



Throughout the changing political context of the 19th century in the Ottoman Empire, the relationship of the Hemshinli people to Islam was not monolithic. More importantly, particular settlements in the Hemshin region demonstrated differing forms of adherence to Islam. This paper addresses the question of religious affiliation in the Hemshinli settlements in the 19th century. For this purpose, the differences among these settlements in the Hemshin region – Elevit, Karadere, Khodorchur, and Hopa – are explored in terms of their religious affiliation. The cases drawn from missionary reports, travel writings and official documents show that it is not possible to generalize about the religious belongings of the people in the Hemshin area in the 19th century.

Religious belongings

The question of religious affiliation
in the Hemshin settlements in the 19th century

By Gülbin Kıranoğlu

In May 2015, *Agos*, a bilingual Armenian newspaper in Turkey, published an article on two official Ottoman documents from 1913 that qualify as evidence for the connection of the Hemshinli community to Armenianness. Hemshinli are people whose ancestors come from the historical area of Pontus, comprising lands from Trabzon, Rize and Artvin in the north-eastern Black Sea region in Turkey. These documents that the newspaper article mentions particularly refer to the Hemshinli people in Hopa, describing them as ‘Armenian-convert Muslims’ (*‘Ermeni’den dönme Müslümanlar*) and ‘converts who are originally Armenian’ (*‘Aslen Ermeni iken ihtida etmiş*’), and urge the official addressees to take the necessary measures against the risk of missionary influence. In these Ottoman documents, listing the names of the Hemshinli villages that pose this risk, the officials present the Hemshinli people as more prone to such influence ‘due to their gullibility and ignorance’ (*‘saflik ve cabillikleri nedeniyle*’). The actual peculiarity that makes the Hemshinli community more suspect for foreign influence and hence for possible treachery, in the eyes of the officials, is their former affiliation with Christianity, which is the source of their ambiguous status. In nationalist contexts, the potential to revert to a former faith is feared and interpreted as the act of a weak character. This character is then seen as a proxy for foreign powers, although the interactions between the local community and the foreigners do not take place in a static environment; there is a dynamic exchange which influences all parties.

In order to understand the religious ambiguity of the Hemshinli people, we need to go back to the 19th century, decades before these documents were composed. In the 19th century, the religious belonging of the Hemshinli villages reflected their ambivalent attitudes towards Islam as well as Christianity. It is claimed that, as one of the Christian

communities in the historical Pontus, the people in the Hemshin district converted to Islam between the 16th and 18th centuries. However, Islamicization was a gradual process in this less permeable mountainous region. Along with Orthodox Greek communities such as the Kromlides (Kurumlular) and the Stavriotes (Istavriler), who converted to Islam, the Hemshinli were also defined as a ‘crypto-Christian’ community by many scholars. This paper explores the Hemshinli community’s relation to Islam with regard to the phenomenon of ‘crypto-Christianity’ in the 19th century.

Apostates and ‘crypto-Christians’: disambiguating the Hemshinli

First of all, it is important to scrutinize the term ‘crypto-Christianity’, which is generally used to denote the covert adherence to Christianity by voluntary or forced converts, in order to be able to understand why this marker has clung tightly onto these communities. Our knowledge on these people is mainly drawn from missionary literature since Ottoman archives mostly remain silent about this phenomenon until the mid-19th century, when these communities made a political claim in the aftermath of the reform edicts of 1839 and 1856. However, Western missionaries marked the affiliation of these people as secretive. The Ottoman government defined these people as apostates from Islam but refrained from the official punishment of public execution unless the apostate publicly cursed Islam. It is striking to see that the way in which these communities are conceptualized is contingent upon the perspective of the observer. Analysing how the Ottoman Empire perceived the phenomenon, Selim Deringil, in his book *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire*, argues that, because the public execution of apostates was banned in 1844 due to Western pressures, re-conversions to Christianity were feared more in

the 19th century than in previous centuries as they were seen as the precursor to losing the Ottoman Empire’s members in this transitional period from the empire to a modern notion of a state. Therefore, such acts of reversion to the former faith were not simply a religious but also a political issue. In the Ottoman Empire, the so-called ‘crypto-Christian’ peoples comprised various ethnic communities who had converted to Islam in previous centuries, among them the Shparataks from Albania, the Laramans from Kosovo, the Linobamvaki from Cyprus, the Kromlides, the Stavriotes and the Hemshinli from the Pontus region. In the Pontus, such communities were mainly associated with their hometowns. However, in addition to such seemingly neutral markers, these communities around the empire were also defined with pejorative perceptions of their religious ambiguity, which were used among the local populations: ‘in Serbia *droverstvo*; in Cyprus *patsaloi* (piebalds), *apostolikoi* (wild carobs) or *linovamvaki* (linen-cottons); in Albania *laramanoi* (motleys)’ (Deringil: 115). While the Hemshinli were known as ‘*ges ges*’ (‘half-half’) to the neighbouring Armenian villagers, the Kromlides and the Stavriotes, were referred to as ‘quarter Muslims’ (*‘buçuk Müslümanlar*’) or ‘people of two cults’ (*‘iki ayin icra eder abali*’) in the official Ottoman documents, signifying their perceived anomalous and deficient religious identity. In a report written by the British consul in Trebizond (Trabzon), W. G. Palgrave, who described these communities as ‘neither Mussulmans nor Christians’, the fulminating attitudes of the Ottoman administration were presented: these communities who, in a window of opportunity during the Tanzimat period, ‘were about to abjure Mohe-madanism’ which was in the eyes of ‘the Pasha, Defterdar and many others of the leading Mussulmans’: **not a subject of congratulation to**

the Christians, as [these communities] never believed in anything and were like animals on the subject of religion. The Mahomedans are moreover aware, that circumcision is scarcely known among them, that they have churches of their own and that it is only when they happen to be living entirely among Mahomedans that they attend Mosques and Mussulman meetings (35).

For the Ottoman governance, such ambivalence caused a problem because such an ambiguous position did not fit into the available categories for administrative and bureaucratic purposes. In the binary logic of the Ottoman Empire, where one could only fall into categories of Muslim or *dhimmi*, these communities complicated the issue as an intermediate group.

The problem with the usage of the concept of ‘crypto-Christian’ is that it relies on the superimposition of two sets of binary opposition: public–private and true–false. It implies that there is an inner truthful life that is hidden as opposed to a false public identity. In his article ‘Public Secrets: Crypto-Christianity in the Pontos’, Yorgos Tzedopoulos discusses this juxtaposition as the source of a fallacy:

the distinction between true/private and false/public identity has several methodological flaws, since it approaches identity in an essentialist and monolithic way. Identity is not an inner, metaphysical quality but a social category formed by interaction and negotiation (168).

The essentialist notion of identity is predicated on the idea that these people move back and forth between these two irreconcilably separate identities. However, a more fluid perception of identity understands the demarcations between identities or religions as blurry, and accommodates more room for variations or even deviations. This line of thought could help us in interpreting the religious dualities of these peoples, such as the practices

of worship in both Christianity and Islam; the use of double names: one in Armenian or Greek, the other in Turkish; and the simultaneous profession of imam/priest as ambiguous rather than crypto. The term ‘crypto-Christianity’, on the other hand, has a disambiguating function, denying a space which allows an ambiguous belonging to both faiths simultaneously. It rather forces an assumption that there is a definite choice between two faiths, which is hidden from outsiders. Tzedopoulos warns us that ‘[i]dentity – or rather identities – are constantly re-interpreted, reapplied, and re-negotiated’ and argues that:

[t]he multiple identities of the so-called crypto-Christians in the Ottoman Empire applied to different social environments. As far as our sources permit us to discern, the same people defined themselves as Muslims or Christians in different situations and for different reasons (168).

What seems like religious deception or a public performance from an outsider’s perspective could be an idiosyncratic religious affiliation, shaped by fluid transitions between religions.

Dawkins’ hierarchy of genuine faith

The usage of the term ‘crypto-Christian’ also suggests that the conversion process by these communities was superficial and incomplete. This approach to conversion could be best found in the categories devised by Richard M. Dawkins, one of the scholars who popularized this term in his well-known article titled ‘The Crypto-Christians of Turkey’. Dawkins claimed that such ‘people with divided or ambivalent religious affiliations’ could be categorized according to degrees of ‘genuine’ commitment to their ‘true’ religion. The lowest are the ‘syncretic Sufi adherents’; moving then to the next worst, the ‘indifferents’, who are characterized as showing detach-

ment from both religions; then to the ‘imperfectly converted’ who cannot let go of some traditions of their former faith; and at the top are the genuine crypto-Christians who are idealized as devout Christians who hate Islam. From a perspective that appreciates this superficiality as a symptom of loyalty to the original faith, the return to the true faith might even seem inevitable. Tzedopoulos observes such an attitude in his evaluation of the works by the Greek nationalist historians. Tzedopoulos finds this attitude ‘highly problematic’ due to its lack of recognition of multiple identities embraced by these communities and its particular exclusion of the Muslim one. He argues that these communities ‘did not simply pass for Muslims; they were so, since their socio-political identity was Muslim, regardless of their deviating religious practices’ (168). Criticizing the essentialist notion of these communities’ adherence to Christianity, which assumes an unchangeable core to identity, Tzedopoulos also adds that these people’s Christian faith could not have remained the same after they registered as Muslims even though in the beginning their Muslimness was only a disguise.

Hovann H. Simonian, the editor of the volume on the Hemshin entitled *The Hemshin: History, Society and Identity in the Highlands of Northeast Turkey* (2007), in his chapter on the Islamicization of the Hemshin region, does not object to the way Dawkins approaches religious ambiguity, but rather points out the scarcity of evidence which can be used for the classification of the Hemshinli cases. Subsequently, he makes use of this categorization with a view to illustrating the transformation of spiritual attachment to the former faith over time. Arguing that three of these categories might define the Hemshinli experience of ‘crypto-Christianity’ or ambiguous religious affiliation, Simonian concludes that this categorization rather seems to reflect stages of conversion:





View from the Kaçkar mountains. Foto: Ugur Biryol

Genuine crypto-Christianity was probably predominant in the early stages following conversion, but faded away with the passage of time, leaving in its place only relics of Christian rites and customs which an ‘imperfectly converted’ population found difficult to part with (73).

These might gradually ‘los[e] with time some of their original religious meaning’ (ibid.). Therefore, in Simonian’s view, the process reflects an eventual dissolution of the original faith in which the later the conversion takes place, the closer it is to genuine ‘crypto-Christianity’.

Simonian argues that the Hemshinli ‘crypto-Christians’, in addition to the categories of Muslim Hemshinli and Armenian Hemshinli, constitute the third category in the region. In Simonian’s view, these Hemshinli converts ‘developed their own brand of crypto-Christianity,’ blurring the distinction between being Armenian and being a Muslim (70). For Simonian, one of the factors which ambiguated religious affiliation in the area was gender because ‘many Hemshinli families had a Muslim father and a Christian mother’ in line with the Islamic law which forbids Christian men to marry Muslim women but also due to the fact that women were more likely to preserve old customs and traditions in the domestic sphere (72). In some places such as Karadere, the mothers tried to maintain the continuity of Christianity in the family by secretly sending their children to Trebizond so that they could be raised within the Armenian religious tradition. Another factor which had an influence on religious affiliation, Simonian argues, was altitude. The duality associated with the ‘crypto-Christians’ was more typical in the countryside, especially among the transhumant communities like the Hemshinli. In the high valleys where Muslim supremacy was less invasive, Christian rituals were more likely to survive. One exam-

ple of a religious custom, which was transformed over time into a relic, is the Armenian festival of ‘Vartavar’ which is still celebrated in the Hemshin valleys. Simonian asserts that, during the process of gradual decline in Christianity and the increase in Islam in the Pontic region from the mid-17th to the 19th century, one can observe ‘a three-tier pattern’ concerning ethnic organization: the Laz were closest to the coastal lines, the Hemshinli were scattered in the middle, and the Christian Armenians were settled in the upper valleys (56). He argues that Islam was widespread along the shorelines since the Laz converted to Islam earlier, whereas in the highlands of the Pontos, the Islamic ambiance faded away over the foggy mountains, offering more freedom for Christian lifestyles.

The Hemshinli: Muslim or Christian? Or ambiguous?

There are some Hemshin settlements which come into prominence with regards to the issue of relative religious freedom. The differences in religious affiliation across the Hemshin region might be portrayed in relation to these places. The first of these Christian refuges was Elevit. Situated in Çamlıhemşin at an altitude of 1800 metres, the village of Elevit was able to preserve its Christianity until the early 19th century. Hovann Simonian attributes this characteristic to its proximity to the Khachikar monastery, which was the operating diocese in the Hemshin region. Additionally, its proximity to the Catholic bastion of Khodorchur was another advantage. Therefore, in the case of Elevit, it was not only altitude, but also access to spiritual guidance that influenced the villagers’ religious affiliation, which would explain why Başhemşin at the same altitude was Muslim. However, throughout the 19th century, Elevit eventually lost its status as a Christian shelter as its inhabitants gradually left the

village. By 1870, the Islamicization of the region was coming to a completion and the overall population of the nahiye (i.e. administrative region) of Hemshin decreased to 23 Christian families. By that date, according to official Ottoman documents, the number of mescits (i.e. smaller mosques) increased to 40 and mosques increased to 15.

Another settlement which acted as a Christian asylum for the persecuted Hemshinli was Karadere. Karadere was not situated in the historical Hemshin region but at its periphery, closer to Trabzon. Karadere is described in missionary and travel literature of the period as a ‘crypto-Christian’ place. Similar to Elevit, its proximity to the city of Trabzon where a considerably large Armenian community resided was an advantage. In the beginning of the 19th century, as noted by Minas Biji kyan, Karadere converts ‘still carried Armenian last names and spoke Armenian; old people knew Christianity, worshipped the Cross and offered alms’ (qtd. in Simonian: 74). This was partly due to the spiritual assistance of priests who continued their services to these people who registered as Muslims. About 25-30 crypto-Christian families in Karadere were under the religious guidance of the posterity of the martyred priest Der Garabet Toroslu until 1820, and after a break of 20 years, the priest Der Garabet Tavlasyan in 1840. However, Karadere crypto-Christians were deeply traumatized by their forced conversion as they recounted their stories in a heartbreaking manner, as is evident from one of the testimonies of a Hemshinli *bey* (lord) collected by Sarkis Hayguni: ‘Turkishness [Islam] is not mine. What can we do? We are Turkified [Islamicized] now; we have fallen in the fire of God’ (qtd. in Simonian: 75). In the 1850s, Der Garabet Tavlasyan attempted to put an end to their agony by approaching the Armenian religious authorities to ask for their support concerning the reversion of Karadere

converts to Christianity. Unfortunately, the Church failed to provide the support that Tavlasyan sought. The majority of the Armenian *amiras* (i.e. the Armenian wealthy class of eminence) were reluctant to finance Tavlasyan's work, which led to Tavlasyan abandoning this cause. For Hayguni, this could have been a historical moment of succeeding in reverting these people back. However, neither the Armenian Church nor the *amiras* had the courage to affront the Ottoman administration for what would be considered 'apostasy'. Nevertheless, later, Karadere 'crypto-Christians' attempted to reconvert to Christianity by using the circumstance of declared religious freedom with the Hatti Humayun decree in 1856. They approached and inquired about the support of the local Suicmezoglu *agha* but were prevented by the plot of the Orthodox Greek converts, mollahs from Of, who scared away the officials from Istanbul against a potential scandalous incident of apostasy by pretending to make an official request of reversion themselves. Despite this plotting, some Karadere converts still managed to return to their former faith in 1858 (Simonian: 75; Deringil: 116). In the latter half of the 19th century, the Ottoman governance devised the hybrid category of *tenassur* for addressing this ambiguity but, in practice, used it to put obstacles in the path of reversion to Christianity. The term *tenassur* literally meant Christianized and was mainly applied to the 'crypto-Christian' communities who showed confidence in declaring their re-conversion to Christianity and, therefore, were punished with conscription, despite the fact that army service was only assigned to Muslim subjects in the conscription law of 1871.

The protection of Christian life in the empire was not only protected by altitude but also by conversion (in)to Catholicism. A village cluster located in the south of the Kaçkar mountains at the borders of the

Hemshinli region, Khodorchur, had become Catholic in the 17th century. Throughout the 19th century, Khodorchur was completely Armenian and thus seen as an Armenian haven. Therefore, some Hemshinli chose to be settled in Khodorchur and some Elevit Hemshinlis married into Khodorchur families. Additionally, Khodorchur Armenians also contacted the Hemshinli as guides while crossing Hemshin to go to Rize, both a destination and a stop on their way to earn a living in other urban centres. In the middle of the century, these Catholic Armenians of Khodorchur started a migration route to Russia as pastry bakers, which would serve as a model for the Hemshinli. This increased after the border demarcation with Russia in 1878 and became so successful that, in Simonian's words, '[f]rom Batum to Warsaw and Riga, there were few cities of the Russian Empire that did not have bakeries and pastry shops operated by Hemshinli' (87).

This relationship that the Hemshinli established with Russia is noteworthy for exploring their religious affiliation. Due to economic reasons, the Hemshinli migrated to urban centres but they changed their destination to Russia, having been inspired by the success story of the Khodorchur¹. In the case of Khodorchur, the men of the village earned their money in Russia and then built beautiful mansions (hence the contemporary name 'Sirakonaklar', 'row of mansions'). However, the relations with Russia were not always for seasonal or temporary purposes. With the treaties signed following the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78) and the shifting of the border between the Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia, some Islamicized Armenian villages and lands fell under the rule of Russia. The annexation of the crypto-Christian villages by Russia created an opportunity for reverting to Christianity. Approximately 200 Hemshinli families in Hopa found themselves under the control of a Christian

empire, which was a litmus test for determining their affiliation. In contradistinction to the subsequent distrustful attitude of the officers in the decades to come, the Hopa inhabitants had not attempted to revert to Christianity, which demonstrated their attachment to Islam. However, one community who wanted to use this change of imperial sovereign to their advantage was the Islamicized Armenian community of a village in Olti. In 1880, the Olti 'crypto-Christians' appealed to the Armenian Church for reversion to Christianity, presenting old Bible manuscripts in Armenian which attested their Christian affiliation. Simonian argues that the two converted communities in the region acted differently because of their dates of conversion. Hemshinli from Hopa had lived through a longer period as Muslims and were shaped by Islam in fundamental ways. Olti's later date of conversion, on the other hand, according to differing sources, either 30, 50 or 70 years before the Ottoman-Russo War, was effective in their request for reversion to the Christian faith.

Similar to the attitudes of the Armenian religious authorities towards Karadere 'crypto-Christians' in the Ottoman Empire, the attitude of the Armenian Church in Russia towards Olti 'crypto-Christians' was not welcoming. However, it would be helpful to examine the public opinion of the period to understand the attitude of the Church. The issue of Islamicized Armenians was discussed by a few journalists of the period in Armenian newspapers published in Tiflis, the Armenian cultural centre at the time. Examining the writings of contemporary intellectuals demonstrates that it was not surprising that there was a lack of interest towards the converts when the Armenian intellectuals were still discussing in 1880 whether Armenians whose religious affiliation was Catholic or Protestant could be accepted as Armenians. The renowned writer Raffi (Hagop Melik



View from the Kaçkar mountains, Foto: Ugur Biryol

Hagopyan) wrote in Mshak: ‘Neither Catholicism, nor Protestantism, nor even Islam cause the Armenian to cease being an Armenian’ (qtd. in Vardanyan: 81). These words were more secularist than what Mshak’s chief editor would write about the Islamicized Armenians less than a decade later. In his 1887 editorial piece, Grigor Artsruni complained about the lack of public opinion on the topic of Muslim Armenians: **When many years ago we said that in Kars province and to some extent in Batumi there were many Muslim Armenians who had been forcibly converted to Islam under the Turkish rule, nobody wanted to believe** (qtd. in Vardanyan: 82).

Arstruni, having difficulty accepting these Armenians’ affiliation with Islam, criticized the lack of proselytizing work by the Armenian Church concerning these people, calling for the formation of an organization serving the cause of these communities in the annexed territories. However, as seen in the Orti case, the Church, on the contrary, was not only indifferent but seemed oppositional by extreme bureaucratic obstruction in the few attempts of reversion to Christianity by ‘crypto-Christian’ Armenian communities. The Armenian historian Atrpet, who investigated the situation, shared the details of the cumbersome procedure – i.e. the request of Olti crypto-Christians was first taken to the Catholicos, then to the Russian Viceroy of the Caucasus, then to the Governor of Kars, whose deputy was assigned to negotiate the issue with the State Council. Another journalist who wrote about the ‘Turkified Armenians’ was Nor Dar correspondent Piro, who, in 1893, expressed his surprise about the Armenian origins of the bakers in Tiflis who migrated from the Ottoman Pontos. Later, he published a more descriptive piece on these Hemshinli bakers who had preserved their Armenian culture. Most Hemshinli migrants who made careers in bakery and pastry had to return

to the homeland with the 1917 revolution. The cases discussed here therefore show that it is not possible to generalize the religious affiliations of the people in the Hemshin area during this transitional period in the 19th century. Examining documents about the Hemshinli in the 19th century demonstrated the course of the varied ways in which they related to Islam, but what is noteworthy about the Hemshinli community is their heterodox affiliation with Islam after their conversion.

Zusammenfassung

In dem sich wandelnden politischen Kontext des 19. Jahrhunderts im Osmanischen Reich war die Beziehung der Hemshinli zum Islam nicht monolithisch. Noch wichtiger ist, dass einzelne Siedlungen in der Hemshin-Region unterschiedliche Formen der Zugehörigkeit zum Islam aufwiesen. Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit der Frage der Religionszugehörigkeit in den Hemshinli-Siedlungen im 19. Jahrhundert. Zu diesem Zweck werden die Unterschiede zwischen den Siedlungen in der Hemshin-Region – Elevit, Karadere, Khodorchur und Hopa – im Hinblick auf ihre religiöse Zugehörigkeit untersucht. Die Fallbeispiele aus Missionsberichten, Reiseschriften und offiziellen Dokumenten zeigen, dass es nicht möglich ist, die religiöse Zugehörigkeit der Menschen in der Hemshin-Region im 19. Jahrhundert zu verallgemeinern.

Annotation

1) The oral history accounts of the Hemshinli pastry chefs are collected in the book – and later the documentary with the same title – Gurbet Pastasi. Hemsinliler, Goc ve Pastacilik (2007) by Uğur Biryol.

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DOI: 10.17185/duepublico/76299

URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:465-20220719-115744-1

Published in: UNIKATE 58 (2022), p. 60-69

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