քելոխն իվէ ք'ելլին քայրդէ կ'էնին: Շատ պարաք կ'ելլի, հեմի ինչեցնուշ ք' ուզին: Անտի ինչեցնելէ էրկուսէ ուուշ ճոմփացովէ ճոմփան իշնողուն մէկ ալ նա սաթարին քելխան ճոմփան ինչեցնողում կ'ասա: Տաղին օնունէ թեմել կ'ելլի: Թեմելէ չվոնէ ճետին կապա կու, "ես հեմի աստի ինչեցենիմ" կ'ասա: Անտի էնկերտաքէ ճոմփան ք' իշնուն փութ կ'էնին մարդուն վուճուսէ կո քելոխէ չկո: "Յահու," կ'ասին, "ասու քելոխէ կար թա չկա՞ր թա: Ինչ էնիք ինչ էնի՞ք օշ:՝ Յուրուց փութ կ'էնին "Յահու," կ'ասին, "մէկ էրթա կ'ասա կենոջէ հարց էնիք պալքի կենիկէ քիտենա կու:" Կենոջէ մօտէ կ'երթոն, "Յահու," կ'ասին, "քու մարդուն քելոխէ վասան էր թա չէ՞ր թա:" Կենիկն ա կ'ասա, "աս աքվան ա," կ'ասա, "քահվալթի հազրըլամիշ ի," կ'ասա, "պալթ մարդէ կիավ թա կիավ օշ թա չքիտիմ," կ'ասա:

Yiyek hadik enger tsaxutn ive kayığ enuş gerton. Tsaxutin keloxn ive kellin kayığe genin. Şad barak gelli; hemî inçetsnuş kuzin. Andi inçetsnele erguse uuş compatsove compan işnoğun meg al na satarin kelxan compan inçetsnoğum gasa. Dağın onune temel gelli. Temele çvone cedın gaba gu, 'yes hemî asdı inçetsenim' gasa. Andi engerdake compan kiçnun put genin martun vucude go keloxe çgo. 'Yahu,' gasin, 'asu keloxe gar ta çgar ta? İnç enik inç enik oç?' Yuuts put genin 'yahu,' gasin, 'meg erta gasa genoçe harts enik balki genige kidenā gu.' Genoçe mode gerton, 'yahu,' gasin, 'ku martun keloxe vaan er ta vaan çer ta?' Genign a gasa, 'as akvan a,' gasa, 'kahvaltî hazırlamış i,' gasa, 'bat marte giav ta giav oç ta çkidim,' gasa.

Three friends go up a mountain to make a boat. They climb up to the top of the mountain and make the boat. [The mountain] is very steep; now they want to lower [the boat down the

mountain]. Then to lower it, two go down by one path; the other says, 'I'll lower it down the steeper path.' The lad's name is Temel. Temel ties a rope around his neck and says, 'Now I'll lower it.' Then the friends go down the path and see that there's a man's body, but there's no head. 'Hey,' they say, 'did he have his head or not? What do we do, what don't we do?' They look at each other and say, 'Hey, let's go ask his wife; maybe she knows.' They go to the wife and say, 'Hey, does your husband have a head, or not?' The wife says, 'this morning he prepared breakfast, but I don't know if he ate it, or not.'

The story of Temel's Head is a variant of a popular Christian Armenian folktale, 'The Priest's Head', of which one version from the Mush area in eastern Turkey involves two men taking a priest to a cave to search for the missing day of the week, Friday. The story concludes as follows:

(9) excerpt from 'The Missing Friday' (Russell 1987)

It was decided the priest should go [into the cave], so they lowered him down into the hole with his feet sticking out the top. Time passed, and the priest made no sound. They pulled him out by his feet and saw he had no head: the bear ate it.

'Hey, son, the priest had his head on when we brought him here, didn't he?'

'Shucks, I didn't look to see if it was there or not.'

'This is pretty bad, son. We'd better go and ask his wife whether the priest had his head on or not when he left the house this morning.'

So they went to her house.

'Ma'am, would you tell us, did the Father have his head on or not when he left the house today?' asked the householder.

'By my soul, I don't know,' replied the priest's wife. 'Now was it, or wasn't it? But I do recall, while he was eating yogurt it was dribbling down his beard.'

One can see that the essence of the story (including the nonsensical tone) of the Priest's Head is preserved in the Hemshinli version. However, the priest has been replaced with a secular character, Temel, the standard hero of Black Sea tales, and the mildly anticlerical tone of the original is completely absent. There is also interesting wordplay specific to Homshetsma: the story clearly takes place on a mountain, but it makes no sense to build a boat on a mountain. It does make sense, on the other hand, to build a boat in a forest, where wood is readily available; this possibility is in fact alluded to in the tale's use of Homshetsma *gufunlun* (tsaxud), which means both 'mountain' and 'forest'.

The essential point in the story of Temel's Head, though, is the way in which its Christian elements have been stripped from the Hemshinli version, which is part of the general dechristianization of the Hemshinli culture. Related to this dechristianization is the Hemshinli's loss of Armenian identity. For example, the Hemshinli have completely lost the word *hay* 'Armenian' and its derivatives, such as *hayerēn* 'Armenian language', using instead the terms *homşetsi* and *homşetsma* respectively. Similarly, as I mentioned earlier, the eastern Hemshinli use the Turkish term for Armenians, *ermenî*, to refer to drunkards. One also finds amongst the Turkish Hemshinli sentiments such as the following, which was expressed in a 1984 letter from an eastern Hemshinli to Rüdiger Benninghaus: 'the Armenians are terrorists, and therefore the peaceful Hemshinli cannot be of Armenian descent' (Benninghaus 1989:486). However, it

should be noted that in 1914 the entire population of Cengiz's village fled to the mountains, suggesting some awareness of their Armenian past.

Despite the general dechristianization of the Turkish Hemshinli language and culture, we should note that there are in fact a few isolated remnants of their Christian past. For example, the Turkish Hemshinli observe *nor dai* 'New Year' on the day of the Epiphany, in accordance with the Christian Armenian practice. Bryer (1975:142) reports moreover that baptisms were performed among the western Hemshinli as late as the turn of the twentieth century. Finally, in late July the western Hemshinli celebrate at their *yaylas* a three-day festival called *vartivor*. This is a survival of the Christian Armenian festival *vardavar*, the Feast of the Transfiguration, which is generally celebrated August 6th (cf. Russell 1992).

The Hemshinli have also preserved a few isolated Christian items in their lexicon. For example, unlike the Laz, who have replaced their original Caucasian word for 'god' with Turkish *tanrı* (Dumézil 1937), the Hemshinli have preserved the original Armenian word *աստուած* *astuac* in the form *ասբաժ* (*aspadz*), which shows up in expressions such as *ասբաժ խենտացնա քեզիկի* *aspadz xendatsna kezigi* 'may god make you joyful'. The form *aspadz* is only attested elsewhere in the dialect of Akn, which as we have already seen must have once been in closer contact with the Hamshen Armenians. *Xendatsna* is the causative subjunctive of the verb *xenduş*, which preserves the original meaning of the Classical Armenian verb *խնդալ* *xndal* 'rejoice, be joyful', unlike standard modern Armenian, wherein this verb now means specifically 'to laugh'. One can also notice in this blessing the dative suffix *-gi*, which is only found in Homshetsma.

Another interesting remnant of the Hemshinli's Christian past is the verb *խաչուչ* *xaçuş*, which means 'to nail an entrance shut with two boards'; in certain situations it can also have the more generic meaning 'to close'. Cengiz describes this verb as being based on the image of the two boards nailed on top of one another in perpendicular fashion. This suggests that the verb is derived from the Armenian noun *խաչ* *xaç* 'cross', which has been lost in Cengiz's dialect as part of the general dechristianization of the lexicon.

So far we've seen that the conversion to Islam has resulted in a striking dechristianization of the language and culture of the Turkish Hemshinli. However, as can be seen from the tale of Temel's Head, the assimilation of the Hemshinli to their Turkish neighbors has had a more general impact on their language and culture as well. The younger generation has assimilated many of the basic characteristics of Turkish pronunciation, so that the *ղ* ("ghad"), which in most forms of Armenian is pronounced as a voiced uvular fricative *ɣ*, is pronounced by the younger Hemshinli in the same manner as Turkish *ğ* (*yumuşak ge* "soft g"), that is either as a barely audible uvular approximant, or as nothing at all. The older Hemshinli, on the other hand, still speak with what we can call an Armenian accent.

There has also been a massive influx of Turkish vocabulary, to a much greater extent than we find in other Armenian dialects. Some typical examples, culled from the text in (8), are given in (11):

(11)	Homshetsma	Turkish	gloss
	kayığ	kayık	boat
	vucud	vücut (< Arabic)	body (Arabic 'existence')
	cid	cid ⁶ (< Arabic)	neck
	balki	belki (< Persian)	perhaps
	kahvalti hazırlamış elluş	kahvaltı hazırlamak	prepare breakfast

The last example reveals Homshetsma's predilection for compound verbs based on Turkish roots; some further examples are provided in (12).

(12)	Homshetsma	Turkish
	haz enuş 'to love'	haz 'pleasure' (< Arabic)
	duşunmuş elluş 'think'	düşünmek 'think'
	taşınmış elluş 'move'	taşınmak 'move'
	emanet enuş 'entrust'	emanet etmek (< Arabic)

Homshetsma has also assimilated Turkish syntax to a degree not normally found in Armenian dialects. For example, Homshetsma has developed an equivalent of Turkish -mi/mı/mu/mü, which serves as an indicator of yes-no questions. The use in this capacity of *ta*, which originally meant 'that, if, or', corresponding to standard Armenian /թէ/, can be seen in the sentences in (13), taken from our folktale:

- (13) *ta* as yes-no question marker in Homshetsma
- a. Homshetsma asu keloxe gar **ta** çgar **ta**?
his head was Q wasn't Q
'did he have a head or not?'
- Turkish onun başı var**mi**ydı yok**mu**ydı
- b. Homshetsma ku martun keloxe vaan er **ta** vaan çer **ta**?
your husband's head on was Q on wasn't Q
'was your husband's head on or not?'
- Turkish senin adamının başı üstünde **mi**ydi yoksa (üstünde) değil**mi**ydi

This peculiar usage of Armenian /թէ/ as a marker of yes-no questions also occurs in the nearby Xotorjur dialect to the south, but otherwise is unattested in the Armenian-speaking world.

Turkish has also found its way into Homshetsma poetics. For example, the eastern Hemshinli have a saying վուր քէշի շեպետնու խեշի vur keçi şebetsu xeçi, literally 'hit, goat, hit, so that it falls down', used to goad someone into action. The efficacy of this idiom crucially depends on the linguistic tools available exclusively to the Hemshinli: living in a Turkish-speaking milieu, they can play the Turkish verb *vurmak* 'hit' against its Homshetsma equivalent şebetsnuş (which does not seem to be used in standard Armenian, though it is found in the dialects of Van, Erevan, and Ghazax). Similarly, the Hemshinli can rhyme the Turkish word keçi 'goat' with the Homshetsma verb xeçuş 'fall', which again is rare in standard Armenian. Word

⁶ This form does not appear to be widely known by speakers of modern Turkish.

plays of this type are no longer possible among the northern Hemshinli and other Armenian groups who do not speak Turkish.

Another interesting example of wordplay in this mixed Turkish-Armenian context is the counting rhyme in (15), which Cengiz's mother used to teach him the numbers from one to ten:

(15)	meg, terone pe(r)g	one, a hoe outside
	ergus, terone çapa	two, a hoe outside
	yyiek, govu tek	three, a cow's placenta
	çors, dzile nors	four, sparse corn sprouts
	hink, terone di(n)g	five, a goatskin sack outside
	vets, kenafin tets	six, smelly air in the outhouse
	oxte, dolavin tuxte	seven, the sheet of paper in the cupboard
	ute, terone tute	eight, the mulberry outside
	ine, valan hine	nine, the old pants
	dase, tarkin tase	ten, the bowl on the shelf

Notice here that whereas the middle word is often of Turkish origin, the rhyming couplet is always drawn from the native Armenian word stock, with two exceptions, *çapa* and *tas*. The former is particularly interesting, as it alone fails to rhyme with the number it accompanies. This striking asymmetry suggests that the rhyme for *ergus* '2' was originally some native Armenian lexical item, which was subsequently replaced, perhaps when the meaning of the original Armenian form was forgotten.

It is important to notice that the Hemshinli are not simply assimilating features of standard Turkish language and culture, but rather of local Black Sea Turkish. Thus, for example, the Turkish Hemshinli no longer employ the Christian Armenian month names, but they also do not employ those found in standard Turkish. Month names such as *հունիս* *gucux* 'February' and *չորրորդ* *çurux* 'July' are clearly related not to the standard Turkish forms *şubat* and *temmuz*, but rather to the forms we find among the Turks of Çaykara to the southwest, *küçük* and *çürük* respectively, and to those we find in Kars to the south, *g'ücük* 'February' and *cürüg ayı* 'August'. Other months such as *sifte güz* 'September' and *gaakeş* 'December' are also of Turkish origin--*siftah güz* in Turkish means 'first autumn' and *gaakeş* derives from *kara kış* 'black winter' (cf. Kars *gara-gış*, Erzerum *GARGIŞ*)--but again do not correspond to the standard Turkish forms *eylül* and *aralık*.

1.4. Language

We've seen so far that the language and folklore of the Hemshinli have much to tell us about their identity, their history, and their social and geographical context. I'd now like to present a case study that demonstrates this point more forcefully, but in order to do so it is first necessary to provide a general overview of the history and structure of the Homshetsma language.

A number of conditions have conspired to make Homshetsma one of the most divergent and interesting varieties of Armenian. The Hemshinli moved from the original Armenian homeland to an area of isolated mountain villages at a time when the Armenian language was still relatively homogenous, and had not yet developed the incredible diversity that characterizes the hundreds of modern Armenian dialects (Weitenberg 1983). Consequently, Homshetsma preserves a number of important archaisms that were levelled elsewhere, and has also developed a host of peculiar innovations not found in other varieties of Armenian. The fact that the

language is not written has entailed that Homshetsma has not undergone *any* influence from the classical or literary dialects, which to the best of my knowledge makes it unique among the Armenian dialects. Homshetsma therefore gives us our only glimpse of what Armenian in its so-called ‘pure’ form would look like, untainted by loanwords from Classical Armenian and not stripped of the Turkish component of its lexicon.

A number of features distinguish Homshetsma from all other dialects of Armenian. Whereas all other varieties of Armenian form the infinitive by adding to the verb stem the suffixes *-el*, *-il*, *-al*, and so on, Homshetsma adds only the suffix *-uṣ*. Our tale for example contains two infinitives, *enuṣ* ‘do’ and *iṇetsnuṣ* ‘lower’, corresponding to standard Western Armenian *ընել* and *իջեցնել* respectively. In (17) we can see that Homshetsma, like many western dialects, actually has four classes of verbs according to the vowel they take in conjugation, but all of these select the *-uṣ* infinitive.

(17)	2sg present	infinitive	gloss
	<i>-e-</i> genes	enuṣ	do
	<i>-i-</i> gellis	elluṣ	be
	<i>-a-</i> garta gus	gartuṣ	read
	<i>-u-</i> mednu gus	mednuṣ	enter

Adjarian (1911:189) plausibly relates the *-uṣ* suffix to the Turkish participial suffix *-iṣ*, as in *alıṣ-veriṣ* ‘trade’, whereas Dumézil 1963 prefers to derive it from Persian.

Homshetsma is also unique in using the verb *unnuṣ* ‘have’ as an auxiliary: in northern Homshetsma it is used to form the progressive tense, and in eastern Homshetsma it is used to form the perfect tense, in a manner similar to Germanic and Romance languages.

Homshetsma is also unusual relative to other Armenian dialects in using the Middle Armenian plural suffix *-vi-* as a singulative marker for paired body parts (the one possible parallel is Zeytun). Other dialects use forms such as *աչվի* and *ուկվի*, but these forms are always plural in meaning -- ‘eyes’, ‘eyebrows’ -- whereas in Homshetsma they are singular, the plural being formed by adding the regular plural suffix *-niye* (18).

(18)	Homshetsma singular	Homshetsma plural	gloss
	açvi	açveniye	eye
	unkvi	unkveniye	eyebrow

Though the use of this particular suffix is unprecedented, the semantic development it reflects is paralleled in standard Armenian, where the Classical Armenian plural suffix *-p* (*-k*) is employed to mark the same paired body parts as well as certain other singular nouns.

Like most western Armenian dialects, Homshetsma employs the affix *gu* to mark the present and imperfect tenses. The distribution of this affix is peculiar in Homshetsma, though: it appears after polysyllabic consonant-initial verbs, and before vowel-initial and monosyllabic verbs (19).

(19)	infinitive	1sg present	gloss
	xarbuş	xarbi gum	speak
	enuş	genim	do
	devuş	gu dom	give

In terms of lexical material, Homshetsma possesses a host of words unparalleled elsewhere in Armenian, such as the form *hohol* or *xorxol*, which means ‘owl’; the standard Armenian form *bu/pu* is unknown to Hemshinli. Another isolated form of unknown origin is *galaş* ‘wind’; again, Hemshinli have not heard the standard Armenian forms Հով *hov* and քամի *kami*.

On a lighter note, Homshetsma seems to be unique amongst the Armenian dialects in having a voiceless coarticulated dental and bilabial trill, which we find for example in the expression used to call baby chickens, *tbi cici*. This sound occurs as a regular phoneme in the nearby Caucasian languages Ubykh and Kabardian, but does not appear to be phonemic in Homshetsma. Homshetsma also differs from standard Armenian in pronouncing *r* as a retroflex alveolar approximant, in the same fashion as speakers of standard American English. One also hears this pronunciation among elderly Armenians born in Turkey.

Two other linguistic features that distinguish Homshetsma from all but one or two other Armenian dialects are the change of *a* to *o* before nasals that I mentioned earlier, and the use of the -oğ participle to form the future tense. The change of *a* to *o* before nasals is only paralleled in the dialect of Akn, which as we have already seen is closely related to Homshetsma, and in the dialect of Aslanbek in western Turkey. However, we happen to know that the Aslanbek community was formed by immigrants from Akn and Hamshen. Interestingly, this particular change is also attested in our earliest known Armenian manuscript, the Moscow gospel, which was written by a scribe from Kars, just to the south of Hamshen, in 887, not long after Hemshinli arrived in the area.

We can see the use of the -oğ participle to form the future tense in our folktale:

- (20) սաթարին քելխան ճոմփան ինչեցնողում
satarin kelxan compan inçetsnoğum
cliff-gen. top-abl. path I.will.lower
‘I’ll lower it on the path from the top of the cliff’

The basic verb is *inçuş* ‘descend’, from which we form a causative *inçetsnuş* ‘cause to descend, lower’. To make the future tense of this causative verb, one removes the infinitive suffix and adds the participial suffix -oğ, followed by forms of the auxiliary verb ‘be’. We know from other forms of Armenian that -oğ was originally a present participle suffix, so that the entire form originally meant something like ‘I am lowering’. The development of present progressive formations of this type into future formations is amply attested in the world’s languages, including English, which has forms such as ‘I’m going to the store tomorrow.’

Homshetsma also preserves a number of archaic features that have been lost in standard Armenian. I have already mentioned the verb *xenduş*; another striking example involves the formation of the past tense. Indo-European, the ancestor of Armenian, formed the imperfect tense by prefixing an *e-* to the verb root; so, for example, the word for ‘he carried’ was **eb^heret*. The expected outcome of this form in Armenian is *eber*, which is in fact what we find in the Classical Armenian aorist. Standard Modern Armenian has entirely lost this *e-* augment, though,

so we now have forms like Standard Western *բերեց* perets. Homshetsma, however, preserves the augment; their form for 's/he brought' is *էբի* epi.

As in Middle Armenian, the augment is also extended to a number of new verbs:

(22)	infinitive	aurist	gloss
	toğuş	etoğ	leave
	ponuş	epats	open
	devuş	eyed	give
	eguş	eyev	come
	etc.		

The relation in which Homshetsma stands to other Armenian dialects is somewhat complex. Nevertheless, we can say that Homshetsma is clearly a Western Armenian dialect. For example, it shows the voicing of original Armenian voiceless unaspirated stops that characterizes almost all western dialects, as we can see in forms from our folktale repeated in (23):

(23)	Homshetsma	Common Armenian	gloss
	enger	<i>ընկեր</i>	comrade
	gerton	<i>կու երթան</i>	they go
	şad	<i>շատ</i>	very
	ergus	<i>երկու</i>	2
	dağın	<i>տղայ</i>	boy

We also know that the original form of Homshetsma, before it split into the three modern groups, contained a set of sounds known as voiced aspirates: {*պ^h ս^h կ^h ժ^h ճ^h*} (b^h d^h g^h dz^h c^h). These sounds are preserved in the Christian dialect of Mala (in Trabzon), but have merged with the original voiceless aspirates in Cengiz's dialect (since voiceless stops are predictably aspirated in Cengiz's dialect, as in English, we do not write the aspiration):

(24)	Classical Armenian	Mala	Köprücü	gloss
	<i>բան</i> <i>ban</i>	b ^h on	pon	thing
	<i>գիւղ</i> <i>giwt</i>	g ^h eğ	kyağ	village
	<i>դուրս</i> <i>durs</i>	d ^h us	tus	outside

These two properties of the Homshetsma consonant system, namely the voicing of original voiceless unaspirated stops and the aspiration of original voiced stops, are consistent with the historical evidence that the Hemshinli came from the Ayrarat region, since the local dialects of Ayrarat share these properties (Markosyan 1989).

The variety of Homshetsma spoken by eastern Hemshinli has a number of interesting innovations. The epenthetic vowel, which normally surfaces as schwa in other varieties of Armenian, surfaces as *e* in eastern Homshetsma (25a), and as *a* before the sounds x and ğ (25b).

(25)	Standard Western Armenian	Homshetsma	gloss
a.	դնել tinel	tenuş	put
	շունս şunis	şunes	my dog
b.	աստղ asdıġ	asdaġ	star
	պեխ bex	bax	moustache

The only other dialect of Armenian in which this change occurs is Tigranakert.

Eastern Homshetsma also shows a predilection for metathesizing stop + sonorant clusters, particularly at the end of a word; so, for example, original տայգր ‘husband’s brother’ becomes dark; original ցամաք ‘dry’ gives the verb tsokmetsnuş ‘dry out’; original շիտակ ‘straight’ gives the verb şigduş ‘heal’; հաւկիթ ‘egg’ becomes hagvit; նօւր ‘sparse’ becomes nors, which we saw in the counting rhyme; աղոսյ ‘tooth’ becomes arga; and so on (26a). This metathesis also applies to some loanwords: Turkish *haber* ‘news, narrative’ (originally from Arabic) gives xarbuş ‘speak’; *küfür* ‘cursing’, also from Arabic, gives kerfuş ‘to curse’; and so on (26b).

(26)	source	Homshetsma	gloss
a.	<i>taygr</i>	dark	husband’s brother
	<i>ćamak</i>	tsokmetsnuş	dry → dry out
	<i>şitak</i>	şigduş	straight → heal
	<i>hawkit</i>	hagvit	egg
	<i>nawsr</i>	nors	sparse
	<i>akray</i>	arga	tooth
b.	<i>haber</i>	xarbuş	news, narrative → speak
	<i>küfür</i>	kerfuş	curse

In the domain of vocabulary, Homshetsma has undergone a variety of interesting semantic changes. The word ծանր, which originally meant ‘heavy’, has become in Homshetsma the word dzond, which means only ‘pregnant’. պէտք, which in standard Armenian means ‘need’, in Homshetsma means only ‘well, good’, as in inçbes es? bedk im ‘how are you? I’m good.’ The original Armenian root /սել-, which survives in the standard Armenian forms /սելք ‘brains’ and /սելօք ‘clever(ly)’, is preserved in Homshetsma only in the form xelok, which means ‘quickly’.

With this linguistic background in hand, I’ll now present a case study demonstrating that careful examination of a people’s language and folklore can reveal important facts about their past.

2. The etymology of Pompush

2.1. Hemshinli onomastics

In January of 1995 I began working with Cengiz, the eastern Hemshinli from the village of Köprücü. Cengiz provided me with a list of personal names commonly used in his village, which I have reproduced in (28).

(28) Eastern Hemshinli personal names and nicknames

MALE	FEMALE
boko	açige
budig	adiye
çita	budige
tsortsel	tsentsele
çute	dukşi
çuti	fadi
degele	gabçax
didom	gunti
dongo	hemzet
feremuz	kentse
cibo	mentse
kisti	mentsi
koşele	mentuxe
koşi	pompuş
kosigin	pulli
mapu	tuxe
mati	xavi
maxas	xavula
mufik	ameli
muti	mufide
papulik	çiçili
pepe	
pilo	
pirtod	
piti	
plis	
risman	
suat	
temal	
tilist	
uguli	
fli	

Given the linguistic and cultural setting in which the Hemshinli have lived for the last millennium, we should expect that the stock of personal names should consist of native Armenian forms, stripped of their Christian component, alongside Caucasian, Turkish, and Muslim forms. Since the native stock of non-Christian Armenian personal names is largely of Iranian origin, we should therefore expect Hamshen personal names to be primarily of South Caucasian (Laz) or Iranian origin. This appears to be confirmed by the list in (28): the majority of the names appear to be Caucasian, and others are Iranian, as I'd like to suggest here.

2.2. Armenian and Iranian queens

One of the more intriguing personal names in (28) is Pompuş, the name of Cengiz's sister. This name has no synchronic meaning for the Hemshinli, and in its present form means nothing in standard Armenian or in the Caucasian languages of the area. However, when we consider the phonological history of Homshetsma, the name begins to make sense.

First of all, we already know that Homshetsma has a synchronic rule that raises *a* to *o* before nasal consonants. This rule has produced historical changes (29), and is also responsible for synchronic alternations in the modern language (30).

(29)	Classical Armenian	Homshetsma	gloss
a.	համ ham	hom	taste
	աման aman	omon	cup
b.	ծառ tsar	dzar	tree
	շատ şat	şad	very

(30)	underlying form	surface form	gloss
a.	gu-ert-a-m	gertom	I go
	gu-ert-a-n	gerton	they go
b.	gu-ert-a-Ø	gerta	he/she/it goes

Given the existence of this rule of nasal raising in the history of Homshetsma, it is possible that Pompuş descended from a protoform *pampuş.

We also know that Homshetsma possesses a rule that changes *i* to *u* before *ş*⁷. This rule does not apply in all of the cases where we might expect, such as գիշեր ‘evening’ > kişer, but does apply in a significant number of cases, summarized in (31).

(31)	source	Homshetsma	gloss
a. from Armenian	uriş	uuş	other
b. from Turkish	-iş	-uş	participial suffix
	şişe	şuşe	bottle

It is therefore possible that our protoform *pampuş could have been produced from an earlier form *pampiş by the application of this rule.

We also know that Cengiz’s variety of Homshetsma underwent the same consonant shift as Standard Western Armenian, merging the original Armenian plain voiced series of consonants with the voiceless aspirates, and voicing the original plain voiceless series. I’ve supplemented the forms we saw earlier with the ones in (32) (recall that aspiration is not noted in our rendition of Homshetsma forms).

(32)	Classical Armenian	Homshetsma	gloss
	տասն tasn	dase	ten
	դու du	tun	you (sg.)
	թեւ tew	tev	wing (Classical), arm (Homshetsma)

The consonant shift in (32) could therefore have produced our protoform *pampiş from an earlier form *bambiş.

⁷ It is interesting to note in this context that *ş* is produced with lip rounding in some languages, including English.

Finally, we know that Homshetsma, like all modern Armenian dialects, at some point in its history underwent a rule deleting word-final *n* when preceded by a consonant. This rule produced outcomes of the type in (33).

(33)	Classical Armenian	Homshetsma	gloss
	ձուկն	tsug	fish
	մուկն	mug	mouse

It is therefore possible that our protoform *bambiş derives from an earlier form *bambişn.

The form բամբիշն *bambişn* is in fact a Classical Armenian word for ‘queen’, used in particular in reference to Iranian queens. The form is a loan from Middle Iranian *bāmbišn*⁸, which in turn derives from Avestan *dəmānō.paθnī-* ‘lady of the house’ (Benveniste 1966:27). In the Classical Armenian period բամբիշն was used as a personal name as well (Adjarian 1971.1:378); for example, the fifth-century historian Pawstos Biwandatsi speaks of Բամբիշն, wife of Athenogenes and sister of king Tiran of Armenia.

The word *bambişn* is no longer used as a title, a word for ‘queen’, or a personal name in modern Armenian. (There is one notable exception: the wife of the minister in the protestant Armenian church is referred to as *pampiş*. However, the Armenians I have asked have been unaware of the original meaning of this term.)

The Hemshinli personal name *Pompuş* appears to be an archaic remnant of precisely the original usage, however. The steps of the derivation I have sketched thus far are summarized in (34).

(34)	Old Iranian	<i>dəmānō.paθnī-</i>	
	Middle Iranian	<i>bāmbišn</i>	
	Armenian I	<i>bambişn</i>	(no length distinctions in Common Armenian)
	Armenian II	<i>bambiş</i>	(all Armenian dialects lose final <i>-n</i> after a consonant)
	Armenian III	<i>pampiş</i>	(consonant shift)
	Armenian IV	<i>pompiş</i>	(all Homshetsma subdialects have nasal raising)
	Armenian V	<i>pompuş</i>	(the change of <i>i</i> to <i>u</i> is peculiar to Muslim Homshetsma)

Pompuş therefore originally meant ‘queen’, a completely plausible title for a woman; compare the modern Armenian personal name *Takuhi*, with the same meaning. As is often the case with personal names, however, the original meaning of the name was subsequently lost.

What conclusions can we draw this seemingly innocuous form *Pompuş*, found only in a tiny mountain village of no more than a few hundred people, tucked away in the forgotten backwaters of northeastern Turkey? This single form tells us many things:

⁸ Manichean Middle Persian *b’nbysn* [*bāmbišn*], Pahlavi *b’anbšn’* [*bāmbišn*]. Hübschmann 1895:117 mentions a Pahlavi form *bānbušn*, which he claims to be an incorrect reading based on the Armenian evidence. The Sogdian form *p’mpwšt* [*bāmbušt*] mentioned by Benveniste 1966:27, however, suggests that this *-u-* may have been a legitimate Iranian development. If this is the case, we do not necessarily need to invoke the Hamshen rule in (31) to account for the *-u-* in *pompuş*, though it is unlikely that an eastern Iranian language such as Sogdian would have been in contact with Armenian.

- it speaks of the Armenian roots of a people currently in the last stages of assimilating a Turkish identity;
- it reveals the historical connection between two ethnic groups, the northern Hemshinli and the Turkish Hemshinli, who since 1915 have forgotten each other;
- it speaks of the Christian heritage of a people who now have turned to Islam and almost entirely forgotten their Christian past;
- it tells of an ancient link between Armenians and Iranians that was severed more than a millennium ago.

Though the Hemshinli have been separated from Iranian influence for more than a millennium, they have preserved in this personal name a trace of the important historical influence of Iran on Armenia that has been lost in the standard language. Perhaps closer examination of the remainder of the onomastic stock of the Hemshinli will shed further light of this sort on the rich cultural history of the Armenians.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been twofold: to provide an introduction to the language and culture of the Hemshinli, an important yet neglected Armenian community; and to argue for the importance and immediate necessity of working with Armenian dialect speakers. The languages and cultures of these individuals are the last remnants of premodern Armenia, and as such provide us with raw material for understanding the development of Armenian civilization and society that we cannot obtain from the literary languages and urban Armenian societies.

In addition, as we have seen in our investigation of the name Pompuş, the study of Armenian dialect communities such as the Hemshinli reveals and requires a complex synthesis of ancient Iranian, Caucasian, Christian, Muslim, and other elements. The depth and subtlety of the interactions between these elements are easily missed in studies that choose to ignore living oral traditions in favor of medieval texts, historical documents, and so on.

Since Armenian is not a tree from which dialects grew, but rather a map of different Armenic languages, the study of dialects and material transmitted in them restores a great deal of neglected material to the fund of Armenian culture. The study of Armenian literature should not be constrained by an artificial and externally-imposed model according to which folk tales, songs, riddles, jokes, and so on are regarded as primitive or secondary to a canonical literature. No one should purport to deplore Orientalism on one hand and then apply extraneous criteria on the other when determining what areas should be stressed when selecting materials for the study of Armenian history, civilization, and language.

I hope to have persuaded the reader that in order to develop a proper understanding of the history of Armenian communities and the development of their language and culture, we cannot confine ourselves to the study of classical and medieval texts. Armenian culture is not like that of the Sumerians, which by necessity we must study solely through its written records and material remains. Rather, Armenian culture is a mosaic of hundreds of subparts, many of which, like those of the Hemshinli, are still alive today, continuing, unbroken, traditions developed more than a millennium ago. Written records and material remains can never fully document a living culture; by confining our attentions to these remains, we content ourselves with simply scratching the surface of deeper phenomena. We must take advantage of the living traditions in all of their manifestations if we hope to come to grips with the true richness of Armenian culture.

This work must be carried out as soon as possible, because most of the nonstandard Armenian dialects, and with them their traditions and cultures, are fading away as we speak. In Köprücü, for example, most of Cengiz's contemporaries speak only Turkish; within 50 years the eastern Hemshinli may well have suffered the fate of their western counterparts, preserving no more than a smattering of Armenian words in their Turkish as evidence of their Armenian past. Neither of my Hemshinli informants from Abkhazia speaks Homshetsma fluently; they tell me that most of their contemporaries speak Russian as their first language, with a smattering of standard Armenian. Thus the northern Hemshinli too seem to be on their last legs. Let us hope that steps will be taken to arrest or slow down this process, and that scholars will study the language and culture of the hundreds of Hemshinli communities before it is too late.

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