

Public Abstract

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

Ahiska/Meskhethian Turks are an ethnic group from the region of Meskhethia (Ahiska) in the Caucasus, now in southern Georgia that borders Turkey. Ahiska/Meskhethian Turks have been forced to relocate multiple times in their history. First, they were exiled from their homeland of Ahiska to Uzbekistan by Stalin in 1944, then from Uzbekistan to the Krasnodar region of Russia in 1989. The US government granted refugee status to many Ahiska Turks in Krasnodar in 2004, and by the end of 2006 around 17,000 settled in 66 towns in 33 states in the US (Ayd?ngun et al., 2006).

This study focused on understanding ethnic identity and life of Ahiska/Meskhethian Turks in Columbia, Missouri. It presented both my fieldwork as well as other pertinent literature addressing ethnicity and ethnic identity, circumstantialism, primordialism, adaptation, and assimilation. For this research, data are mainly derived from qualitative ethnographic research methods that involved participant observation, semi-structured individual, family and formal voice recorded interviews.

The study demonstrated that the most important components of Ahiska ethnic identity are religion, language, family, and endogamy. However, religion comes first for Ahiska ethnic identity. Participants used Ahiska Turks, Muslim Turks, and Ottoman Turks for naming their identity. Ahiska Turks' ethnic identity is not unchangeable and rigid, and it has been changing 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. Their life is more comfortable than in any other places where they had lived before, and living in the USA has ensured security, equality, antiracism and freedom for them. The American core culture is fundamentally different than Ahiskan culture, and religion is one of the most significant ethnic boundary markers for them. Although interviewees do not have significant problems in the USA, older generations want to move to Turkey after retirement. Ahiska Turks accepted that they are changed, adapted and integrated and acculturated to American society, but they did not want assimilation or Americanization. It is acceptable for them to borrow some kind of things from the host culture or other ethnic groups. However, they cannot change the main components of their identity like religion and language, and their boundary markers like food, and eating habits etc.