

## UNDERSTANDING AND DEFINING ETHNIC IDENTITY: AHISKA/MESKHETIAN TURKS IN A MIDWESTERN AMERICAN CITY

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### ABSTRACT

*This study focuses on understanding ethnicity and ethnic identity of Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks in Columbia, Missouri, USA. To understand the participants' ethnic identity, I conducted fieldwork and interviewed nine Ahiska Turks. The study demonstrated that the most important components of Ahiska ethnic identity are religion, language, family, and endogamy. Participants mostly used Ahiska Turks for naming their identity. Ahiska Turks' ethnic identity is not unchangeable and rigid, and it has been changing and redefining in different countries and under different economic and social conditions. Although ancestry, "bone of Ahiska Turkish bone, flesh of Ahiska Turkish flesh, and blood of Ahiska Turkish blood" is important for them, feeling Ahiskan, and obeying cultural norms of their Ahiskan community is more important than having Ahiskan ancestry. Thus, their comments about ethnic identity are more in line with the circumstantialist concept of ethnicity than with the primordialist concept of ethnicity. Also, it is impossible to divide ethnic groups into homogeneous units and analyze them with a "cookie-cutter" approach, and this study showed that common shared heritage is more important than physical characteristics for many ethnic groups in today's world.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ahiska Turks, Ethnic Identity, Primordialism, Circumstantialism.

## ETNİK KİMLİĞİ ANLAMA VE ETNİK KİMLİK TANIMLAMASI: BİR ORTABATI AMERİKA ŞEHRİNDE YAŞAYAN AHISKA TÜRKLERİ

### ÖZ

*Bu çalışma, Columbia, Missouri, ABD'de yaşayan Ahiska Türklerinin etnisite ve etnik kimliğini anlamaya odaklanmıştır. Katılımcıların etnik kimliğini anlamak için, alan araştırması ve dokuz Ahiska Türkü ile görüşme yapılmıştır. Çalışma, Ahiska Türklerinin etnik kimliğinin en önemli bileşenlerinin din, dil, aile ve topluluk içi evlilik olduğunu göstermiştir. Katılımcılar, etnik kimliklerini isimlendirmek için çoğunlukla 'Ahiska Türkleri' ni kullanmışlardır. Ahiska Türkleri etnik kimliği değişmez ve sabit değil; farklı ülkelerde ve farklı sosyal ve ekonomik şartlar altında değişmekte ve yeniden tanımlanmaktadır. Soy bağı, "Ahiska Türkü kemiğinden, dokusundan, kanından" olmak, katılımcılar için önemli olsa da, Ahiska Türkü olarak hissetmek ve topluluğun kültürel normlarına uymak, Ahiska Türkü soy bağına sahip olmaktan daha önemlidir. Böylece, katılımcıların etnik kimlik hakkındaki görüşleri, ilkçi yaklaşımdan daha çok durumsal yaklaşım ile uyumludur. Ayrıca, etnik kimlikleri homojen parçalara ayırmak ve "pasta kalıbı" mantığıyla analiz etmek imkansızdır ve bu çalışma günümüzün dünyasında, birçok etnik grup için paylaşılan ortak mirasın fiziksel özelliklerden daha önemli olduğunu göstermiştir.*

**Key Words:** Ahiska Türkleri, Etnik Kimlik, İlişkilik, Durumsallık.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Interaction between cultures and ethnic groups is increasing in today's world. Unfortunately, this increasing interaction is accompanied by increasing ethnic conflicts resulting from the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of cultural and ethnic differences. As this trend continues, it is obvious that interaction and conflict between ethnic groups will be one of the most important issues in the future. Therefore, it is crucial for all ethnic groups to understand each other's ethnic features and accept cultural and ethnic differences within the scope of being human as in the discipline of anthropology. For these purposes, this study to understand the ethnic identity of Ahiska Turks in Columbia, Missouri, USA was undertaken. It draws upon my fieldwork and pertinent literature addressing the topics of ethnicity and ethnic identity. The data from my fieldwork derive primarily from qualitative ethnographic research methods that involved participant observation and semi-structured voice recorded interviews with both individuals and families. The main theoretical concepts used for understanding these two topics are the primordialist and circumstantialist conceptions of ethnic identity.

### **1. OVERVIEW OF AHISKA TURKS HISTORY**

#### **a. Origin and Homeland of Ahiska Turks**

Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks are a Turkish society from the region of Ahiska/Meskhetia in southern Georgia that borders Turkey. The ethnic identity and historic origins of Ahiska Turks have always been a debated issue. There are three main theories about their ethnic identity and historic origin. According to Georgian and Soviet sources, there was an ancient Georgian tribe, the Meskhs, in this region before the Ottoman invasion in 1578. These Meskhs defended the Georgian nation against invasion by the Turks, but eventually came under Ottoman rule. This led to their gradual conversion to Islam and their Turkicization. They started to speak Turkish and ultimately they were labeled as Turks.

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In contrast to the Georgian view, Turkish sources argue that Meskhetian Turks had settled Ahiska prior to the Ottoman period. They were one of various Turkish groups that were present around southern Georgia long before the Ottoman period. According to this Turkish view, during the 11th and 12th century, Georgia faced attacks from Turkic tribes that had come earlier from Central Asia. There is a third origin theory. In regard to this third theory, "According to scholar Alexander Osipov, there were both Muslims (Turks, Karapapakhs, Kurds, Lezgins) and the Georgians (who were converted to Islam unwillingly) in Ahiska. According to the Ottoman laws, non-Muslims could not own lands. For the Georgians, the best way to solve this problem was to convert to Islam and ultimately own property" (Aydingun et al., 2006, p.4). My interviewees think that they are of Turkish origin, and the second theory is truer than others. In my opinion, the first and second approaches are more acceptable than the last approach. This is because when the Ottomans and other Turkish states conquered new territories they often moved Turkish tribes to new areas for securing territory and converting other people to become Muslim.

In any case, by 1578, the Ottoman Empire conquered the region, and the region was under Ottoman rule until 1828. In 1829, about half of Meskhetia and a large part of the Caucasus were occupied by the Russian Empire. After the 1853-4 and the 1877-8 Russian-Ottoman Wars, the region became part of Russia, and remained a secure part of Russia until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The Caucasus was in turmoil between 1917 and 1921 because of wars and alliances between Georgia, Armenia, the Ottomans, and Russia. As a result, the borders were changed quite often until the Treaty of Kars between Turkey and the Soviet Union defined them in 1921. Ahiska eventually became part of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1921, and is now called Samtskhe-Javakheti and is currently found in the Republic of Georgia.

In historical documents, Ahiska Turks are labelled by many names, including, “Caucasians”, “Georgian-Sunnis”, and “Tatars”. “Meskhetian Turks” is the label most widely used by scholars, officials and the media (Aydingun et al., 2006). While “Meskhetian” and “Meskhetian Turks” is used to refer to their Georgian identity; “Ahiska Turks” is used most widely by members of this ethnic group to emphasize their Turkish identity.

### **b. Deportation History**

Although Ahiska Turks were culturally and ethnically different from Georgians, and they had minority status in Georgia, they lived peacefully in their homeland of Georgia until 1944 (Sumbadze, 2007). Ahiska Turks supported the Ottomans during the Ottoman-Russian wars in 1877-8, and Ahiska Turks continued to support the Ottomans in World War I. For this reason, Russians treated Ahiska Turks as a potential danger for their regime and a threat to the security of the Ottoman and later the Turkey border. In addition, before the beginning of World War II, Russian leader Stalin labeled many minority groups untrustworthy because of his fear of division of Soviet Union into different nationalities. From the beginning of the Soviet Union to the death of Stalin in 1953, roughly six million people who were living in the lands of the USSR were deported to Central Asia, Siberia, and the Far East (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007).

On the night of November 14, 1944, Ahiska Turks started to be deported from their homeland to various areas within the USSR. Ahiska Turks were put in cattle wagons and sent to 8 districts and 264 regions all over Soviet Russia, especially to areas in central Asia, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, under extremely harsh conditions (Cinar, 2007). Approximately 100,000 Meskhetian Turks were deported from their region. During the deportations to Central Asia many Ahiska Turks died from cold and hunger (Aydingun et al., 2006). When they arrived in their new regions, they were placed under the special settlement regime until Stalin’s death in 1953 (Aydingun et al., 2006).

The new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, criticized Stalin for the deportations, and in 1956 lifted many of the restrictions that had been applied to minorities. He allowed Chechens and Ingush to return to their own homeland in the Caucasus. However, Ahiska Turks were not allowed to return to Ahiska.

Nearing the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), rising nationalism and conflicts in many Soviet Republics caused tensions between different ethnicities. One of the places affected by these events was Uzbekistan. Although Uzbeks and Ahiska Turks share the same Turkic identity, these events led to violent conflicts between them. My interviewees who were old enough to have lived in Uzbekistan mentioned that they did not have any significant problems in Uzbekistan until the 1980's. Interviewees said that they left Uzbekistan before violent events started. They also think that the Russian intelligence service incited violence in Uzbekistan. These violent events, known to the international media as the "Fergana Events" or "Fergana Pogrom", started on June 3, 1989 (Aydingun et al., 2006). Around 100,000 Ahiska Turks were living in Uzbekistan at the time, and more than a hundred Ahiska Turks died in the Fergana events. After the army gained control, Soviet troops evacuated 17,000 Ahiska Turks to Russia from June 9<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>, 1989. After this evacuation, 70,000 Ahiska Turks were forced to leave the region and to relocate to different parts of the Soviet Union (Aydingun et al., 2006).

Ahiska Turks had to leave their fifty-year home where they had settled after 1944. About 13,000 Ahiska Turks were settled in the Krasnodar in the North Caucasus of Russia near the Black Sea. However, Krasnodar was not an ideal place, and there was a new tragedy for Ahiskans that would cause a new exile. While other regions recognized Ahiska Turks as Russian or Soviet citizens, Krasnodar local authorities refused to recognize them as legal

residents (Kuznetsov, 2007). Interviewees mentioned that the main reason behind the discrimination by Krasnodar officials is the historical and geopolitical position of Krasnodar. Krasnodar is near the Black Sea and Turkey, and it was also in Ottoman territory. Discrimination against migrants and ethnic minorities was very common in post-Soviet society, and Aydingun calls the events in Krasnodar “soft ethnic cleansing” (Aydingun et al., 2006, p.9).

Ahiska Turks could not work legally, nor could they obtain social and medical benefits. In addition, the state-controlled local media marginalized Ahiska Turks and other minority people as illegal immigrants who were a danger to the security and stability of region. In 2002, Krasnodar authorities began to prevent Ahiska Turks from working in farms. This created a very hard situation for Ahiska Turks and 40 of them organized a 40-day hunger strike to draw international attention to their conditions (Aydingun et al., 2006).

Although Ahiska Turks had tried to gain international attention after the collapse of the USSR, it took their situation in Krasnodar to evoke help from international organizations and governments. International institutions, like the Council of Europe (COE) and the United Nations High Commission of Refugees (UNHCR) became deeply interested in this issue. The first solution to be discussed by the international organizations was repatriation to Georgia which had entered into the Council of Europe in 1999. Although Georgia initially accepted repatriation of Ahiska Turks, they then reversed their decision because of ethnic conflicts. After that, the United States offered a refugee program to Ahiska Turks in 2004. It is hard to estimate their exact numbers today, however, their current population is approximately 600,000 in the world (Seferov & Akis, 2008).

They live in many different countries, but their main population is in nine different countries: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and the US. About 17,000 refugees came to the US from 2004 to 2006 under the strict standards for admittance into the program. The US government granted refugee status to them because of discrimination in Krasnodar and Georgia's repatriation approach. Ahiska Turks resettled in over 33 states, with the largest populations in Pennsylvania (785 individuals), Georgia (623), Washington (590), Illinois (508), Kentucky (499), Arizona (497), Idaho (471), Texas (417), Virginia (417), New York (394), and Colorado (365) (Aydingun et al., 2006).

## **2. ETHNICITY, ETHNIC IDENTITY AND MAJOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ABOUT ETHNICITY**

For a better understanding of Ahiska Turk ethnic identity, we must first understand the meaning of ethnicity, and how this meaning has changed in anthropology and other related disciplines. The term ethnicity is obscure to many ordinary native English speakers and social scientists continue to argue over its meaning (Tonkin et.al, 1989). The term ethnicity comes from the Greek term ethnos (from ethnikos). The meaning of ethnos was heathen or pagan. It was used to refer to non-Greeks, or to other people who shared some biological and cultural characteristics and who lived together. Then, in the Greek New Testament, the word ethnos was used as a synonym of gentile, meaning a non-Christian and non-Jewish pagan (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996). It was sometimes used in this sense from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. After this time it was used to refer to race in English speaking societies. That is, from the mid-nineteenth century, the meaning of ethnos was accepted to be a "group of people with shared characteristics" (Tonkin et. al, 1996).

In the United States during the Second World War, the words ethnics and ethnos were used as polite terms for showing the supposed inferiority of Jews, Italians, Irish, and other groups to the dominant American culture of British descent (Eriksen, 2002). Ethnicity was misinterpreted in Western culture because of fundamental confusions between race and culture. According to Scupin, after the 1960's, social scientists separated ethnicity and ethnic identity from physical characteristics, and started to use ethnicity to refer to cultural heritage. While ethnicity is based on cultural heritage, an ethnic group consists of people who believe that they share a common heritage (Scupin, 2012). Hutchinson and Smith define ethnic identity as the sense of belonging to a particular cultural community. According to them, an ethnic group has six main features: "a common proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a sense of solidarity, and a link with a homeland (1996, p.6).

There are a lot of existing different theoretical approaches about understanding and defining ethnic groups and processes of ethnicity in the literature. However, there are two main conceptions of ethnicity in cultural anthropology. These are the primordialist and instrumentalist approaches. Primordialism was developed in the 1960's, and Clifford Geertz is usually credited as the author who introduced the concept of primordial attachments. According to Geertz, ethnic attachments are based on "givens" or more precisely, the *assumed* "givens" of the social existence of humans (1963, p.259). According to Scupin, a person's personal identity and ethnic identity are fundamentally bound up with each other, and people learn their ethnic identity through enculturation. One of the most important points of the primordial approach mentioned by Geertz is that the sense of belonging to one's own ethnic group is perceived as being the result of birth. According to Scupin, people form emotional attachments to ethnicity throughout the enculturation period, and develop ethnic boundary markers like religion, dress, language, and other visible symbols during the enculturation process (2012).



Joshua Fishman is another scientist that proposed the primordial approach. He tried to explain how ethnicity is intuitively defined and experienced as a part of an actor's being (as distinct from "doing" and "knowing")(1980, p.84). According to him, the sense of "being" is at the core of ethnicity and comes from kinship. He says the feeling of being one's ethnicity is as strong as that of being close to one's parents, grandparents, children, and brothers, and is one of the most powerful motivations for individuals. He also says this feeling transcends death and, in a sense, guarantees eternal life. In addition, Fishman sees ethnicity as a universal mystery. He describes ethnicity and language as a bodily experience, and argues that language and ethnicity are as tangible as are the features of sex, intelligence, and skill (1980, p.84–86).

Scupin criticizes the primordial approach of Geertz that is based on ineffable givens or spiritual traditions, and Fishman's mystical concepts (2012). Eller and Coughlan also severely criticized Geertz because of his asociological approach, reducing social phenomena to inherent bonds, and unchangeable, fixed characteristics (1993).

The second broad theoretical approach to ethnicity is the instrumentalist approach, which is also known as the circumstantialist approach that began to be used in anthropology in the 1960's by anthropologists like Edmund Leach and Michael Moerman. Moerman claimed that ethnicity is more complicated than anthropologists think. According to him, ethnicity cannot be based on only objective cultural material, and this led to Moerman changing from an objective approach to ethnicity to a subjective approach (1965). Scupin calls his approach more emic ("the native's point of view"), and he claims that social scientists cannot analyze ethnic groups with a "cookie-cutter" approach that divides homogeneous units, especially in multicultural societies (Scupin, 2012, p.67).

In his book “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries”, Fredrick Barth also used the instrumentalist (circumstantialist) approach and focused on the interaction between ethnic groups and how people define different elements of their own ethnicity and how those elements and characteristics are manifested in different economic and political situations. Jil-White claims that Barth changed the anthropological approach to ethnicity forever (1999). With Barth, “the anthropological emphasis shifted from the static evocation of tribal identity as a feature of social structure to a recognition of ethnic identity as a dynamic aspect of social organization” (Jenkins, 1997, p.19).

At the beginning of Barth’s study, he criticizes anthropologists for giving most of their attention to differences between cultures and supposing that there were clear-cut boundaries between cultures, without focusing on the constitution of ethnic groups. According to Barth, ethnic identity is not unchangeable and rigid, but is instead fluid. Although ethnic units and their boundaries persist, ethnic identity may change in different inter-ethnic interactions and relations. (1969). Ethnic groups according to Barth are not unchangeable and fixed, therefore ethnic features are variable from time to time, and generation to generation. The instrumentalist approach is powerful because it can account for the fluidity of both ethnic boundaries and the cultural criteria used to establish such boundaries.

In summary, the primordialist view of ethnicity states that, in order to belong to an ethnic group, one must have been born from people within that ethnic group. That is, descent is both necessary and sufficient to establish an ethnic identity. In contrast, the circumstantialist view describes ethnicity as a rapidly changing social construction, or instrument, created by individuals to gain advantages in certain social, economic and political environments regardless of their ancestry, and descent is neither necessary nor sufficient to establish an ethnic identity (Palmer et. al, 2012).

Nowadays, most anthropologists accept that we cannot explain ethnicity with either the primordialist or circumstantialist approach alone, and they generally use these approaches together. One intermediate, proposed by Palmer et al., view focuses on common ancestry and tradition for establishing an ethnic identity. This intermediate way is useful for explaining both how ethnic identity can change under some conditions and the absence of change under other conditions for hundred years (2012). This is consistent with Scupin's conclusion that both the primordialist and circumstantialist models have been very helpful for social scientists to understand ethnic identity and ethnic groups around the world from earlier times. Most contemporary anthropologists are using some form of middle way between primordialism and circumstantialism for interpreting and describing different aspects of ethnicity. Therefore, both primordial and circumstantialist approaches, and the intermediate way are very useful for understanding Ahiska Turks identity, because it explains ancestry, tradition and identity change.

The Ahiska Turks have been the focus of many studies. *Ahiska Turks at a crossroads: Integration, reparation or resettlement?* includes their life history in different countries (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). Other works include Coskun's master's thesis about ethnic identity among Tucson Ahiska Turks (Coskun, 2009), and according to this study, Ahiska Turks ethnic identity both fixed and dynamic; a Ph.D. thesis about exploring Ahiska Turks identity in Phoenix (Bilge, 2012); and a Ph.D. thesis about repatriation (Ray, 2012). There are also many articles about these topics, specifically analyses of group experiences (Aydingun, et al. 2006); Ahiska Turks' ethnic identity (Aydingun, 2002), where she discussed how particular social and economic situations, like 1944 exile, are very important for Ahiska Turks identity; ethnic discrimination and resettlement (Swerdlow 2006), focusing on the importance of minority groups such Ahiska Turks after September 11; culture in Wheaton, Illinois (Avci, 2012), and similar findings about components of Ahiska ethnic identity (Cetinkaya & Kodan, 2012).

### **3. METHODOLOGY & STUDY POPULATION**

My data were mainly derived from qualitative ethnographic research methods that involved participant observation, semi-structured individual, and family formal voice recorded interviews. Participant-observation was facilitated by the shared Turkish language and took place at a variety of field sites such as religious and national celebrations and festivals, as well as in-home family visits with community members. Participant-observation of family and community gatherings allowed me to develop a sense of the subject's daily lives, culture, and ethnicity. Because of US refugee policy, Ahiska Turks are scattered around America, and only a small number of them were located in Columbia. According to an Ahiskan man, several Ahiskan families had moved to other states to be close to their relatives, leaving only five families currently in Columbia. I interviewed a total of nine people from these families. Four of the participants were female, and five of them male. The youngest was about twenty-five years old and the oldest was around sixty-five. All names used are pseudonyms.

- Cafar is a male in his mid- sixties. He is married and has children and grandchildren. He was born in Uzbekistan.
- Mehmet is a male in his twenties and is single. He was born in Russia.
- Bahtiyar is a male in his forties and married with children. He was born in Uzbekistan.
- Orhan is a male and single. He was born in Russia. He is in his late twenties.
- Arslan is a married man with children. He is in his thirties and was born in Uzbekistan.

- Ayse is a female and was born in Uzbekistan. She has children and grandchildren, and is in her sixties.
- Ozlem is a female in her forties and married with children. She was born in Uzbekistan.
- Saadet is a female and was born in Uzbekistan. She has children and grandchildren, and she is in her mid-sixties.
- Zahide is a female in her thirties and married with children. She was born in Uzbekistan.

Semi-structured interviews with these individuals were conducted around two broad questions.

**Research Question-1:** How do Ahiska Turks define themselves, and their ethnic identity? What are the main components of Ahiska Turk ethnic identity?

**Research Question- 2:** Is Ahiskan identity changeable or unchangeable? Is having Ahiska Turk descent enough for being Ahiska Turk?

I did voice recorded interviews in order to obtain better linguistic data. I explained the research both in English and Turkish, informing the subjects about the details of their participation. Family interviews were done at my home and the interviewees' houses. For individual interviews, although I wanted to interview face to face, only one of them wanted to meet, others preferred online communication. So, I emailed them about my research and research questions. After they sent me their answers, we used instant messenger for clarifying answers. I explained any question they did not understand. I did not have any significant problem understanding them. Interviewees can speak many languages including one or more of the following: Russian, Uzbek, English, Tatar, and Turkish. The older people were

most comfortable being interviewed in Turkish. Second generation participants have different language abilities. Some of them preferred Turkish like their parents, but others asked me if I spoke Russian or English. The teenage children of interviewees were comfortable with English and Turkish.

After interviewing all participants, I transcribed all of the interviews verbatim in Turkish. I also analyzed interviews in Turkish. This involves coding both field notes and interviews. I used the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, I started content analysis through open coding for categorizing, and identifying patterns. This produced the categories of family, language, religion, endogamy, ancestry and culture. After open coding, I tried to connect categories by axial coding, then I used a selective coding strategy to identify major themes found to be related to understanding ethnic identity and life in the USA from the interview data. The findings then were reported in two sections based on their relevance to the research questions.

#### **4. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**Research Question-1: How do Ahiska Turks define themselves and their ethnic identity? What are the main components of Ahiska Turks ethnic identity?**

My analysis of the content of the answers to these questions revealed that religion, language, family, and endogamy are the most important components of Ahiska Turks identity. In reporting informants' comments, I did not edit their English.

**Religion:** According to all interviewees, religion (Islam) is the most important component of Ahiska Turks ethnic identity. Whether or not an interviewee follows all religious rules and practices, all of them mentioned religion first. They look on religion as an inseparable part of their culture, and

they define their identity first of all with religion. Interviewees think the Russian government exiled them primarily because of their religion. Cafar said that the USSR government was opposed to religion, especially Islam, and they tried to prevent them from practicing their religious duties. According to Mehmet, religion is the basic element of their culture and identity:

First and foremost characteristic of culture is our religion. Our culture goes hand in hand with Islam. Our religion plays a big role in our culture. Thanks to Islam, we are keeping our culture. If next generations obey Islamic rules, it is to be continuing as an Ahiska Turk.

Ayse mentions that religion is everything for their community, and they are planning to move to Dayton, Ohio, USA because they have many relatives living there. Thus, children can maintain their religion and identity in their community. Although Uzbeks are also Muslim and of the same sect, Ahiska Turks had some problems with them, and had to move Krasnodar Krai. When I asked to hear more about this issue, they said they thought the main problem was because of Russian government and intelligence service. Although, according to my observations and interviews, Bahtiyar does not follow many religious practices and rules, he emphasized again the importance of religion for their identity during the interview. He says that Islam is the “*number one*” priority for them. Cafar also mentioned that religion is most important for them, and he wants to be buried in Muslim country, preferably Turkey. He states:

Russia struggled to remove our religion. However, we maintained. I am still doing my religious duties. I want to be buried in Turkey. I joined an Ahiskan man funeral ceremony in Baltimore. It was strange. Ceremony was not like in a Muslim country. We cannot do same practice here. For me, Turk means Muslim. I cannot accept other definitions. I am proud of my Turkishness, however the bottom line is religion.

**Language:** Although not given as much importance as religion, language is another important component for Ahiska Turks. Many of them can speak more than one language. People born in Uzbekistan can speak Uzbek, and many of them can speak Russian. In addition, they learned English in the US. However, they speak Turkish at home. Grandparents are particularly emphatic about their grandchildren speaking Turkish at home. Bahtiyar mentioned that he can speak Russian, Uzbek, Tatar, Armenian, and English, but they speak Turkish at home. When I chatted with them at national and religious celebrations and family visits, they often mentioned Turkish TV programs. All of the interviewees said they are watching Turkish TV channels at their home. Turkish TV channels are not only beneficial for language, but also for learning about Turkish culture. According to my observations, they are successful at preserving their language, although they do not have a homeland, and they have been exiled many times. We did not have significant problems understanding each other. There are very few words I could not understand. When I asked Saadet about speaking Turkish, she replied that:

Although we can speak a lot of languages because of migration, we are speaking Turkish at home. That has never been changed. We were speaking Turkish at home in both Uzbekistan, Russia, and also here. I am forcing my grandchildren to speak Turkish at home. Outside is not problem, of course they should speak English, but at home they have to speak Turkish. Otherwise, how we can understand each. We are watching Turkish TVs at home. Children can learn Turkish language and culture.

**Family:** Another important component that can be conceptualized as defining Ahiskan character is family. Family is very important for Ahiska Turks, because they have taken strength from each other especially during exile and migration periods. Their family is usually an extended family. According to their customs, one of the sons, usually the youngest son, continues to live with



his parent's after marriage. Cafar is living with his youngest son. He said that it is a part of Ahiska Turks' culture. He also mentioned that he came to the USA for his children. He chose to come to the USA instead of Turkey because it is better for his children's education and career.

Bahtiyar said that family is important for them because of reproduction, and continuity of their community and identity. According to him, his family raised him and helped him get married. He will also do the same things for his children so their identity will continue. The divorce rate is very low among Ahiska Turks. However, according to Ayse, it is increasing. She looks at the family as a school for new generations:

We are proud of our family structure. Divorce rate is very low at our community. However, in USA, it is increasing. Many people are divorcing although they have been married for many years, and they have a lot of children. Children will behave same as what they saw at their home. They are living in an extended family, so they should continue to live in extended family. Family is like school for children, they are learning from parents and especially grandparents.

For Ahiska Turks, not only first degree relatives are important, they are also keeping connections to other relatives. Mehmet also mentioned the importance of family for characteristics of Ahiskan ethnic identity and maintaining that identity: "Family, having honor, dignity, and an earning with the sweat of your forehead are important for us. I spend time with my people, friends, family, elder people."

**Endogamy:** Endogamy is also another characteristic of Ahiskan ethnic identity. Firstly, they want in-community marriage with other Turkish people. According to Ayse, endogamy is important because it makes it easier for the parties to understand each other. Although they prefer in-community marriage, marrying within Islam is the most important factor. According to interviewees, if

two parties are Muslim, or can accept Islam, an Ahiskan can marry. Although they mentioned endogamy, there are a lot of Ahiskans married to Russians or Americans. Ayse's granddaughter married to a Russian man, and she looks at her like she is no longer Turkish. She calls her Russian. According to Mr. Cafar, in-community marriage is important. It would be better if an Ahiskan marries another Ahiska Turk, but any Muslim is acceptable, or a person who converts to Islam. However, nowadays, he said that it is up to children, and many people do not obey this rule. Although Mehmet mentioned importance of religion, he did not accept non-Turkish marriage.

When I asked interviewees how they name themselves, answers were variable. However, "Ahiska Turk" was the most common one. Ayse said that "we are Ahiska Turks. Ottoman Empire settled us to Ahiska, we are Ottoman Turks". According to Ozlem, any definition that includes being Turkish is enough for her. Ozlem said that they are Muslim Turks from Ahiska. According to Bahtiyar, they are neither Ottoman Turks nor Ahiska Turks. He says they are only Muslim Turks because they did not live during the Ottoman period, and also did not live in Ahiska. Cafar, however, said that they are Ottoman Turks. He also states:

We are Ottoman Turks. My father also said same. If an American asks my identity, I will say that I am Ottoman Turk. Ahiska Turks term was started to use after Ottoman Empire. I do not know who used for us. Our homeland was in Ottoman, Turk control. Ottomans lost this territory, like Krasnodar. Then, our homeland was other part of border. Some Ahiskan people say that we came from Russia. I do not accept this. They should say that Ottoman Turks came from Uzbekistan or Russia. I also do not accept Ahiska Turks. In this sense, I was born in Uzbekistan, so I have to say that I am Uzbek Turk. Uzbekistan is only my birthplace. I am Ottoman Turk.

I asked Mehmet how he defines his identity, Turks, Ottoman Turks, Turks from Russia, Meskhetian Turks. He answered: "All of them are correct for us. We prefer Ahiska Turks".

**Research Question-2: Is Ahiskan identity changeable or unchangeable? Is having Ahiska Turk descent enough for being Ahiska Turk?**

To answer this question, I asked the following specific sub-questions: Is Ahiskan identity changeable or unchangeable? Is having Ahiska Turk descent enough for being Ahiska Turk? Are obeying Ahiskan customs, following cultural norms, speaking Turkish, or obeying Islamic practices more important?

All of the interviewees accepted the fact that identity can be changeable, not rigid, and that their identity is changing in different economic and social conditions. Bahtiyar said that their community has been changing because they have always been taking good and bad things from the host culture. However, Bahtiyar did not accept that his personal identity changed in either the US or in Russia. According to Orhan:

Also, as our generation proceeds, we become less and less of an Ahiskan person. Living in a foreign country, makes us more prone to identity loss. Our identity is changing. But for us to be able to keep our culture, we must pass it on through our children. It's perfectly fine to follow customs and traditions, but if it makes one person become aggressive or disobedient towards religious rules, then that culture has immoral practices. But so far, I have not seen something that is forbidden in religion, but practiced in our culture. Our culture goes hand in hand with religion, and our religion plays a big role in our culture.

Ayse is very upset that the new generations are changing very fast. According to her, feeling like an Ahiska Turk is more important than having Ahiskan parents. She said that she has a granddaughter who is married to a Russian man, she is not Ahiska Turkish anymore, because she is not thinking like an Ahiska Turk. Mehmet's view on this issue can be seen in the following part of an interview:

**MA:** Do you think Ahiska identity can be changeable or unchangeable?

**Mehmet:** Yes, I think it can be changed because we live in a foreign country and we are influenced by them all the time. So far, we are the second generation of the Ahiskan people (US teenagers) in America and I am already seeing changes, but it's minor.

**MA:** Think a child whose parents are Ahiska Turks, but American family raised baby. She is Turkish or American?

**Mehmet:** Question is hard for me to answer. You mean if your parents aren't Turks, and why do you want to identify yourself as a Turk?

**MA:** For example, you have a little girl. If I gave her to an American family, would she be American or Turkish?

**Mehmet:** I think she could choose that. Even if her real parents are Turks, she can call herself an American.

**MA:** What's your opinion?

**Mehmet:** It would be easier for her to be an American since she grew up with them.

**MA:** If I took an American baby, and raise at my family like Turkish, baby would be American or Turkish?

**Mehmet:** Turkish, because she will be adapted to a Turkish lifestyle.

**MA:** Is having an Ahiskan parents, or blood more important than feeling an Ahiskan?

**Mehmet:** Nowadays, blood is less important. World is changing.

As can be seen above, feeling is more important than descent, according to Mehmet. Bahtiyar also mentioned that, "if next generation obey religious rules, and community culture, they will be still Ahiskan. If they do not do, I will not say they are Ahiska Turks. Even if it is my little son or daughter." Orhan had a similar point of view, and he said that they are changing, learning new things, and children and children's culture are different than elders and elders' culture. He also stated:

**MA:** Do you think having Ahiskan parents is enough for being Ahiskan? Are obeying Ahiskan customs, speaking Turkish, obeying Islamic practices more important?

**Orhan:** Only having parents is not sufficient. What you are is more important.

**MA:** Can you give me a rate about that?

**Orhan:** It is not easy to give rate.

**MA:** How about 80%?

**Orhan:** May be, or more.

In contrast, Cafar emphasized the importance of Turkish ancestry. If a person was born from Turkish parents, he or she will be Turkish at any circumstances. Anyone cannot change it.

**Cafar:** Islam and Turkishness are very different from each other. A person who is Christian, Jewish or from other religions can choose being Muslim later. However, he or she cannot choose Turkishness. Onion is onion, tomato is tomato. Blood cannot change.

**MA:** If a Turkish family gives their daughter to American family, will she be American or Turk?

**Cafar:** She will be Turk. I know that her parents Turkish. Blood cannot change. She will not be Muslim in the future, but she is Turkish. A Russian man said that his grandparents were Turk. I cannot say that he is Turkish. He was like Russian. His grandparents know that he is Turkish.

**MA:** If a Turkish family takes an American baby to Turkey, and raised like a Turk, is she American or Turkish?

**Cafar:** She is American, but she will be Muslim, not Turkish. God created all of human. I do not discriminate. But, I am proud of my Turkishness. It is enough for me that parents know race of their children. All human are equal.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

Religion has been the bedrock of ethnic identity for many ethnic groups (Safran, 2006), and although there are multiple defining aspects for Ahiska Turks ethnic identity, all of the nine interviewees said that religion is the first and foremost feature of Ahiska Turks ethnic identity. Although participants' religious practices varied, they all looked to religion as an indispensable part of their culture. One of the interviewees even called their ethnic group Muslim Turks, and he also mentioned that other definitions such as Ahiska Turks, Ahiskan, or Ottoman Turks cannot explain their identity. Language is also important for many ethnic groups (Safran, 2006).

Although language is not as important as religion for Ahiska Turks, it can be said that speaking Turkish is the second most important part of Ahiskan identity. Consistent with the view that ethnic identity is a matter of ancestry, and the family is the arena where children learn ethnic identity features (Alba, 1990), the family is the next most important component of Ahiskan identity. Family serves as the first school for children because of living foreign countries where they learn their culture, and parents, especially grandparents keep community roots and traditions alive for grandchildren. Endogamy is a key factor for maintaining ethnic identity, and culture conservation for many cultures (Screws, 2003).

According to participants, endogamy is not a direct component of their ethnic identity, but it is important because they can build a traditional Ahiskan family with endogamy. According to Ahiskan culture, an Ahiskan must marry a Muslim woman or man. Although interviewees said that marrying with an Ahiskan is preferable, they do not reject someone as long as they marry a Muslim or someone who will convert to Islam. According to the interviewees, there are also a lot of people married to non-Ahiskan or non-Muslims.

According to their culture, endogamy is much more important for a woman than a man.

The purpose of the second research question was to discover whether Ahiska Turks define their own identity closer to primordial or circumstantial conceptions of ethnicity. It can be said that the majority of their views on ethnicity can be associated with circumstantialism, the theory that ethnic identity is not rigid. However, their views are not purely circumstantialism, and all of them did not fully support the circumstantialist approach.

All of the interviewees accepted that their identity can be changeable and has been changing. At first Cafar did not accept change, but then he accepted that his family and community's lifestyle are changing. Living in foreign countries and different economic and social conditions, and interacting with new cultures, cause changes in Ahiska Turks' identity. Ahiska Turks' ethnic identity is changing from time to time, country to country, generation to generation and conditions to conditions.

All of the interviewees said some of these changes are bad and some are good. Although two out of nine interviewees mythicized their ethnic identity and blood, and looked Turkish is an ineffable given from God, according to most of the interviewees, "bone of Ahiska Turkish bone, flesh of Ahiska Turkish flesh, and blood of Ahiska Turkish blood" is not enough for being an Ahiskan. Thus, my research is consistent with the fact that most anthropologists accept that we cannot explain ethnicity with either the primordialist or circumstantialist approach alone, and they are generally using these approaches together. The intermediate approach refers to ethnicity as "ancestry and tradition", and also "... ethnic membership is at once a question of source of origin as well as current identity".

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The purpose of the study was to understand Ahiska Turks ethnic identity among Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks in Columbia, Missouri, USA. It presented both my fieldwork as well as other pertinent literature addressing ethnicity, ethnic identity, circumstantialism, and primordialism. The study demonstrated that the most important components of Ahiska ethnic identity are, in descending order, religion, language, family, and endogamy. It also found that participants used Ahiska Turks, Turks, Muslim Turks and Ottoman Turks for naming their identity, and that these ethnic identities have been changing and redefining in different countries and under different economic and social conditions.

Although ancestry, “bone of Ahiska Turkish bone, flesh of Ahiska Turkish flesh, and blood of Ahiska Turkish blood” is important for them, feeling Ahiskan, and obeying community culture is more important than having Ahiskan ancestry. It can be said that their comments about ethnic identity are closer to circumstantialism, however; they are not purely circumstantialist or primordialist.

My study proved again that shared common heritage, cultural heritage is more important than physical characteristics for many ethnic group at today’s world, and ethnic groups are not unchangeable and fixed, therefore ethnic features are variable from time to time, and generation to generation. Also, it is impossible to divide ethnic groups into homogeneous units, and analyze them with a “cookie-cutter” approach.



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