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

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by
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presented by Mustafa Aydar,

a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Flore Zéphir
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INTRODUCTION

Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks are an ethnic group from the region of Meskhetia (Ahiska) in the Caucasus, now in southern Georgia that borders Turkey. Ahiska/Meskhetian 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 (Aydınçın et al., 2006).

This study focuses on understanding ethnic identity and life of the Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks in Columbia/Missouri, and presents both my fieldwork as well as other pertinent literature addressing the topics of ethnicity and ethnic identity, adaptation and assimilation. For this research, data are mainly derived from qualitative ethnographic research methods that involved participant observation and semi-structured voice recorded interviews with both individuals and families.

The two main topics of this study are understanding Meskhetian Turks’ ethnic identity and adjustment to life in the United States. The main theoretical concepts used for understanding these two topics are the primordialist and circumstantialist conceptions of ethnic identity, and the segmented assimilation and acculturation theories about adaptation to the US, and American culture.
CHAPTER I: OVERVIEW OF MESKHETIAN TURKS HISTORY

Origin and Homeland of Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks

Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks are a Turkish society from the region of Ahiska/Meskhetia in the Caucasus. Meskhetia, now called Samtskhe-Javakheti, is a region in southern Georgia that borders Turkey. Throughout history, this area has always been important because it is located on trade and migration routes, and it has changed hands between the Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007).

Figure 1: Meskhetia/Ahiska and Caucasus

Source: (Better architecture, Regional Map of Caucasus and Central Asia, 2015)
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 (Aydınğün et al., 2006).

In contrast to the Georgian view, Turkish sources argue that Meskhetian Turks had settled Ahiska prior to the Ottoman period. There 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. In fact, Georgian King David IV asked for help from Kipchak Turks to defend southern and eastern Georgia from attacks during that time (Aydınğün et al., 2006).

There is a third origin theory. Aydınğün says about this third theory, “According to scholar Alexander Osipov, there were both Muslims (Turks, Turkmen, Karapapaks, 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 (Aydınğün 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 conquered new territories they often moved Turks to new areas, and they also wanted other people to become Muslim.

In historical documents, Ahiska Turks are labelled by many names, including, “Turks”, “Georgian-Sunnis”, “Azerbaijanis”, “Caucasians” and “Tatars”. “Meskhetian Turks” is the label most widely used by scholars, officials and the media (Aydın Gün et al., 2006). While “Meskhetian” and “Meskhetian Turks” is used to refer to their Georgian identity; “Ahiska Turks” is used the most widely by members of this ethnic group in order to emphasize their Turkish identity. I also prefer to use “Ahiska Turks” for defining them, but I also used Meskhetian Turks, and Ahiskan in my study. It is hard to estimate their exact numbers because Soviet authorities did not consider them separate, and they have been recorded as members of other national groups. However, their current population is approximately 600,000 in the world (Seferov & Akis, 2008). They live in many different countries, however their main population is in nine different countries: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and the US.
Table 1: Estimated 2008 Population Numbers of Meskhetian/Ahiska Turks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worldwide</td>
<td>600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>170,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>85,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>190,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Seferov & Akis, 2008)

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 (Coskun, 2009).
**Russian Period and Exile from Homeland**

During the Soviet hegemony, Ahiska Turks were defined a number of different ways. First, in 1921 their Turkish identity was denied and they were considered Turkish speaking Georgians, but they were allowed to learn the Turkish language at local schools. Between 1926 and 1935 Soviet officials called them Turks or Turkic people. According to new Soviet policy in 1935, they were called Azeris or Azerbaijanis. As a consequence, their passports were changed and they were labelled Azeris, and the Azeri language started to be taught in their schools. From 1938 to the Second World War, there was no reference to their Turkish identity, and they were called Georgians. The Russian officials forced the Ahiskan to change their last names from Ahiskan names to Georgian last names (Aydıngün et al., 2006).

Although Meskhetian 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 Ottoman 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 populations because of his fear of division of Soviet Union into different nationalities. In 1944, the Stalin administration ordered the deportation of Ahiskans from their homeland to another region in the USSR. Several groups were deported from “Meskhetia” and from the neighboring region of “Ajara”, but
Meskhetian Turks were the largest ethnic group affected (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). 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). Some of them were Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Karachay, Balkars, Turks, Kurds, and Khemsils. Ahıska Turks were deported for strategic reasons because of alleged smuggling activities, espionage, and collaboration with Turkey, but there was little evidence to support these allegations (Pohl, 2004).

As a result, on the night of November 14, 1944, Meskhetian Turks started to be deported from their homeland to various areas within the USSR. The exile took place between the 14th and 18th of November, 1944. Ahıska 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). The journey took about 18 days and nights from Georgia to Central Asia. Approximately 100,000 Meskhetian Turks were deported from their region. During the deportations to Central Asia many Meskhetian Turks died from cold and hunger. The first few years of resettlement saw an additional 15% to 20% of their population (around 20,000 people) die (Aydingün et al., 2006). When they arrived in their new regions, they were placed under the special settlement regime until 1956. They were deprived of almost all civic and political rights, and most Meskhetian Turks worked on farms, which was the only place they were permitted to be employed. They could not travel anywhere outside of the settlement without going to the police and obtaining permission from the local government (Aydingün et al., 2006).
With Stalin’s death in 1953, the Ahiska Turks started to be granted new freedoms. 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, Meskhetian Turks were not allowed to return to Meskhetia. One of the most important reasons behind that decision was the geopolitical importance of the Meskhetia region in the Cold War era. It was the border between Soviet Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Aydingün et al., 2006).

Deportation from Central Asia and New Home (Krasnodar)

Nearing the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), the effects of a declining economy, glasnost (meaning “openness”) and perestroika (meaning “restructuring”) policies, in the Soviet Union were accompanied by rising nationalism and conflicts in many Soviet Republics (Coskun, 2009). This caused tensions between different ethnicities. One of the places affected by these events was Uzbekistan. Although Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks share the same Turkic identity, and they are both Sunni Muslim, 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 (Aydingün et al., 2006). Many young Uzbeks
gathered in Tashlak near Fergana, then set fire to Turkish houses. The first killings took place on that day, and reached the media on June 6, 1989 (Chikadze, 2007). Around 100,000 Ahiska Turks were living in Uzbekistan at the time. According to Aydingün, more than a hundred Meskhetian Turks died in the Fergana events.

After the army gained control, Soviet troops evacuated 17,000 Ahiska Turks to Russia from June 9th-18th, 1989. After this evacuation, 70,000 Ahiska Turks were forced to leave the region and to relocate to different parts of the Soviet Union (Aydingün et al., 2006). Ahiska Turks had to leave their fifty-year home where they had settled after 1944. According to Coskun, Ahiska Turks searched for new places to resettle after these events. Some of them settled in Chechnya, or Kabardin-Balkar Autonomous Republic, others went to Azerbaijan, and still others went to Turkey. Today, the estimated population of Ahiska Turks in Uzbekistan is 20-25,000 (Coskun, 2009).

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. After the collapse of the USSR, Uzbekistan became an independent state. According to Krasnodar officials, Ahiska Turks should be Uzbek citizens not Russian (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 also it was in Ottoman territory. Interviewees also said that when Ahiska Turks came to Krasnodar from Uzbekistan, Russian people and authorities spread propaganda that Turks would take
over the territory again. Discrimination against migrants and ethnic minorities was very common in post-Soviet society, and Aydängün calls the events in Krasnodar “soft ethnic cleansing,” and states that “Regional politicians used xenophobia against non-Slavic people to keep the Meskhetian Turks, along with some other smaller ethnic minorities, a perpetually stateless people” (Aydängün et al., 2006, p.9). The Krasnodar officials continued to enforce the USSR residency permit system (propiska) against Non-Slavic people. Therefore, Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks could not work legally, nor could they obtain social and medical benefits. In addition, they did not give birth certificates to children who were born in Krasnodar after resettlement. Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks were forced to attend segregated classes because, according to officials, they were unwilling to learn Russian. Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks did not only witness policy discrimination, they were also victims of violent attacks by a Slavic group known as the Cossacks (Aydängün et al., 2006). The state-controlled local media marginalized Ahiska/Meskhetian 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/Meskhetian 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 (Aydängün et al., 2006).

**International Attention and Resettlement in the United States**

Although Meskhetian 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
Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Council of Europe (COE), the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE), the United Nations High Commission of Refugees (UNHCR), and the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) became deeply interested in this issue. International Jewish organizations also paid attention to the racism and anti-Semitism in Krasnodar after the mid-1990s (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007). 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 Meskhetian Turks, they then reversed their decision because of ethnical conflicts (Aydingün et al., 2006).

After that, the United States offered a refugee program to Meskhetian Turks in 2004. 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. Meskhetian Turks resettled in over 33 states: 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) (Aydingün et al., 2006).
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ethnicity, Ethnic Identity and Culture

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 peoples who shared some biological and cultural characteristics and who lived together in concert. According to Hutchinson and Smith, Greeks called themselves genos Hellenon, and considered non-Greeks as peripheral, foreign barbarians, or ethenea. Thus, there was a dichotomy between ethnic “others” and non-ethnic “us”. Then, in the Greek New Testament, the word ethnos was used as a synonym of gentile, 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”. While ethnos has not been commonly used in Anglophone discourse, lots of terms-like ethnology, ethnography, ethnicity, ethnic-have been formed from this term, and built upon the idea of race (Tonkin et. al, 1996).

At that time, the discipline of anthropology, especially the sub-disciplines of cultural anthropology and ethnology, developed. Ethnology was built on the study of
cultures, although some anthropologists used the term race. As Scupin (2012) describes, E. B. Tylor claimed that biological traits have a link with cultural characteristics. However, according to Franz Boas and later anthropologists, physical characteristics cannot be associated with cultural traits. While culture is transmitted through enculturation, biological characteristics are passed through genetic inheritance. People learn their culture and language “by learning the language and various symbols, values, norms, and beliefs in the environment to which one is exposed” (Scupin, 2012, 60).

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. In current usage, both the objective and subjective aspects of ethnicity are emphasized (Scupin, 2012). He explains these aspects:

The objective aspect is the observable culture and shared symbols of a particular group. It may involve a specific language or religious tradition that is maintained within the group, or it may be particular clothing, hairstyles, preferences in food, or other conspicuous characteristics. The subjective aspect involves the internal beliefs of the people regarding their shared ancestry. They may believe that their ethnic group has a shared origin, or family ancestry, or a common homeland. In some cases they may believe that their ethnicity has specific physical characteristics in common. This subjective aspect of ethnicity entails a “we-feeling” and a sense of community or oneness, or a distinction between one’s own “in-group” versus an “out-group.” It doesn’t matter whether these beliefs are historically or scientifically accurate, genuine, or fictional. (2012, p.59)
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).

For a better understanding of ethnicity, we need to comprehend culture. We can simply define culture as all of the learned and shared ideas, beliefs, and traits from any society. According to E.B. Tylor, “Culture or Civilization includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871, p.1). Humans learn their culture both consciously and unconsciously, and transmit it to offspring and to others. Culture is a collection of “values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society” (Verderber & Verderber & Shellow 2000, p.69 as quoted in Samovar et al., 2009). Scupin defines culture as “the historical accumulation of learned symbolic knowledge that is shared by an ethnic group”, and he mentions that it is transmitted through enculturation (Scupin, 2012, p.60, 61). Culture consists of the shared understandings and practices within a society. Therefore, these shared understandings are most easily seen at a public level rather than in an individual mind. However, all individuals do not share culture equally (Scupin, 2012). According to Scupin, culture has two dimensions, material and nonmaterial:

Material culture consists of the physical products of human society (ranging from clothing styles to housing and building types to technologies of transportation).
Material culture often constitutes important ethnic boundary markers, which are used to differentiate one group from another. Clothing styles are often used to demarcate one ethnic group from another. Nonmaterial culture refers to the intangible products of human society (symbols and language, values, beliefs, and norms). Values are the abstract standards by which members of an ethnic group define what is good or bad, holy or unholy, beautiful or ugly (2012 p.61).

Therefore, every ethnic group has both particular beliefs, ideologies, norms, a shared worldview, and the material culture that goes with them. However, anthropologists disagree about the exact nature of ethnicity.

**Major Anthropological Perspectives about Ethnicity**

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). As Scupin describes Geertz’s view, kinship, religious and social ties are originated through learning from the society. According to Scupin, a person’s 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. In addition,
he mentions that Geertz mostly focused on the internal aspects of assumed givens more than ethnic boundary markers (Scupin, 2012, p.66). Geertz states:

By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the “givens”—or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed “givens”—of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one’s kinsman, one’s neighbors, one’s fellow believer, ipso facto; . . . in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself. . . . But for virtually every person, in every society, at almost all times, some attachments seem to flow more from a sense of natural—some would say spiritual . . . affinity than from social interaction (1963, p. 259–260).

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). According to him:

Ethnicity has always been experienced as a kinship phenomenon, a continuity within the self and within those who share an intergenerational link to common ancestors. Ethnicity is partly experienced as being “bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh, and blood of their blood.” The human body itself is viewed as an expression of ethnicity and ethnicity is commonly felt to be in the blood, bones, and flesh. It is crucial that we recognize ethnicity as a tangible, living reality that
makes every human a link in an eternal bond from generation to generation—from past ancestors to those in the future. Ethnicity is experienced as a guarantor of eternity (1980, p.84–85).

Scupin criticizes the primordial approach of Geertz that is based on ineffable givens or spiritual traditions, and Fishman’s mystical concepts (2012). Jack Eller and Coughlan also severely criticized Geertz because of his asociological approach, reducing social phenomena to inherent bonds, and unchangeable, fixed characteristics (1993). Eller and Coughlan also call the primordial approach a bankrupt approach for the analysis and description of ethnicity (Eller & Coughlan, 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. During his fieldwork with the Lue society in northern Thailand, he tried to define the ethnic identity of the Lue in relation to the many other different ethnic groups in the area. When Moerman asked this ethnic group to identify their ethnic features like language, culture, and religion, they expressed their relations with other groups and how they shared these features with other groups in their territory (Moerman, 1965). Based on this study, Moerman concluded that 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. 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. Barth states: “The same group of people, with unchanged values and ideas, would surely pursue different patterns of life and institutionalize different forms of behavior when faced with different opportunities offered in different environments” (1969, p.12).

Scupin describes Barth’s view: “ethnicity is not fixed and unchanging but is, instead, fluid and contingent, as people strategically use, define, and redefine their ethnicity to respond to their immediate basic needs” (Scupin, 2012, p.68). Ethnic groups according to Barth are not unchangeable, therefore ethnic features are variable from time to time, and generation to generation. According to Dincsahin, circumstantialism depends on three main assumptions: “1. Ethnic identity is subject to change, and the identity is a
product of a certain context. 2. Ethnic identity is about rational-choices which imply that ethnic groups use their identity as an instrument to attain political and economic aims. 3. Since ethnic identity is not static and natural, new ethnic identities can emerge and older identities can be redefined in time, that is, ethnic identity can be socially constructed, manipulated and invented.” (Dincsahin, 2006, p.85). 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. Most instrumentalists generally comment that culture is an indirect reflection of political, economic, and other materialist factors (Scupin, 2012).

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 (Scupin, 2012). “Ethnic identity unites the semantics of primordial and historical claims with the pragmatics of calculated choice and opportunism in dynamic contexts of political and economic competition between interest groups” (Tambiah, 1996, p.21). One intermediate view focuses on common ancestry and tradition for establishing an ethnic identity (Palmer et al., 2012). Palmer et al. state:
The ancestry and tradition conception of ethnicity can explain how ethnic identity can sometimes change under certain conditions, but endure unchanged for centuries under other conditions. In addition to the loss of certain traditions, ethnicity can be changed by focusing on more distant or more recent common ancestors, or on one ancestral line instead of another, or simply making a plausible lie about one’s ancestry. On the other hand, ethnic identities can remain unchanged for centuries if the same ancestry and necessary traditions remain emphasized year after year, and generation after generation. This is not, however, due to some inevitable transference of some “essence” from parent to offspring, but instead due to the difficult task of passing on certain traditional learned behaviors (2012, p.97).

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. In addition, “the primordialist model has been extremely useful in substantiating the persistence of ethnicity, whereas the circumstantialist model has helped demonstrate how ethnic identity can be altered or constructed in various economic and political conditions” (Scupin, 2012, p.69). 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 both ancestry, tradition and identity change.

Patterns of Ethnic Relations

Interdependence and interactions between diverse ethnic groups is inevitable in today’s world. Ethnic relations are a topic of much concern today, and, according to some social scientists such as Scupin it is the most important issue faced by the world. The changing political and economic dynamics that accompany globalization have a deep effect on ethnic groups and ethnic relations because they increase contact between ethnic
groups. Because of migration, many nations became home to different ethnic groups that are culturally very distinct. Patterns of ethnic relations around the world are very variable today and more diverse than in the past when there was either one ethnic group in a nation or one nation dominated others by force, as in colonialism (Levinson, 1944). Today, pluralism often describes the ethnicity within a nation. According to Levinson: “Pluralism is a form of ethnic relation within a nation in which groups differ from one another in important ways regarding values, social organization, customs, and behavior, but at the same time participate in and support societal institutions, and thus are all members of the same society” (1994, p.191).

It is J.S. Furnivall who first uses the concept of pluralism, and he defines a plural society as “a society comprising two or more social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit” (Furnivall, 1967, p.446) According to M.G. Smith (1969), a plural society is a society where different groups can be internally distinguished from each other by institutional and cultural differences. Fredrik Barth (1969) also describes a plural society as a society combining ethnic contrasts, ecological specialization, and economic interdependence within groups. “Instead of one overarching homogeneous identical system of institutions shared within a society, a plural society consists of ethnic groups that differ in social organization, beliefs, norms, and ideals.’(Scupin, 2012, p.70).

In cultural pluralism, each ethnic group can maintain their own cultural features like religion, language, and custom within the larger society. The main point of cultural pluralism is that there is not any hierarchical ranking between ethnic groups, and there is
not any group that can dominate others (Levinson, 1944). In contrast, in institutional or structural pluralism, ethnic groups can have separate institutions, like schools and churches, in the same society (Scupin, 2012, Levinson, 1994). Sometimes ethnic groups compete with others for power and resources in “radically plural societies” such as some societies in Caribbean and Africa (Scupin, 2012, p.70). In that kind of society, the dominant group rules the government and tries to protect its own group’s interests, and imposes its rules on minority ethnic groups by force. In addition, subordinate groups are considered to be subjects not citizens. In “consociational societies” such as Switzerland (p.71), based on a more egalitarian relationship, the structural and cultural differences between the ethnic groups are protected by the national government. In theory, each ethnic group has political autonomy, and each group has similar political and economic opportunities. In this kind of society, ethnic groups have the legal right to maintain their cultures, and there is a proportional political representation of each group (Scupin, 2012).

Another type of relationship between ethnic groups is assimilation. The terms assimilation, integration, acculturation and incorporation are often used interchangeably, and need closer defining. Assimilation is “a process of boundary reduction” (p.39) that can occur when two or more ethnic groups come into contact with each other (Yinger, 1994). The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups describes assimilation as “the processes that lead to greater homogeneity in society” (1980, p.150). At the end of the assimilation process, the cultures of different ethnic groups come to be similar to each other. Assimilation occurs easily and quickly if ethnic groups have similar cultural and physical traits when they meet. Pierre van den Berghe explains several general factors favoring assimilation in his book The Ethnic Phenomenon (1987). According to him, if
ethnic groups have great phenotypic resemblance, then assimilation occurs easily. Also, when groups have great cultural similarities, they tend to assimilate quickly. This is because subordinate groups easily find ways to acculturate, and dominant groups accept subordinates as biologically related. In addition, if the ethnic group is a small minority, assimilation is more likely to occur. Smaller groups are generally dependent on the rest of the society because of having fewer resources. Also, low-status groups are more ready to assimilate than high-status groups, because there is not as much for high-status groups to gain as a result of assimilation. Immigrant groups are more likely to assimilate than native groups.

It is generally accepted by social scientists that there are three forms of assimilation: biological, structural, and cultural. Biological assimilation or amalgamation is the biological connection of distinct ethnic groups, and the making of a new ethnic group via intermarriage and reproduction. Amalgamation takes a very long time, and it occurs late in other assimilative processes. Since amalgamation results from intermarriage, it is likely to occur after acculturation and integration (Yinger, 1994). When intermarriage takes place, ethnic boundaries have been extensively reduced.

Structural assimilation, or integration, is the process by which ethnic groups not only adopt the culture of another ethnic group but also become participants within the basic institutions in the society. In other words, ethnic group increases their social interaction with members of the other ethnic group within neighborhoods, schools, business, clubs, churches, and other organizations within the society. (Scupin, 2012, p.72)

In cultural assimilation, one ethnic group adopts another group’s cultural features, like language, religion, norms, values, and beliefs. Some form of cultural
assimilation is almost inevitable because of the borrowing that takes place between cultures when different ethnic groups come in contact. Cultural assimilation may be voluntary or involuntary. Some ethnic groups accept the dominant group’s culture voluntarily in order to secure securing their political and economic rights, and governments sometimes support groups who voluntarily assimilate to the dominant culture. In contrast, forced assimilation or ethnocide means wiping out the minority culture and totally integrating that ethnic group to the dominant culture.

In the earlier or classical approach, assimilation is seen as a desirable and almost inevitable process. For example, Robert E. Park and Earnest Burgess define assimilation as “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons, and groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.” (1921, p. 736). According to this classical assimilationist approach, immigrants or subdominant ethnic groups are expected to assimilate into the dominant culture (Zhou, 2013). In addition, Brown and Bean explain:

Classic assimilation theory sees immigrant/ethnic and majority groups following a "straight-line" convergence, becoming more similar over time in norms, values, behaviors, and characteristics. This theory expects those immigrants residing the longest in the host society, as well as the members of later generations, to show greater similarities with the majority group than immigrants who have spent less time in the host society (Brown & Bean, 2006).

In this classical view, there is a dominant society that provides standards for other groups to adjust to. According to Gordon, the neutral term “host society” (1964, p.71) can be used for describing the dominant society. Joshua Fishman referred to the “core society”, and the “core culture” in American life. Fishman described this core culture as “made up
essentially of White Protestant, middle-class clay, to which all other particles are attached” (as quoted in Gordon, 1964, p.72). In this view, Protestant Americans with Anglo-Saxon origins are described as a reference point for immigrants and their children. Cole defined this as “Anglo-conformity” theory, which is a renunciation of the immigrant’s ancestral culture in favor of the behavior and values of the Anglo-Saxon core group (Gordon, 1964 p. 85). Classical assimilationist theories are generally concerned with how immigrants adapt to society and with the forces that promote their progress. They focus on how the behaviors of immigrants change in the new society and their success in moving from their old culture to the new culture. This approach sees the continuation of features from the old ethnic culture as disadvantageous. Some countries such as U.S., China, Germany have promoted assimilation to smaller groups in their societies during their history.

In contrast to the classical approach to assimilation, multiculturalists claim that the original ethnic group’s culture continually reshapes itself as it becomes a part of the common culture, and thus it conserves itself to the last (Zhou, 2013). Zhou views segmented assimilation theory as a middle-range alternative theoretical approach to assimilation that fills some of the gaps in descriptions of the complex process of immigrant adaptation. Segmented assimilation theory rejects the concept of a white-class core that aims to assimilate all immigrants. Zhou also states:

From the segmented assimilation perspective, how well immigrants and their offspring adapt to life in the host society is determined by unique contexts of exit and reception. The context of exit entails a number of factors, including premigration resources that immigrants bring with them, such as money, knowledge and skills; the social class status of the immigrants in their homelands; and the means of migration. The context of reception includes group positions in
During acculturation, groups and their members come together for intercultural contact, and negotiation for achieving adaptive outcomes for both parties. Nowadays, there are few, if any, societies that have one culture, one language, and one single identity that symbolizes the whole population. Acculturation takes place between two or more groups culturally and psychologically, and involves individuals living successfully in two cultures. The immigrant group is not the only group to experience enduring change because the dominant culture also changes because of the interaction and co-existence (Berry, 2005). According to Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936, p. 149);

Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups under this definition, acculturation is to be distinguished from culture change, of which it is but one aspect, and assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation.

Hence, acculturation and segmented assimilation theory are a useful approaches for understanding Meskhetian Turks ethnic identity and, on the other, adaptation to American host culture. Acculturation and segmented assimilation theory reject the concept of a white-class core that aims to assimilate all immigrants, however it accepts parts of both adaptation and acculturation.

The Meskhetian/Ahıska Turks have been the focus of many studies. *Meskhetian Turks at a crossroads: Integration, reparation or resettlement?* includes their life history
in different countries (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). Other works include Cingi’s master’s thesis about culture and education in Dayton (Cingi, 2012), and Ahiska Turks have a lot of problems adaptation to American society and it affects students success; Reisman’s master’s thesis about Seattle’s Ahiska Turks and diaspora (Reisman, 2012), according to her, Ahiska Turks are successful at maintaining identity; 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 (Asu, 2012), and they are happy about living in U.S; and a PhD. thesis about repatriation (Ray, 2012). There are also many articles about these topics, specifically analyses of group experiences (Aydingün, et al. 2006); Ahiska Turks’ ethnic identity (Aydingün, 2002), she mentioned particular social and economic situations, like 1944 exile, are very important for Ahiska Turks identity; population transfer (Payin 1992), ethnic discrimination and resettlement (Swerdlow 2006), and mentioned importance of minority groups such Ahiska Turks, especially after September 11; culture in Wheaton, Illinois (Avci, 2012), and similar findings about components of Ahiska ethnic identity (Cetinkaya & Kodan, 2012), and family relations, religion and Turkish Cultural Centers are very important maintaining Ahiska identity.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY & STUDY POPULATION

This study presents both my fieldwork as well as other pertinent literature addressing the topics of Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks, ethnicity and ethnic identity. For this research, data are mainly derived from qualitative ethnographic research methods that involved participant observation, semi-structured individual, and family formal voice recorded interviews. When I came to Columbia, I heard that there was an Ahiska/Meskhetian woman who makes traditional Turkish bread. I met this woman when buying bread. That was my first contact with Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks in the USA. Although I knew Meskhetian Turks before I came to the USA, I did not know that there were Ahiskan communities scattered around USA. Hereby, I started to visit her and tried to listen Ahiska Turks’ stories, and observe their lifestyles. I also started to ask questions about Ahiska Turks when I talked to Turkish people and students who have been living in Columbia for very long time. Then I decided to study this group as my thesis subject.

Before, I started my research, I obtained permission from the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board to conduct my research. Then, I started to do participant-observation, individual interviews, and family interviews. Participant-observation 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. Religious and national celebrations are generally organized by University of Missouri Turkish Student Association (MUTSA). Not only Turkish students, but also other Turkish people and Meskhetian Turks can attend these activities with their families. I could contact these people very easily through MUTSA’s, and, because we share the same language. 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, there are only five
families in Columbia now. Others moved to other states to be close to their relatives. I
interviewed a total of nine people from these families in Columbia. 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.

Ayşe 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.
During semi-structured interviews, participants were asked a series of questions, beginning with demographic information (age, sex, etc.). Interviews 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:** How do Ahiska Turks define their lives in the USA and their place in American society? Are they adapted or assimilated?

I usually did voice recorded interviews in order to obtain better linguistic data. However, I just took notes in the course of one of the family interviews because they did not want the interview recorded. I employed reflective listening, which entailed that I remained open and non-judgmental in the process. I explained the research both in English and Turkish, informing the subjects about the details of their participation. I also assured all of the interviewees that their participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were also reassured that their identities and all identifying information would remain confidential; and they would only be identified by pseudonyms. Throughout the study, documents and data relevant to research did not contain any real names.

Family interviews were done at my home and the interviewees’ houses. These two family interviews were group conversations centered on meals. For individual interviews, I found contact information of Ahiska Turks from Turkish students. Although I wanted to interview them face to face, only one of them wanted to meet, others preferred online communication. 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. Their dialect is a little different from my Istanbul dialect, and they are using some Russian words. However, 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, Tajiki, Armenian, and Turkish. The people who were born in Uzbekistan attended Uzbek schools. Those born in Russia attended Russian schools, and those born in the USA attended English speaking schools. 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. The teenage children of interviewees were comfortable with Turkish and English. However, when I started to interview teenagers in Turkish, they could not understand some points. Therefore, I asked questions both in 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, change, life in the USA and assimilation. 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. Specifically,
the first section concerns how they define their ethnic identity. The second section reports on their life in USA.
CHAPTER IV: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

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

To answer this first main question, I asked the following specific sub-questions: Who are Meskhetian Turks? How do you define your identity? What are the most important characteristics of the Meskhetian Turkish culture? Is your identity changeable or unchangeable? Do you think having descent is enough for being Ahiskan? Are obeying Ahiskan customs, following cultural norms, speaking Turkish, or obeying Islamic practices more important? 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 Islamic 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 that Russian government exiled them especially because of their religion. Mr. 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 Mrs. Ayşe,

Islam is everything for us. If we were not Muslim, Russian government did not have any problem with us. They discriminated against us because of our religion. My granddaughter was married with a Russian man, and she is living as a Christian at Krasnodar Krai. She is not obeying Islamic rules anymore. For me,
she is Russian, she is not Turkish anymore. Islam is the meaning of our life. According to Islam, our life is temporary, and after life last forever. Because of that reason, we should obey Islamic rules. If a person is Muslim, race is not problem. I am trying to teach my grandchildren Islam.

Mr. Mehmet also said 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.

Mrs. Ayşe mentions that she is trying to teach religion to her grandchildren. They are planning to move to Dayton, Ohio because there are many relatives living there. Thus, children can maintain their religion and identity. She also adds:

Sometimes, I am buying gifts for my grandchildren when they learn sections from Quran. I try to encourage them for learning Islam. We are comfortable at Columbia; however we want to move to Dayton. We want to be near our relatives. My main concern is about children. My grandson is very little, and he is at home. However, granddaughter is attending middle school; she does not have any peer here. If we live with our relatives, our community, they can learn religion, and our culture from elders, and she will have friends from our community.

Mustafa Aydar: You said religion is most important component for your culture. Although, Uzbeks are also Muslim and same sect with you, you had some problems with them and had to move to Krasnodar Krai. What do you think about that?

Mrs. Ayşe: We did not have any problem with them. We were praying together, and we were very comfortable about religious practices. I think, main problem was from Russian government.

Although, according to my observations and interviews, Mr. 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, and he mentions that his grandfather was a religious leader. According to him, religion regulates life, prevents bad habits, and teaches proper hygiene. He also mentions that he can only rest in peace in a Muslim country, and that it should be Turkey. Mr.
Cafar also mentioned that religion is most important for them, and he wants to be buried in Muslim country, 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 others. God created Turks as Muslim. I am proud of my Turkishness, however the bottom line is Islam. Got created all of us, and we did not choose it. So, I also cannot discriminate against other religions, and other people.

**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 here. Children have excellent English as a result of speaking English in school. Adults who work are also good at English. However, they speak Turkish at home. Grandparents are particularly emphatic about their grandchildren speaking Turkish at home. Mr. Bahtiyar mentioned that he can speak Turkish, Russian, Uzbek, Tatar, Armenian, and English, but they speak Turkish at home. He also states:

“I appreciate my mother, because she makes extra effort for my children to teach religion, language, and culture.”

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. According to Mrs. Ozlem:

“We have been watching Saban’s (famous Turkish movie artist) movies from our childhood. His movies are very funny. We are also watching Turkish TV shows.”
Turkish TV channels are not only beneficial for language, but also for learning about Turkish culture. We prepared a kind of Turkish cookie for Mrs. Ayşe and Ozlem when they visited us at our home. She said that she has not eaten it before, but she knows it from Saban’s movies. When I called Mr. Cafar for an interview, he said that they could not watch Turkish television because of frequency changes, and he wanted me to adjust the channels. He also stated:

Religion and language are the most important for us. If we lose our language, we will lose everything. I am forcing my grandchildren to speak Turkish at home. Language is up to parents. Children follow their parents. My two children have two children for each. My daughter’s children can speak Turkish very well, but others are not good, and prefer English and Russian. If there was a Turkish teaching school here, we would send children. I do not like Islamic school, because education is English at there. When I go to mosque, language is also English. I cannot understand.

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 Mrs. 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 been never 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. Mr. 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.

Mrs. Zahide states:

I am living with my mother in-law. I cannot understand Turkish people from Turkey that they do not live with their parents when they are get married, and some of them send their parents to senior houses. It is very insulting for us. One of sons should live with their parents, mostly the youngest son. I spoke to one of Turkish students that has 6 brothers and sisters. He said that his parents are living alone. I am not able to understand how his parents can live alone while they have six children. It is because of our respect, it is not obligation.

Mr. 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 Mrs. Ayşə, 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. I think main reason is that people are very comfortable, and women can easily call police about their husbands. 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.

Mr. 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, my friends, my family, elder people.”

For Ahiska Turks, not only first degree relatives are important, they are also keeping connections to other relatives. Mrs. Ayşə states:
I am speaking with my sisters and brothers who live in other states with Skype. I went Russia in the summer for joining my relatives wedding ceremony. So, we are trying to join family activities, and trying to call, and trying to keep family connections. Otherwise, children will not have any connection other family members.

Mr. Mehmet also mentioned keeping a connection to other family members:

Our relatives live in another state but we are living in another. We had to move here for work. We had sacrificed our relationship with our people for a job. Both are necessary for a living. But we do go and visit them three times a year or more. And we're moving back this summer Inshallah. We have lost so many ties with our family. That's why it's important to be living together with your people.

**Endogamy:** Endogamy is also another characteristic of Ahiskan ethnic identity. Firstly, they want in-community marriage with other Turkish people. According to Mrs. Ayşe, endogamy is important because it makes it easier for the couple 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. Mrs. Ayşe’s granddaughter married a Russian man, and she looks at her like she is no longer Turkish. She calls her Russian.

Mr. Mehmet does not accept non-Turkish marriage.

MA: Do you think endogamy is important for Ahiska Turks?
Mr. Mehmet: Endogamy?
MA: Marriage with Ahiska Turks
Mr. Mehmet: Ok. Exactly
MA: Should an Ahiskan person marry Turkish from Turkey?
Mr. Mehmet: Yes, of course
MA: Should an Ahiskan person marry an American or Russian?
Mr. Mehmet: No
MA: Should an Ahiskan person marry an Arabic, or any Muslim?
Mr. Mehmet: No.
MA: Why? You said religion is very important. According to Islam, it is not problem.
Mr. Mehmet: I know. It should be like that. Religion should be on the top. However, preferring endogamy is not illegal for Islam. According to our
community, Turkish culture and customs are important. In our culture, it is unacceptable that you marry someone from another race. But it is not forbidden to do so in Islam. And that's where culture and religion intervenes. Our culture is different from Arabic culture. Actually, nowadays many both Ahiskan men and women marry people not Turkish and Muslim.

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.

When I asked interviewees how they define themselves, Mrs. Ayşe said that “we are Ahiska Turks. Ottoman Empire settled us to Ahiska, we are Ottoman Turks”.

According to Mrs. Ozlem, any definition that includes being Turkish is enough for her. Mrs. Ozlem said that they are Muslim Turks from Ahiska. According to Mr. 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. Mr. 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 Mr. 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.”
All of the interviewees accepted the fact that identity can be changeable, not rigid, and their identity is changing in different economic and social conditions. Mr. Bahtiyar said that their community has been changing because they have always been taking good and bad things from the host culture. However, Mr. Bahtiyar did not accept that his personal identity changed in either the US or in Russia. According to Mr. 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 Allah, then that culture has immoral practices. But so far, I have not seen something that is forbidden in Islam, but practiced in our culture. Our culture goes hand in hand with Islam. Our religion plays a big role in our culture.

Mrs. Ayşe 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 with a Russian man, she is not Ahiska Turkish anymore, because she is not thinking like an Ahiska Turk. Mr. Mehmet also added:

MA: Do you think Ahiska identity can be changeable or unchangeable?
Mr. 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?
Mr. Mehmet: Question is hard for me to answer. I mean if your parents aren’t Turks, and why do you want to identify yourself as a Turk?

MA: For example, I have a little girl. If I gave her to an American family, would she be American or Turkish?
Mr. Mehmet: I think she could chose that. Even if her real parents are Turks, she can call herself an American.

MA: What’s your opinion?
Mr. 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?
Mr. 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?
Mr. Mehmet: Nowadays, blood is less important. World is changing.

As can be seen above, feeling is more important than descent, according to Mr. Mehmet.

Mr. 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.” Mr. Orhan had a similar point of view:

MA: Do you think Ahiska ethnic identity changing at different countries and condition? Or, it is same?
Mr. Orhan: Of course it is not rigid, it is changing. We are learning new things, children are different than us.
MA: Do you think having Ahiskan parents is enough for being Ahiskan? Are obeying Ahiskan customs, speaking Turkish, obeying Islamic practices more important?
Mr. Orhan: Only having parents is not sufficient. What you are is more important.
MA: Can you give me a rate about that?
Mr. Orhan: It is not easy to give rate.
MA: How about 80%?
Mr. Orhan: May be, or more.

In contrast, Mr. 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.

Mr. 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 I gave my daughter to American family, will she be American or Turk?
Mr. 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 I took an American baby to Turkey, and raised like a Turk, is she American or Turkish?
Mr. 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.

**Research Question-2: How do Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks define lives in USA and their place in the American society? Are they adapted or assimilated? What are the exits and receptions?**

The second main question is about understanding Ahiska Turks life in the USA. I tried to understand how their life is here, what they perceive to be the main differences between American culture and their culture, and whether they are adapted or assimilated. This second main question was divided into these sub-questions:

How is your life in the United States? What kind of cultural differences do Meskhetian Turks report when comparing their culture with American culture? Do you think you are adapted, integrated here? Do you think you are assimilated to American culture? Why? Why not? What parts of your culture can be integrated to the USA? Do you think the USA is a comfortable place for maintaining culture and living in peace? Why? Do you think Americans, such as your neighbors, learn something from your culture? What is the most important thing you have learned from American culture? Do you fear Americanization? Do you think the next generation, and those following, can maintain their culture? Why? Why not?

**Their life and their place in American Society**

All of the interviewees think that their lives in the USA are more comfortable than any other place they lived before. According to them, living in the USA has ensured many
good things such as security, equality, and freedom for them. They also mentioned the ability to have a job and education here. Mr. Cafar said that they did not have legal status to live and work in Russia, and they could not buy houses.

I came to Columbia from Russia, firstly. In Russia, we could only work at farms, because we did not have permits. Then, Krasnodar authorities restricted working at farms. Other cities gave permit to us, but Krasnodar did not. I think, main reason is historical. Krasnodar was Ottoman city. When we came Krasnodar, they said that Turks came again. When we came USA, they gave permit to remain of Ahiska Turks. Our life was not bad in Uzbekistan. We lived peacefully for 60 years, but problems started at the end of 1980’s. We were under pressure in Russia. My father lost his leg in prison because of Russian government.

Mrs. Ayse also described similar experiences

MA: Which state did you come firstly?
Mrs. Ayse: Arizona
MA: Why Arizona?
Mrs. Ayşe: US government scattered us, and we had to go to Arizona. Government also found job for us, and pay money for house and utility at first months.
MA: Why did you come to Columbia/MO?
Some of our relatives were settled to here by US government. They said that they were comfortable, and had job here. Then, we decided to come here. Actually, they moved to Dayton/Ohio.
MA: Are you comfortable at here?
Mrs. Ayşe: Our life is very comfortable and easy. When we were in Russia, we were working at farms, and severe working conditions. I am retired because of my health problems, my daughter-in-law is working. However, we will also move to Dayton. Actually, we would move at last summer, but we did not move because my son’s permission problems.
MA: Do you think can you find job easily there?
Mrs. Ayşe: If you are hardworking, it is easy to find job in US.

Mrs. Ozlem also added during interview: “if you know the language, you can find lots job here. It was problem at first days in Arizona. Then we learned English.”

However, Mr. Bahtiyar said that their life was better in Russia. “Our life in US is between work and home. All of the people here are living at apartments. If you do not have money, you cannot live here. We are living here for paying for utility and rent.
Bribery was very common in Russia. However, I was happier there than here.” Mr. Metin said some things are better in the USA and some things are worse.

MA: So, Why did you come?
Mr. Metin: We were under pressure. Before that we were comfortable. We were afraid that everything might be like in Uzbekistan. I wanted to come, but security was main problem. Everything is very expensive here. I cannot go dentist here, because it is very expensive. I am planning to go Turkey for my dental treatment. Government and laws are excellent here. Therefore, everything is going ok. Otherwise, US may be worse than Russia, people can fight. I do not like US schools. I have never heard about school assault in Russia.

Mrs. Ayşe also mentioned children’s lives are also very comfortable here. When she was attending school, she had to walk a lot of kilometers each day in snow in Uzbekistan. She says her grandchildren who attend school here are treated like queens.

My grandchildren are attending middle school. School bus takes them in front of our home, and bring to the door. All of the cars stop, when they are getting on and off. State government provide food when they are at home. If we compare them to us, they are very relaxed. Sometimes, this relaxing conditions make me afraid for maintaining our identity.

Mr. Mehmet and Mrs. Ozlem especially liked the equality and antiracism in the USA.

Although Mr. Bahtiyar does not like life in US, he admits that there isn’t any discrimination against him and Ahiska Turks. However, he said when they were in Russia, police were always disturbing them. He also liked the way people were judged by their work in the USA. According to Mrs. Ozlem, in the USA, you are not discriminated against because of your nation, race, or religion. People including employers look at what you are doing. Mr. Cafar said also that both in Russia and Uzbekistan, people were calling them “Black People” and considered them second-class. American people treat them like themselves. Although he said that the “Ferguson events” indicated discrimination against African Americans, he did not think there is any discrimination toward Ahiska Turks.
Mr. Mehmet criticized the media’s portrayal of Muslims, but he thinks it cannot be worse than Russia:

MA: How is your life in the United States?
Mr. Mehmet: It's good. I am working and attending Community College. I have never been criticized of racism. I feel very blessed to be here, because you’re given the right to go to school like everyone else and it's easy to maintain a living. Our parents whom speak little English, manage to find jobs and work in physically tiresome conditions 24/7. Our parents are truly heroes.
MA: Is there any inequality for you or other ethnic groups in USA?
Mr. Mehmet: Not that I know of. And if there was, it wouldn't be as bad as Russia. However, unfortunately, the media portrays Muslims as a terror group who want to kill others. But we’re not terrorist lol. I am a Muslim, but I don't wear the headscarf. That's probably why I have not faced racism.

Mr. Bahtiyar mentioned that although there is not any discrimination here towards Ahiska Turks, he thought Americans fear foreigners, especially Muslims. Mrs. Saadet also says that they were discriminated against in Russia because of their identity, race, and religion. “My parents were exiled from homeland, because they were Turkish, and Muslims. We had to leave Uzbekistan because of same reason, we also came here for same reason. However, there are lots of different groups that live here, and no one cares about race.”

All of the interviewees strongly felt that the USA is a secure place for living and practicing their religion and culture. Mr. Cafar said that he watched an interview from Turkish TV about Ahiska. There are still a lot of older Ahiska Turks living in Ahiska, but they were complaining that they could not do traditional wedding ceremony or circumcise their children there. In contrast, there is not any discrimination against them for practicing their religion and culture here. Mrs. Zahide agreed:

MA: Were there any problems for living or maintaining your ethnicity? Do you have any problem for maintaining religion, your language?
Mrs. Zahide: No, not really. After all, we're not the only immigrants here.
USA is a country of freedom. You can practice any religion and live any life you want.

All of the interviewees said that the American host culture is very different than Ahiskan culture. They mostly mention religious differences, eating habits, and family relations.

Mr. Cafar said that everything is different:

Everything is very very different. For example, family relations, respect to elders, foods. Americans eat at Mc Donald’s, they eat fast-food. They always greet, but no neighborhood here. They like their culture, but I do not like. Everyone likes own culture.

Mrs. Ayşe and Ozlem mentioned that children and people here are very free. According to Mr. Arslan;

The American culture is a very contrasting culture when compared to ours. They believe in Christ, celebrate Christmas and love to eat bacon. In the summer, it's the time to get into the bikini body and be out on the beach. As a teenager, you have boyfriends and girlfriends. As for us, we don't do any of those! We are just so different. We would either become like them, or would never let any of it get into our culture. No grays.

Mr. Metin also emphasized differences:

MA: What is the differences between your culture and American culture?
Mr. Metin: Actually, everything is very different. It originates from religious different. Firstly, foods are different. Americans live the day, and do not care about future, and their children. We are very respectful to bread. Whenever I see on the ground, I always take. I did same thing at my work. My boss said “Are you crazy?” Young Americans do not care about religion, and generally older people go to church. And, another important difference is about child raising. Children are very free here, and parents cannot say anything to children. However, authoritarian family is common at our community. It was not like that in Russia. Drugs using is very common here.

When I asked interviewees whether they are happy here or not. Only one of interviewees said that their lives were better in Russia. Others said that they are happy here, at least their lives are better here than other places that they lived, and there is no discrimination against them here. Mrs. Ayşe said they do not have any problems here.
They are feeling secure, working and earning their money. She also added that elders could settle in Turkey, but children have to finish their school in the US. Mr. Cafar:

I did not want to come to USA. I wanted to come for the sake of my children. Actually, we do not have any problem here. But I want to return to Turkey, and to my relatives. I want children to come to Turkey after earning money, and finishing school. I do not want to go to Russia, Uzbekistan or Ahiska. Many people do not want to return to Ahiska, because there is not any job possibility. I also do not have relatives living in Ahiska now.

Mr. Mehmet mentioned only wanting to visit Turkey:

MA: Are you happy here? Do you want to continue to live here? Why? Why not?
Mr. Mehmet: Yes, I love it here. But I really want to go to Turkey for only visit.

**Adaptation or Assimilation**

All of the interviewees are afraid the next generations will lose their identity. Older generations who were born in Uzbekistan and Russia are especially afraid of their children and grandchildren losing their culture. They fear the American lifestyle, freedom, comfort, schools and laws in the USA are very attractive to the new generations, and this worries them. Mr. Bahtiyar states; “we have not seen any discrimination in USA, however, USA is not good place for maintaining culture. Children are exposed to many bad habits here. I am planning to return to Turkey. US is not good place for us.” Mrs. Ayşe also said: “I hear that lots of Ahiskan are divorcing here. Divorce was not common in our community in Russia and Uzbekistan. Parents have 4-5 children are divorcing. What is your problem? They are calling police for unimportant family problems.” Mr. Mehmet also said:

MA: Do you have fear of losing culture and identity in USA?
Mr. Mehmet: Yes definitely. Not myself but the future generation.
MA: Do you fear of Americanization? How do you maintain identity and adapt American society together?
Mr. Mehmet: Make sure to spend time with your people and friends and work at the same time. So that you’re keeping a balance.
MA: Do you think next generations can maintain their culture? Why? Why not?
Mr. Mehmet: Hopefully. If they manage to keep a connection to their roots.

Interviewees accepted that they are changing, but they do not want to accept assimilation or Americanization. As mentioned above, they mostly talked about change in new generations. For example, Mr. Bahtiyar does not accept that he is changing, although he thinks the new generation is changing. He said that “I have never changed here, and I will never. I cannot accept assimilation or Americanization.” At first, Mr. Cafar did not accept that he and his family are changing. When I asked in details, he accepted change, but not assimilation.

Mr. Cafar: I cannot accept I and my family are changing. We are same. We did not change under 70 year-Russian hegemony. We do not change in USA.

MA: How about simple things about lifestyle? For example, you are eating meals at table, but you were eating on floor table. So you are changing.

Mr. Cafar: Yes, that kind of things changed. We are eating at table, we are using couch different than our traditional one, and we do not use here floor bed. But, not accepting American or Russian culture. I have still Turkish flag at my car.

Mr. Mehmet also mentioned the same point:

MA: Do you think that your culture have changed here?
Mr. Mehmet: It is slowly changing.
MA: Do you think you are adapted, integrated here? What did you do?
Mr. Mehmet: Yes, I have adapted to the American lifestyle.
MA: Do you think you are, Ahiska Turks have maintained culture here? Or, assimilated?
Mr. Mehmet: Sorry, what’s assimilate?
MA: Losing culture, Americanization (I also explained in Turkish)
Mr. Mehmet: Oh okay. No, I don’t think so. I think we have maintained our culture. We still eat the same traditional foods, and practice the same rituals.
MA: Do you think next generation can do?
Mr. Mehmet: There are some people among us that are strong. They keep their culture and identity and are determined to carry it up to their grandchildren, but some Ahiska people are changing. So while half of us maintain, the other half would change.
MA: Ok.
When I asked questions about their exits from where they came from and their receptions in the USA, interviewees mentioned that they learned from American culture, and their neighbors and friends at work also learned a lot of things from them. Mrs. Ayşe and Ozlem said that Americans are smiling and greeting everyone, and they thought that was a good thing. However, Mr. Bahtiyar said that he did not learn from Americans, mostly, they learned from him. According to him, Americans are living in good conditions, and colleagues learned lots of things from him about both work and food. Mr. Cafar said that they do not have much interaction with Americans because of cultural differences. According to him, national and religious celebrations are good opportunities for interaction. Mr. Mehmet added the following about his exits and receptions:

MA: Do you think Americans, neighbors learn something from your culture?  
Mr. Mehmet: Yes, they see what type of people we are. They learn some things about Turkish people. They loved our food, but I think they learned that are hardworking too. Because we are used to be always working hard to get our money. Americans work at comfortable places.  
MA: What is the most important thing you learned from American culture?  
Mr. Mehmet: Hmm, I must say I have learned a lot about their artists and musicians. They are so famous and very many people see them as role models. Americans like to play sports and have leisure time. These are things that they value. I also have learned to live in a diverse community. In Russia, our world was so small, and we had few positions, but, in America, there is more freedom. Also, I learned to be with many different people, learned to be not racist. I learned that there’s more things I can do with my life than just grow up to marry. You could aim for bigger dreams here. Definitely, they do a lot of sports and they are active. That’s one of the things that they inspire me to do. They just shake hands when greeting. But we kiss on the cheek, and they like to have personal space.  
MA: If you compare Russia and US, what are the main differences?  
Mr. Mehmet: Russia; communist, racist towards us specifically. US; freedom, equality.  
MA: Where do you want to live?  
Mr. Mehmet: I would love to live in my native country, Ahiska, but there is nobody there. I have gotten used to American lifestyle, my everything is here, but I would love to visit Turkey.  
MA: So, US for you?  
Mr. Mehmet: Yes.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of the first research question was to discover how Ahiska Turks define their own identity, what were the most important characteristics of that identity, and their approach to ethnic identity. As mentioned above, the most important components of Ahiska ethnic identity are religion, language, family, and endogamy. 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. As Mrs. Ayşe said, “I have a granddaughter, married with a Russian man, lives like a Russian, and does not obey Islamic rules anymore. She is Russian to me.” This respondent’s statement shows that being an Ahiskan means being a Muslim. Religion has been the bedrock of ethnic identity for many ethnic groups (Safran, 2006). One of the interviewees 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. Due to living in many countries and communicating with many cultures, Ahiska Turks may speak Russian, Uzbek, English, Tatar, Tajiki, and/or Armenian. However, they emphasize the importance for speaking Turkish at home and maintaining that language. The family is the next most important component of Ahiskan identity. Ethnic identity is a matter of ancestry, and the family is the arena where children learn ethnic identity features (Alba, 1990). It is another important institution for Ahiskan and also serves as the first school
for children where they learn their religion, language, and culture. Culture is transmitted through enculturation (Scupin, 2012). Parents, especially grandparents keep community roots and traditions alive for grandchildren. Ahiska Turks look at the family as a source of solidarity because they have taken strength from it, especially during exile and migration periods. Their life is centered around their extended family in many ways. An important feature related to family is endogamy. According to participants, endogamy is not a direct component of their ethnic identity, but it affects other things because they can build a traditional Ahiskan family with endogamy. Endogamy is a key factor for maintaining ethnic identity, and culture conservation for many cultures (Screws, 2003). 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. They strongly reject a woman who marries outside of the community, especially a woman who marries with non-Muslim for an exogamous marriage, especially for marrying a non-Muslim. According to the Islamic religious tradition, a woman not allowed to marry outside. As mentioned, religion is the most important component of Ahiska ethnic identity because it affects all parts of it.

Participants collectively called themselves Ahiska Turks, Muslim Turks, and Ottoman Turks. As mentioned above, their ethnic identity and historic origins and naming of their identity have always been a debated issue. Russian, Georgian, and Turkish theories are all different from each other. This issue was not addressed on during
interviews, but I did ask interviewees about their definition of identity. The most common name given in response to this question was *Ahiska Turks*. Ahiska Turks is a term that represents both their homeland and their Turkish ancestry. Their original homeland is called *Ahiska* in Turkish, and *Meskhetia* in English, Russian and Georgian. According to interviewees, the homeland of Ahiska, was important for the earlier generations born in Ahiska, and they were always telling stories about their lives in their hometown and their first exile. However, for Ahiskans born in Uzbekistan, Russia, and the USA, the Ahiska homeland is not as important. Therefore, one of my interviewees preferred the name *Muslim Turks* because it indicated both religion and Turkish ancestry. During the interview, he emphasized religion as the most important component of their ethnic identity. Another participant preferred the name *Ottoman Turks*. According to him, Ahiska Turks can represent only people born in Ahiska, however he was born in Uzbekistan, other Ahiska Turks were born in Russia, and still others in the United States. For him, *Ottoman Turks* is the best name because it can represent all of the Ahiska Turks and because their homeland was in Ottoman territory.

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. Although ethnic identity may change in different inter-ethnic interactions and relations, ethnic units and their boundaries persist. All of the interviewees accepted one way or another that their identity can be changeable and has been changing. At first Mr. 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. All of the interviewees said some of these changes are bad and some are good. Mr. Arslan’s statements below appear almost totally consistent with the circumstantialist approach:

I think it can be changed because we live in a foreign country and we are influenced by [foreign culture] 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. 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 change. Our identity is automatically changing at different life conditions.

Of course, ancestry is important for them; however, two out of nine participants mentioned that feeling Ahiskan is more important than having Ahiskan descent. If an Ahiskan does not obey religious rules and community culture, he or she will not be an Ahiskan. Mr. Orhan’s and Mr. Mehmet’s statements are mostly based on culture.

MA: Do you think having Ahiskan parents is enough for being Ahiskan? Are obeying Ahiskan customs, speaking Turkish, obeying Islamic practices more important?
Mr. Orhan: Having parents is not enough. What you are is more important.
MA: Can you give me a rate about that?
Mr. Orhan: It is not easy to give rate.
MA: How about 80%?
Mr. Orhan: Maybe, or more.

MA: For example, I have a little girl. If I gave her to an American family, would she be American or Turkish?
Mr. Mehmet: I think she could chose that. Even if her real parents are Turks, she can call herself an American.

MA: What’s your opinion?
Mr. 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?
Mr. 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?
Mr. Mehmet: Nowadays, blood is less important.
According to the primordial approach mentioned by Geertz, ethnic identity is the sense of belonging to an ethnic group as result of being born into it, and Joshua Fishman tried to explain how ethnicity is intuitively defined and experienced as a part of an actor’s being (as distinct from “doing” and “knowing”). The primordial approach of Geertz is based on ineffable givens or spiritual traditions, and Fishman’s mystical concepts. Two out of nine interviewees did not mythicize their ethnic identity and blood. An example of someone who did mythicize their identity, Mr. Cafar said if a person has Turkish parents, he or she continues to be Turkish forever. He said that onion is onion, potato is potato. If an Ahiska chooses Christianity, he or she continues to be Turkish, blood cannot change, and to Mr. Cafar looking 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. Mrs. Ayşe mentioned that her granddaughter who is married to a Russian man lives like a Russian, and she considers her to the Russian, not Turkish. Mr. Bahtiyar said that “if the next generations obey religious rules, and community culture, they will be still Ahiskan. If they do not do, I will not say them Ahiska Turks. Even if it is my little son or daughter.” These interviewee’s statements are opposite of the primordial approach. However, Mr. Cafar’s comments fit the primordialist approach. He mentioned that feeling Turkish is important, but without Turkish blood one cannot be considered a Turk.

Ahiska Turks’ identity is changing from time to time, country to country, generation to generation, and conditions to conditions. 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. Both the primordialist and circumstantialist models have
been helpful for social scientists to understand ethnic identity and ethnic groups around
the world from earlier times. In addition, the primordialist approach has been proving the
continuity of ethnicity, and circumstantialism has showed us ethnic identity can be
variable in different economic and political situations. Most contemporary
anthropologists are using some form of middle way between primordialism and
circumstantialism for interpreting and describing different aspects of ethnicity. Both the
role of “origin” (i.e., ancestry) of a person and the concept of culture are important for
understanding ethnic identity. The combined approach of primordialism and
circumstantialism refers to ethnicity as “ancestry and tradition” (Palmer et. al, 2012,
p.97). This intermediate approach is supported by the idea that “. . . ethnic membership
is at once a question of source of origin as well as of current identity” (Barth, 1969,
p.29). It is impossible to say that participants’ approaches are purely circumstantialist or
primordialist. Therefore, this intermediate approach is useful for understanding Ahiska
Turks identity. Aydingün also mentioned that both aspects are useful, and the specific
interactional, historical, economic and political circumstances are very important for
theformation of Ahiska Turks ethnic identity (Aydingün, 2002).

The second main question is about understanding Ahiska Turks’ life in the USA,
their place in American society, the differences between American culture and their
culture, and whether they are adapted or assimilated. None of the interviewees were born
in their homeland, Ahiska. They were born in different countries and had to live in
different cultures. Grandparents witnessed exile from their homeland to Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan to Krasnodar Krai, Krasnodar to the USA, and they had to move within the USA for better job possibilities, or to be close to their relatives. Living in another country creates many problems for them. All of the interviewees think that their lives in the USA are more comfortable than any other place that they have lived before. The most important things about living in the USA has been security, equality, and freedom for them. They also have job and education possibilities here. Mrs. Ayşê: “our life is very comfortable and easy here. When we were in Russia, we were working under severe working conditions. It is strange for me that state school service takes children from our home, after school brings to home, and we do not pay any money. When I was attending first school at Uzbekistan, I was walking lots of kilometers every day for school.”

Living in the USA accorded them the equality that they have greatly desired. Whether or not they liked living here, all of the interviewees admitted that the US ensured them equality and antiracism. In contrast, they all agreed that they were discriminated against by the host culture and the official authorities in Russia and Uzbekistan. People were calling them “Black People” in Russia and Uzbekistan. Although Mr. Bahtiyar does not like life in the US, he admits that there is not any discrimination against them. None of them said that they have problems about practicing their religion and culture. However, two interviewees mentioned that the media portray Muslims as terrorists, and some people are afraid of Muslims and foreigners. They mentioned that some the media institutions deliberately prepare anti-Muslim news.
According to them, the American core culture is fundamentally different from Ahiskan culture. As mentioned above, religion is one of the most significant ethnic boundary markers. According to participants, the main difference originates from religious differences. The most frequently mentioned religious differences concerned eating habits and family relations. Mr. Metin’s statements summarize of the main differences.

Actually, everything is very different. It originates from religious different. Firstly, foods are different. Americans live the day, and do not care future, and their children. We are very respectful to bread. Whenever I see on the ground, I always take. I did same thing at my work. My boss said “Are you crazy?” Young Americans do not care religion, and generally older people go to church. And, another important difference is about child raising. Children are very free here, and parents cannot say anything to children. However, authoritarian family is common at our community.

Although interviewees do not have significant problems in the USA, most of the older people want to move to Turkey. They are waiting for retirement and earning enough money to return. In addition, they added living in the USA is better for children because of better education and job possibilities. No one has any plan to return to Ahiska. Mr. Ayşe said that this is because Ahiska is a mountainous area and there are no job possibilities there. Younger generations are mostly thinking about continuing their lives here. Mr. Mehmet loves the USA, but desires to have a trip to Turkey. All of the interviewees, especially older generations, born in Uzbekistan and Russia, are afraid of losing their identity. They are worried about the next generations losing their identities, especially because of freedom, comfortable life, schools and laws in USA.

Interdependence and interactions between the diverse ethnic groups are inevitable in today’s world. The terms assimilation, integration, acculturation and incorporation are
often used interchangeably, and have related definitions. Assimilation is a process of boundary reduction that can occur when two or more ethnic groups come into contact with each other. As mentioned above, interviewees accepted that they are changing, and especially new generations are changing fast. They said that they are adapted or integrated to American society. They do not want to use the terms assimilation or Americanization. Only two out of all interviewees accepted that they learned some kind of things from Americans. Mr. Bahtiyar said that “I have never changed here, and I will never. I cannot accept assimilation or Americanization.” Mr. Cafar also said that he cannot accept change, or assimilation for him and his family. In cultural assimilation, one ethnic group adopts another group’s cultural features, like language, religion, norms, values, beliefs. Classical assimilationist theories are generally concerned with how immigrants adapt to society and with the forces that promote their progress, and they focus on how the behaviors of immigrants change in the new society and their success in moving from their old culture to the new culture. The segmented assimilation perspective is about how immigrants adapt to life in the host society with exit and receptions (Zhou, 2013). The immigrant group is not the only group to experience enduring change because the dominant culture also changes owing to the interactions and co-existence (Berry, 2005). Ahiska Turks’ receptions are about English, government policies, labor market conditions, and Americans’ attitudes. More than half of the interviewees said that they could copy American’s smiling and greeting behavior. According to an interviewee, although Americans generally greet or smile, they do not want to continue contact. However, Ahiska Turks always open their homes to guests. Another interviewee mentioned that he admires that Americans do sports, play games, and do leisure time
activities. Most of the interviewees admired Americans for living peacefully with other ethnic groups. One of the interesting things that an interviewee said was that Americans taught him to have bigger dreams. According to interviewees, they can borrow some kind of things from their 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, eating habits etc. Ahiska Turks accept adaptation, integration, and acculturation but not assimilation and Americanization.
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to understand Ahiska Turks ethnic identity. This study focused on understanding ethnic identity and life of Ahiska/Meskhetian 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. Research questions for this study were:

- How do Meskhetian Turks define themselves, and their ethnic identity? What are the main points of Ahiska ethnic identity?
- How do Meskhetian Turks define lives in USA and their place in American society? Are they adapted or assimilated?

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.


