

Ahiska Turks in Philadelphia: Keeping Cultural Identity and Religion in a Multicultural Environment

Kenan Cetinkaya, Semanur Kodan

Abstract—Ahiska Turks in the Philadelphia area maintain a very complex, cultural heritage which they have carried with them for centuries from Georgia to Uzbekistan then Russia and lastly to the USA. While facing very severe conditions in the last half of the last century, their passion for their language, religion and tradition allowed them to keep their cultural identity. In the paper, the Ahiska Turks' sorrowful story is reviewed and their struggle with keeping their identity in a multicultural environment of the USA is examined in the context of the Philadelphia area.

Keywords—Ahiska Turks, identity, integration, Philadelphia, Turkish

I. INTRODUCTION

AHISKA Turks or Meskhetian Turks generally are Sunni Muslims, and their original homeland is Meskhetia in the Republic of Georgia. Being under the Ottoman Empire for centuries and later under Soviet Russia, Ahiska Turks have a mix of cultures and traditions. In 1944 under the Stalin regime, Ahiska Turks were forcibly deported from their homeland and settled in modern day Uzbekistan. After facing a pogrom in Uzbekistan, many fled back to parts of Russia during the collapse of the Soviet regime. In 2004 many Ahiska Turks under a very severe situation were granted refugee status under the US refugee program and by the end of 2007 around 17000 settled in 66 towns of 32 states in the US. Ahiska Turks in Philadelphia constitute a big part of the refugee population with a population of around 400-450 people (about 85 families). Many of them live in the Northeast area of Philadelphia [7]. In spite of such a complex history, they are trying to create a new homeland in the US. However, the capitalism, liberty, and prosperity they find in the USA pushes them to challenge their traditional, religious and cultural identity. In the research we focused on the issue of preserving cultures and religious identity in a multicultural society. The method of education of their culture and religion which they offer for their children and teenagers is another part of our focus. These questions are being asked: In contrast to the communist regime of Soviet Russia, what are the challenges of the capitalist system in terms of keeping their religious identity and culture? Do they consider themselves as Diaspora? How do/can they integrate/assimilate into the US society?

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Do they want to fully assimilate into the society or do they have any plans to go back to their homeland? What is the role of religion in their relationship with others and preserving their culture and identity?

In the paper, we start with historical challenges Ahisk Turks have faced. In the second part we go deeper into how Ahiska Turks preserved their identity throughout exile and their time in the USA by analyzing basic characters of their cultures, family structure and religious observances.

II. HISTORY

A. Ottoman Period (1578-1825)

Even though the history of Ahiskan Turks in the area of Georgia is not so clear in the research made before and there are so many debates, two important arguments appear strong: Ahiskan were Turkish families/clans who were brought to Georgia by the Ottoman Empire mainly because of its Turkish policy. According to this policy, the Ottomans, instead of forcing people of the newly conquered area to leave or convert, settled Turkish Muslim clans in this new area in order to make it a Turkish land and let people of different faiths integrate and harmonize. According to this view around 1578 CE Ottoman Turks settled the area called Ahiska/Meskhetia and after 250 years it became a part of Anatolian Turkish settlements [9], [12].

According to a second argument Ahiska Turks are Muslim converts of Georgians. This second argument is strong in terms of the use of the term Meskhetian for the people of Ahiska. However, there is a lack of enough materials to confirm this suggestion or historical documents to oppose it [such as during the Ottoman time, the people never were called Gurcuogullari/ sons of Georgians, but always were called Ahiskan Turks]. Coşkun and Sargin, discuss the problem of the concepts of Ahiska and Meskhetian very detailed in their MA theses [6], [13].

Ottoman rule ended after the Ottoman-Russian wars in 1828 and the region became a part of Russia. And in March 16, 1921, with the Treaty of Moscow, Turkey gave the region totally to Russian control [9], [12], [14]. Especially because the Ahiska Turks struggled during the First World War with the Ottomans against the Russians, the Russians saw Ahiskans as a potential revolt community throughout the Soviet regime and post- Russian periods as well [2].

The harsh attitude of Soviet policy toward the Ahiskan was so clear especially by denying their Turkish identity and by considering them Georgian. From 1926-35 many Ahiskan Turks were called Turks. However, the policy shifted after 1935 when they were called Azeri and their passports stated

that they were Azeri. From 1938 until Second World War they were called Georgians. [12]

The year 1944 was the turning point in the history of the Ahiskans and the darkest year of their story. That is when Stalin pushed them to leave their homeland in present day Georgia because of his fear of a dividing Soviet Union [12], [4]. Ahiska Turks comprised a big part of the population of the region and they exhibited a very high percentage of Muslim background. Their population according to the census was 137,921 [14].

B. Russian Period and Exile (1825-1944)

The assimilation policy of Russia toward the Ahiskan continued after the 1930s including being forced to change last names from Ahiskans to some Georgian last names. We can find some last names of Ahiskans, which are not Turkish, today because of this pressure. In late 1944 when Lavrenti Beria, Stalin's trusted person, passed the resolution labeling minorities similar to Ahiskans as "untrustworthy populations" and therefore stating that they must be deported from their homeland in order to break the linkage and assimilate them, the worst days of the Ahiskan started. More than 100,000 – 115,000 [14] people were forced to depart from the region in 1944 and many of them lost their lives during this deportation. According to some research there were around 15-20 % of the whole population (around 20,000 people) forced to death during the expulsion [12] and in the first 18 month of the exile around 30,000 of them died because of the cold and harsh conditions [14].

Therefore, November 15 became a commemoration of the death and suffering for the Ahiskan people. The deported people were spread to 18 districts and 264 regions [5] all over Soviet Russia especially to central Asian regions such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The people who settled in different areas were faced with a "special settlement regimes" until 1956 [12], [4]. According to this regulation they had to register with state police and they could not travel anywhere outside of the settlement without permission from the local government. Because they were deprived of so many civic and political rights they started working as agricultural laborers. In 1956, after Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev lifted many restrictions applied to minorities and let them become more free in their life in the soviet regime. While many other minorities in exile were affirmed to go back to their homeland, Ahiska Turks did not get this chance and stayed in exile [9]. One of the reasons for that could be the geopolitical importance of the region during the Cold War era, and after the Cold-War [12]. Because of the impossibility of returning their homeland, Ahiska Turks continued to live in the different parts of Central Asia. Our attention shifts to Uzbekistan in/after 1989 because of the high pressure of nationalism among Uzbeks and their rejection of Ahiskan in their homeland.

C. Uzbekistan Period Second Exile (1944-1989)

Even though the Ahiskan in the different regions of Russia were separated from each other, nevertheless they continued to

establish some organizations (The "Vatan Society" was the only Ahiskan organization during the Soviet regime and the "Hsna Society" was founded later for struggling to return to Georgia) especially after the sanctions toward them were lifted by the regime [11]. Some progress was achieved and between the years of 1981-1988 around 1300 people returned to Georgia. However, because of the high level of nationalism in Georgia and the settlement process, half of them were forced to go back into exile [9].Uzbekistan had a large number of Ahiska Turks settlements by June 1989. However, because of the rise of nationalism in Uzbekistan and lack of government support, a pogrom broke out and around 100 Ahiskan died in a region named Fergana Valley [7]. This is called by media and international level as "Fergana events" or "Fergana Pogrom" which started in June 3 1989 [4]. In the aftermath of this pogrom, the government asked some 17,000 (according to some other sources about 12,000-30,000) Ahiskan to move from there and later around 70,000 more to move to different parts of Russia. Many of them went to Azerbaijan while others moved to Ukraine and Kazakhstan [9], [4]. Therefore, in their first half century of the exile, the Uzbekistani Ahiskan Turks faced with second exile.

D. Returning Russia (1989-2004)

The population of Ahiska Turks in Russia was not so small as to be easily ignored. According to 1989 census there were around 207,502 Turks living there. Since many of the Ahiskans were considered Azerbaijani we can argue their numbers could be more than 400,000 [1]. One of the settlements of Ahiskan after the Uzbekistan pogrom was Krasnodar. However, Krasnodar was not a convenient place for the Ahiska Turks since the local authorities of Krasnodar rejected the recognition of Ahiska Turks who settle there.

Aydingün explains their situation as "Regional politicians used xenophobia against non-Slavic people to keep the Meskhetian Turks, along with some other smaller ethnic minorities, a perpetually stateless people" [12]. Without recognition they could not even obtain property, work legally or join higher education. In addition to this hard situation the authorities forced the Ahiskans to re-register as guests in the region every 45 days. Moreover, the local authorities passed some regulations in order to maintain Ahiska Turks as unwanted people by not letting them obtain propiska (residence permit and migration recording tool in the Soviet Union) in the beginnings of 1992. The harsh conditions reached its peak in 2002 when authorities prevented Ahiska Turks from leasing and cultivating the land [4]. Around 11,000 Ahiskans in the Krasnodar region had not been allowed citizenship by 2002. Local authorities asked them to leave on 27th of March 2002 for the third exile in fifty years [10]. Around 40 Ahiskans staged a 10-day hunger strike to draw the attention of international and governmental powers [12].Several international organizations such as the Council of Europe and the International Organization for Migration, tried to solve the problem the Ahiskans faced in the region [12]. In terms of Georgia, the process was so slow that even by the end of 2008 no satisfactory development happened.

Beginning in 2004 until 2007 the US government decided to let around 17,000 Ahiskans into 66 towns of 32 states in the US. The Ahiska Turks in Philadelphia constitutes a big part of the refugee population with a population of 400-450 people (around 85 families).

Today, around 350 - 400,000 Ahiska Turks live in nine different countries throughout the world: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and the United States region [12], [11].

III. CULTURE – IDENTITY

In this part it will be helpful to analyze basic characteristics of the Ahiskan culture in terms of creating their identity.

It is clear that before their deportation, the people in the region of Meskhetia did not know much about ethnic differences or how to feel about it [2]. When they were forced to be assimilated away from their homeland, a religious, cultural consciousness appeared and formed in the individuals as well as in the community of the Ahiskan people.

The First World War and the Second World War had a tremendous effect on the Ahiska Turk's self-consciousness as Turks and on keeping their national identity as part of a Turkish society with myths and memories which pass from generation to generation [2], [1]. Rejection of Ahiska people by the Soviet regime and excluding them from the society helped Ahiska Turks to strengthen their feeling of Turkishness. Therefore, it can be said that ethnic identity of Ahiska Turks was shaped during the 1944 exile period [2]. According to field work made in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Ahiska Turks emphasized their Turkishness and saw themselves as part of the Ottoman Empire. Ahiskan people did not accept or defined themselves as Georgians, or sons of Georgians in any level [16]. Their ethnic solidarity reduced their relationship with other ethnic groups to a minimum and thus by becoming a close community this allowed them to maintain their identity intact even though they were influenced by the society in a general manner [2]. Especially the practices of not marrying outside their ethnic group contributed to them keeping their identity during the exile. Also, their settlements in the different regions were very close to each other especially the rural and suburban settlements and this helped them to keep their communal consciousness in the regions where they lived. [12]

After the long period of three or four exiles the gap between the generations in one family became very clear since the father could have been born in Georgia, a son in Uzbekistan and grandsons in the Ukraine or the USA [16]. Now we can look at basic segments of their cultural identity.

In terms of their religious tradition, it seems that Ahiska Turks, similar to Bosnian Muslims, are not strictly observant Muslims, however they practice circumcision, refrain from pork, fast during the month of Ramadan and celebrate the Muslim holidays of Ramadan Bayramı (Eid al-Fitr) and Kurban Bayramı (Eid al- adha). And after dinner prayer (fast breaking during the Ramadan) they always remember the deceased relatives of the one who hosts the people in his/her house. Interestingly Ahiska Turks adopted some of the secular

festivals of the Soviet Union such as New Year's Eve and New Year's Day on December 31 and January 1. Despite these influences their core values did not become those of the Soviet Russia. However, it is very clear that they accepted some of them in the course of history. [12] In terms of family structure of Ahiska Turks it can be stated that the lineage is an important tool for transferring historical and family ties to the next generation since there was no institutional structure in the community during their exile. So oral transferring of history depends on the lineage stories and myths of their homeland. Many Ahiskans can go back four or five generations when they are asked to mention their names and places they lived [12]. Nearly all Ahiska Turks know the name of the village in which their grandparents lived. Traditionally defining statuses of interfamily relations also should bring some lights on Ahiska Turks' self-identification. Kinship plays a very important role in their lives to increase respect and to keep the family ties very strong by connecting families as well as the groups. Therefore, there are many different names that have been produced for defining different relationship between the members of the family and interfamily.

They have very specific names for instance for their relatives such as:

- æmi – father's brother
- Aqa æmi – father's brother
- Bibi – father's sister
- Hala – mother's sister
- Pa,fa hanum – father's brother's wife
- Pa,fa abla – brother's wife's sister
- dʒidʒi – uncle's wife
- ækæ – older brother
- Dada – older brother [16].

IV. PRESERVING IDENTITY

After mentioning basic characteristics of Ahiska Turks culture in general, now we can reanalyze them in order to understand their response to multicultural environments of the USA. Even though they were living in a very multicultural environment before and during the exile, it is very clear that the hardships and persecutions were very effective on shaping their cultural characteristics and their response to pressure. However, their situation in the USA is very vivid in terms of being free and having intellectual, cultural and religious confrontation with non-Ahiskans. These new challenges -and the fear of failing to transmit their cultural identity to the new generation- pushed Ahiska Turks to embrace their cultures much more than during the exile. We will analyze their cultures in terms of preserving their identity in a reaction to the multicultural environment. Before doing this it will be helpful to point out the need for preserving culture and identity in a multicultural society.

A. The Need for Maintaining Culture and Identity in a Multicultural Environment

Societies keep and develop their cultural structures in constant interactions; however, it is very difficult for minority

groups to maintain their cultural values in multicultural environments where the intense interaction of values is dominant. Individuals who live in multicultural societies will either lose their cultural value, maintain their culture by isolating themselves (potentially causing the ultimate loss of their culture anyway) or they will accept a modified set of experiences through cultural exchange with other groups.

Every individual feels a belonging to family, society and culture, and therefore struggles to maintain his or her own culture by assimilating the language, religion, family structure and feeling of society. Culture is the expression of self in every aspect of life since it explains life, past experiences and productions [19]. One who does not know himself/herself has to face and accept the identity offered by others and is always interested in movements around him/her [21].

Creating the feeling of belonging is a very significant concept for individuals. The process of creation of identity starts from childhood and continues in adulthood. In the childhood phase two facts are important in terms of accepting or denying social and historical ties [17]. The individual who could give reasonable answers to the questions such as "Who am I?", "What will happen to me?" or "What do I believe?" will constitute a positive identity [18]. In psychology the concept of identity which is explained with the concept of personality is shaped by dialogue with others and feedback toward their attitudes. The concept of identity is a concept whose center is the culture and it is constituted by dialogue with family and society [19].

The individual, who is always in dialogue with society since birth, feels the desire of belonging by identity that is obtained through a connection with close family and society. Maslow summarizes peoples' need in five categories: (a) physical needs (b) security needs (c) needs of belonging (d) need of respect (e) need of self-actualizing. The individual who has met their needs on a lower level would look for good relationships and be a better member of a family. The ones who then met their needs on an upper level would mostly show more feelings of belonging [17]. Therefore, in terms of individual identity the acceptance and integration into the society is so crucial. By doing this, individuals will identify the society with themselves and it will lead to maintaining their culture. Moreover, it must be pointed out that individuals have to tolerate the cultures they are in and should esteem it.

B. Religion

Religion is a very significant dimension of Ahiska Turkish ethnic identity [2]. Even though they are not rigid or strictly practice their religions, they could identify themselves with Islamic faith during their exile in Russia, unlike Kazakh and Kyrgyz Turks. There are many stories in which they tell their children about how they faced difficulties in order to practice their religious obligations during this period. Thus, religion as part of their identity has been with them all the time - before, during and after the exiles. Exclusively showing their religious engagements to Islam and practicing religious obligation publicly has caused them to show their bond to Islam as their boundaries with the non-Muslims changed. Thus, the very

characteristic of the religious life of Ahiska Turks opened a reasonable space for them to live their history, tradition and culture during the time of exile. Therefore, many Ahiska Turks in Philadelphia believe that religious education is so important to help the new generation to keep and construct an Ahiskan identity to which they could hold even in the worst situation. Therefore, they ask their children to learn religion by sending them to Philadelphia Dialogue Forum, a Turkish Cultural Center in Philadelphia. There they get basic religious education and participated in weekly prayers. The children's ages differ from 7-13 years old. Volunteer Turkish people there try to teach and educate them in religious tradition as well as Turkish tradition. On the other hand it is clear as Tweed states, in his book *Our Lady of Exile*, religious cartography is active, not passive [15]. There is a clear difference between Ahiska Turks and Turkey's Turks perceptions of religion. While Ahiska Turks see religion as a basic cultural element, Turkish Turks see it as a more ritual and spiritual action in which they show their willingness to pray to God. In terms of Ahiska Turks understanding of religious practices, it is a symbol of their struggle during exile and remembering the hardships they faced just because of their religion and ethnicity. So, the symbolic importance of religion and its processive feature for the Ahiskans must be considered in terms of their century long struggles.

C. Language

The second most important thing that can be conceptualized as defining Ahiskan character, as well as keeping it, is language. Beside the Islamic faith during their struggle while in exile as well as in Philadelphia, in a multicultural environment, they always speak Turkish between themselves and are considered Turkish in their basic values. Now we will look at their perception of language deeper.

Ahiska Turks clearly speak an Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish, which is very close to dialects of the provinces of Kars, Ardahan, Artvin as well as Azerbaijani Turkish. In terms of dialect, especially, it can be asserted that Turkish relationships with the Ahiska and their increasing connection may foresee the possibility of the Ahiskan dialect diminishing into the modern Turkish dialect in the near future [12].

In terms of language Ahiska Turks, by keeping Turkish as their mother tongue, had to learn the countries' language in which they lived. So there are many languages that Ahiska Turks in the USA may know such as Turkish, Russian, Uzbek and English [7]. Turkish is a very important tool in terms of maintaining their loyalty to their history, culture, religion and self-respect. So, it means that if language is lost, everything is lost [12]. In terms of this Aydingün says "In fact, they judged their loyalty to the culture by their knowledge of the mother tongue, so much that sometimes language is treated as if language, ethnicity, ethnic pride and identity are one and the same thing" [2].

Moreover, the exile and expulsion from their homeland has influenced their use of language also. Until 1926 they were using Arabic scripts and around 1920 it is replaced with Latin and later in 1930s they switched to Cyrillic alphabet. So,

different generations of Ahiska Turks now know different kinds of alphabets in which they can read and reflect their writings. For instance, when I was interviewing with Imdat Aladinov he read a poem written by his friend in 1980's in Turkish with Cyrillic alphabet when they were in Uzbekistan, in which he mentions the struggles from their first exile from Ahiska to Russia. Especially older Ahiska Turks in Philadelphia area now know different kinds of alphabets in which they can read and reflect in their writings. This however, does not prevent them from reading Turkish writings in different alphabets.

D. Family

With their family they talk Turkish, eat their traditional foods, practice Islamic religious obligations and live their traditional life. The design of their home in Philadelphia area is a very traditional Turkish home. Most of the traditional home decorations are made by Ahiskan Turks who live in the USA. Therefore, if a non-Ahiskan enters their home, he/she mostly will be surprised to see non-American cultures that are mostly very eastern and very Turkish home style.

This very close and strictly traditional family structure of Ahiskan Turks can be compared with Amish society in a greater scale as a community. Similar to Ordnung [8], a written document binding Amish together, Ahiska Turks have a very strict oral law which they carried with them throughout their exile as well their life in the USA. Oral law is very effective in determining their relationship with each other as well as with others. Secondly, even though, the exclusion from community is not the way Ahiskan treat disobedient members of their society, the pressure they apply to their members and relatives is strong and effective on their decisions about their relationships with non-Ahiskans especially in terms of marriage with non-Ahiskans and non-Muslims.

In addition to the home's external features, internally, family relations are so crucial for an Ahiska Turkish family. Usually Ahiska Turks consist of extended families which unite two to three generations together. Households' size may vary between six to eight, sometimes to ten [2]. In terms of marriage, a traditional way of marriage is arranged marriages with relatives in order to strengthening family ties. Family structure is patriarchal in which the oldest male member is on the top of the hierarchy in the family [16], [12]. Even though the new generations were raised in different areas of the world such as Turkey, Azarbaijan or USA, they all understand and accept this core value of kinship [4].

Moreover, Ahiska Turks are strong community oriented people, which extends beyond their own community. Russian persecution did not prevent Ahiska Turks creating good relationships with others even in the hard times in Krasnodar. Many say that Russian neighbors gave some of their bread which they bought with the permission of the local government to the Ahiska Turks. Especially since Russian was a common language for the older Ahiska Turks, they built good relationships with Russians in the USA in order to adapt to the work and social environment [12].

E. Turkish Cultural Centers

Turkish Cultural Centers which are established around the USA by Turkish people who came from different areas of Turkey became very important meeting, educating and religious places for Ahiskan Turks. Lacking of sound religious education primarily because of the exile years, they could not teach deep, religious knowledge to their children. The opportunities in the Turkish cultural centers in the USA to teach Turkish, Islam and Turkish culture became a crucial social environment for the Ahiska Turks. Ahiska Turks' strong relationship, respect and love for their forefathers' land, Turkey, enabled them to create very strong relationships with American Turks [4]. In one of the Ramadan Bayramı speeches to his Ahiskan fellows, Mikhail Latipov, in 2009 in Philadelphia, said "during the Russian regime we faced with very difficult times and situation but we could keep ourselves, religions cultures from Russian assimilation. However, in the USA, because of the extraordinary level of prosperity and freedom and pressure of capitalist regime to be more individualistic society endanger our self-conscious of being Ahiska community. That is why we need of our Turkish sisters and brothers for staying together, teaching together." His worries show how he was so afraid of assimilation of any kind. In terms of using and learning English as their second language they always emphasize to their children the importance of Turkish for their identity. Therefore, in the Turkish Cultural Centers Turkish, instead of English, becomes the major language that people speak. This is a very convenient environment for Ahiska Turks to show their future generations a natural environment even though there are some dialectical differences. Turkish Cultural Centers, as in Philadelphia, became meeting places for religious services, funerals and marriage ceremonies. Every aspect of their life, then, they can live and experience in the cultural centers with their Turkish fellows. The Turkish flag is not only Turkey's flag, it is one of the most important symbols which Ahiska Turks respect, love and keep in their homes. During their exile period these kinds of symbols were helping them to feel a belonging to Turkey and Turkish people. In the Philadelphia area Ahiska Turks keep Turkish flags in their homes and rooms. Going back to Turkey in the future is another symbolic value which brings Ahiskans together in many circumstances. Thus, these two significant symbols belonging to Turkey contribute to their cultural identification of being Turkish.

V. CONCLUSION

Ahiska Turks' stories start in a very dramatic way. Many Ahiskans have a strong desire for having a homeland where they can live free. In this respect the USA is one of the best places that they could find. However, the capitalist system that presses on individualism and assimilation are the two biggest fears Ahiskans keep in their minds. In order to maintain their cultural identity, history and religion, they try to strongly embrace their core values: family, language and religious education. Turkish language as their mother tongue transmits, connects and creates strong relationships between them and their fellows around the world. Many Ahiska Turks' relatives live either in Russia or different parts of the Asian countries. Therefore, just as they were successful keeping their identity

by holding their language, their aim in the USA is to not lose their consciousness of being Ahiskan by dreaming of going back there or to Turkey. On the other hand, many of them after feeling freedom in the USA do not want to go back because of the fear of facing similar destruction. Therefore, the best thing to do is to integrate into the US society without losing their identity. In order to do this, educating their children is so important to them. Collaborating with Turkish Cultural Centers around the USA is the one of the most significant chances they think that they have found here. Thus, by holding their family relations, practicing religions, dreaming about returning to Turkey, even though not considering themselves as Diaspora, they try to integrate into USA.

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