

THE MELUNGEONS

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The Dictionary of Americanism defines the Melungeon as “a member of a group of people of mixed Indian, White and Negro blood found in some parts of the mountainous portions of Tennessee and Western North Carolina.”¹ Meluncan is also defined as “one of a dark-skinned people of mixed White, Negro and Indian stock, living in the mountains of Tennessee”² in *The Standard Dictionary*. Melun is a Turkish word meaning one whose soul has been cursed by God”, “someone damnable”, “one whose life has been cursed”.³ Melungeons classified different from four legal categories (White, Indian, Negro, or Mulatto) as “FPC” or (“FC” free persons of color) by the first U.S. censuses in the 1790s. Their rights such as vote, education, settlement and court were striped. They had settled the top areas of Appalachians. A few managed to stay in these Appalachian bottomlands but hundreds migrated westward in the mid-1890s, mostly to Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and California. Others migrated Maryland and Ohio.⁴

This group had called themselves Melungeons because of their negative image on Anglo-Americans. For example according to the 1891 writings Will Allen Dromgoole “the Malungeons are filthy, their home is filthy. They are rogues, natural, ‘born rogues’, close, suspicious, inhospitable, untruthful, cowardly, and to use their own word, ‘sneaky’.⁵ In fact “just as thousands of years earlier Roman mothers would control unruly children with the admonition, ‘Hannibal is at the gates!’, so did Appalachia’s Anglo mothers tell their own misbehaving offspring, ‘Be good, or the Melungeons will get you!’.”⁶

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¹ Mitford M. Mathews, der., *A Dictionary of Americanism: On Historical Principles*, Dictionary Department, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1956, s. 1044.

² *Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, International Ed., New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1974, s. 794.

³ Meydan Larousse, Istanbul, Meydan Publishing, 1972, s. 593.

⁴ N.Brent Kennedy and Robyn Vaughan Kennedy, *The Melungeons: The Resurrection of a Proud People*, Macon, Mercer University Press, 2.B., 1997, s. 12 ve 16.

⁵ From *ibid.*, s. 93, f.n. 4. “The Malungeons,” *The Arena* 3 (March 1891) and “The Melungeon Tree and Its Four Branches,” *The Arena* 3 (June 1891).

⁶ From *ibid.*, s. 16, f.n. 11, Edward T.Price, “The Melungeons: A Mixed Blood Strain of the Southern Appalachians,” *The Geographical Review*, No: 14 (April 1951).

Today Clinch Valley College of the University of Virginia in Wise is an official home to the Melungeon Research Committee. Spanish, Portuguese and Turkish researchers as well as Americans are working on Melungeon mystry. They are most likely descendants of:⁷

1. 16 th century Iberian settlers (Portuguese and Spanish) who were abandoned or otherwise cutoff when the English overran the Santa Elena (Beaufort, South Carolina) Colony in 1587; and
2. Several hundred Ottoman (Turkish and other Muslim) Levants (sailors) set off on Roanoke Island, North Carolina in 1586 by Sir Francis Drake. Drake had freed the Turks from their Spanish captors who had utilized the Turks as slave labor at Cartagena in the Caribbean. The Spanish and Turks were constantly engaged in naval warfare back in the Mediterranean and the Spanish regularly used captives as galley slaves and general slave labor.
3. Other Mediterranean/Middle Eastern settlers and/or abandoned captives (e.g., The Virginia Company brought Turkish laborers and Armenian silkworm workers to Jamestown on at least two separate occasions in the mid-1600s. History has ignored these and other well documented instances of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern gene influences on our Southeastern populations, both Native American and European).

In addition to historical data recent genetic analyses show link between the Melungeon and the Mediterranean people. Also Melungeon descendants show Mediterranean diseases as thalassemia, familial Mediterranean fever, and sarcoidosis. Turkish physician Hulusi Behçet's syndrome, a rare genetic eye disease, has been identified in the Melungeon population. They have shovel teeth and the Central Asian cranial bump, too. Brent Kennedy points out six fingers (operated) on his each hand. Six fingers is also a trait of many Turks in Anatolia.⁸

Old Melungeons' belief was very close to *Koran* instead of Christianity. For example according to Muslim version of heaven, most charming women are valuable gifts for their men. The seventeenth century Christian view of heaven does not depend upon this belief. Mattie Ruth Johnson mentions the older Melungeon women who "never wore hats when they went to Church. They believed strongly in the Lord's Supper, and in foot washing. Many believed in fasting when they wanted good to answer certain prayers."⁹

⁷ N.Brent Kennedy, An Update on Melungeon Research, Melungeon HomePage (May 22, 1997), s. 1. Also see Kennedy and Kennedy, s. 120.

⁸ Ibid., s. 149.

⁹ My Melungeon Heritage: A Story of Life on Newman's Ridge, Tennessee, The Overmountain Press, 1977, s. 136-137.

Southeastern Native American dress styles include turbans and the fez with a feather. This was also a Turkish Levant clothing style in the 16th century. Drawings of Cherokee Chief Sequoya with head dress *turban* show this connection between the 16th century Turkish Levants and the Melungeons and Natives.

There are a lot of Turkish words in Native American linguistics. " 'Tennessee,' whose linguistic origin remains a mystery, is virtually identical to the Turkish word *tenesüh*, meaning 'a place where souls move about'. 'Kentucky,' supposedly an Indian word for 'dark and bloody ground,' is little different from the Turkish *Kan tok*, meaning 'saturated with, or full of, blood'. 'Alabama' bears a striking similarity to *allah banya* or 'God's cemetery,' in Turkish."¹⁰ Common Melungeon given names such as Didima (as in Didima Mullins) is a village in Turkey; Alanya (as in Alania Collins) is another Turkish site; Mahala (as in Mahala Mullins) is a Turkish word meaning "great or special aunt."¹¹

The figures Anotalian and Appalachian folk dancers are same. Especially the use of musical spoons is very interesting. The Ottoman-style kilims have the same motifs and designs (tulip, geometries, etc.) with the Appalachian carpets, too.

The ethnic origins of the American people are incredibly diverse. All the groups are characterized by some of the following features:¹²

- (1) common geographic origin;
- (2) migratory status;
- (3) race;
- (4) language or dialect;
- (5) religious faith or faiths;
- (6) ties that transcend kinship, neighborhood, and community boundaries;
- (7) shared traditions, values, and symbols;
- (8) literature, folklore, and music;
- (9) food preferences;
- (10) settlement and employment patterns;
- (11) special interests in regard to politics in the homeland and in the United States;
- (12) institutions that specifically serve and maintain the group;
- (13) an internal sense of distinctiveness;
- (14) an external perception of distinctiveness.

¹⁰ Kennedy and Kennedy, s. 133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, s. 141.

¹² Stephan Thernstrom, der., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, 2.B., Cambridge, The Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1981, s. vi.

There are several regional groups such as Appalachians, Southerners in the United States. They are not the same in character as immigrant groups. The Melungeons are not in only Appalachian regional group but also an immigrant group with Mediterranean, Middle Eastern (and Turkish) roots. They have strong above mentioned ethnic ties with other continents' regional people.