

What is the Role of Religion in Constructing Identity and Social Networks: Meskhetian Turks in the United States?

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Abstract

Although the body of literature regarding the traditions and experiences of Muslim Americans continues to grow, few empirical investigations have specifically explored the process of adaptation of Muslim refugees in the United States. Based on an ethnographic study of conducted in Houston, Texas, this article examines the role that religion plays in the ethnic identity reconstruction process of a relatively recently resettled refugee group, Meskhetian Turks. Islam has been a vital component of Meskhetian Turk identity in Russia and the Republics of Central Asia during the exile years. So, I investigate whether religion still constitutes a critical role in their identity reformation process in the United States where a profound prejudice exists towards Muslims by the society at large. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of ethnic identity formation among displaced populations, with special focus on how the processes of ethnic identity reconstruction and cultural preservation play out among a Muslim immigrant group residing in the U.S. after 9/11 and the Boston marathon bombings.

Keywords: Religion, Meskhetian Turks, Ethnic Identity, North America

1. Introduction

Religion is a critical aspect of ethnic identity. Some refugees rely primarily on religious institutions to preserve cultural traditions and ethnic boundaries (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). Various theories have been developed to explain the relationship between ethnic identity and religion. According to Smith (1978), immigration or displacement is often a theologizing experience and immigrants usually react to the alienation and confusion that results from their arrival in a new country by turning to their religion. In attempt to resolve adjustment issues, they build religious congregations and re-establish familiar social and cultural activities in the new country (Peek, 2005). Hence, religion might have a greater importance in the lives of immigrants and refugees than was the case in their country of origin because religion builds an affiliation between the self and group.

Furthermore, attending a religious meeting in a religious institution offers community networks, economic opportunities, and educational resources for the immigrants and refugees. So as positive benefits increase, immigrants and refugees are more likely to affiliate themselves with their religion (Peek, 2005). Additionally, some religions may be used to maintain personal and social distinctiveness in the pluralist American context. As Peek said (2005, p. 219) “As religion is less and less taken for granted in the multicultural and secular conditions of the United States, adherents to become more conscious of their traditions and often more determined to transmit those beliefs, values and behaviors. Religious dress, practices and organizational affiliations serve as important identity markers that help promote individual self-awareness and preserve group cohesion as ethnic and national heritage is displayed and thus maintained.”

Muslims constitute a significant part of the immigrants’ population particularly in diverse religious nations. Although the estimates vary regarding the current population, and there is not a consensus concerning who should be identified as Muslim. It is generally accepted that approximately three to four million Muslims live in the United States and the population is growing exponentially (Bagby, Perl & Froehle, 2001; Smith, 1999). It is also important to note that the adherents of the religion of Islam belongs to different nationalities, cultures, ethnicities, and Islamic ideologies. Although the body of literature regarding the traditions and experiences of Muslim Americans continues to grow, few empirical investigations have specifically explored the process of adaptation of Muslim refugees in the United States.

Based on an ethnographic study of conducted in Houston, Texas, this article examines the role that religion plays in the ethnic identity reconstruction process of a relatively recently resettled refugee group, Meskhetian Turks. Islam has been a vital component of Meskhetian Turk identity in Russia and the Republics of Central Asia during the exile years. So, I investigate whether religion still constitutes a critical role in their identity reformation process in the United States where a profound prejudice exists towards Muslims by the society at large.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of ethnic identity formation among displaced populations, with special focus on how the processes of ethnic identity reconstruction and cultural preservation play out among a Muslim immigrant group residing in the U.S. after 9/11 and the Boston marathon bombings. It highlights how refugees structure their lives and identities during their interactions with other groups and during social gatherings. This research expands anthropological literature on refugees and ethnic identity (re)formation by capturing the contextual variability of refugee experiences and the diversity of identifications.

2. Who are Meskhetian Turks?

Meskhetian Turks, a small non-titular group who has experienced multiple displacements, violent persecution, and ongoing exile since 1944. Initially, the Meskhetian Turks were one of several groups who were deported from their homeland, Georgia, to Central Asia under Stalin's rule along with the other groups such as the Chechens, Crimean Tatars, and Ingushes who were designated as traitors of the Soviet Union in 1944. After being victims of mass deportation from Georgia, the Meskhetian Turks experienced pogroms in Uzbekistan, and human rights abuses in Russia. Starting from 2004, the U.S. accepted approximately 14,000 Meskhetian Turks as refugees.

2.1. Several Deportations

In 1944, Meskhetian Turks were deported to Central Asia and placed in "special status settlements," a euphemism for labor camps. The group continued to live in the republics of Central Asia, until 1989 in Uzbekistan, where they were settled since they were not allowed to repatriate to their original homeland. After violent clashes in the Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan, in 1989, many Meskhetians fled to Russia with the help of the Soviet army. In the course of the conflict, 101 Meskhetians were killed, 1,200 wounded and their houses and other property destroyed (Aydingün, 2002). Although there is not enough evidence to suspect the disturbance in Fergana Valley, according to the local news and authorities, the pogrom happened due to economic competition, unemployment and population pressure. The Soviet Government assisted the Meskhetian Turks in their relocation to various areas of Central Russia. Mainly Soviet Army evacuated 17,000 of Meskhetian Turks different parts of Russia. Rest of the group who were living in the other parts of Uzbekistan left their previous setting by their own means to Russia. Some Meskhetians, around 13,000 of them, chose to re-unite with family members residing in Krasnodar Krai and opted to move there. Others followed their lead, justifying their choice with geographical proximity to Georgia, comfortable climate conditions and advantageous conditions for agriculture, a traditional occupation of Meskhetian Turks (Ossipov, 2007).

Small number of Meskhetian Turks could settle in Georgia. Those Meskhetian Turks who succeeded in moving to Georgia faced discrimination and legal difficulties. The Meskhetian Turks who remained in Krasnodar Krai (elsewhere in Russia the situation was resolved) were denied Russian citizenship and the basic rights associated with citizenship. As of 2005 and, throughout the previous decade, their legal status was defined as "stateless people temporarily residing in Krasnodar" (Swerdlow, 2006, p.35).

Constrained in their ability to move, Meskhetian Turks had been residing in that part of Russia trying to make sense of transformations around them. They also continued to appeal to authorities hoping to find legal permanence and stability. Yet, after 15 years of struggle Meskhetian Turks were still denied Russian citizenship, their plea was heard by the United States where they were accepted as refugees of special humanitarian concern (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007).

3. Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity formation is a complicated discourse, particularly for migrant populations and affected by many factors including religion, networks, expectations from the receiving country, similarities and the differences between the country of origin and the 'host country', socioeconomic backgrounds, displacement, gender, age and previous experiences. For refugees, the complexity of their experiences in their countries of origin, and in response to their diaspora itself, add further complexities to the process of ethnic identity formation.

Wide usage of the term ‘ethnicity’ developed during the Post-Colonizing world. Prentiss claims that “its broad use as a unit of analysis appeared simply due to increasing discomfort with the term ‘race’” (Prentiss, 2003, p.106). It was first used by sociologists Warner and Lunt in the 1940s. While Williams accepts this discomfort with race, she points out that since the 1970s, race was not a term considered to be very meaningful. There was however a vigorous effort in anthropology to define ethnicity to define a unit of analysis. Ethnicity became popular especially in identity politics of the Post-Colonial era. The definition of ‘ethnicity’ was not only important for anthropology but also for common people, and its meaning was the product of combined scientific, lay, and political classification” (Williams, 1989, p. 402). In order to understand what ethnicity means, it is necessary to look for a connection between its components, which cannot be separated from each other. Williams reviewed A. Cohen and Ronald Cohen's work, which showed that as early as the 1970s ethnicity started to replace traditional subject matters of anthropology such as ‘tribes, villages, bands and isolated communities’ and it received a ‘ubiquitous presence’. According to Ronald Cohen, this marked a theoretical shift in anthropology; the intensity began with Barth's 1969 essay *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Sanders, 2002, p.330).

Barth argued that groups formed on the basis of differences of culture not similarity. Barth claimed that a few select items of culture, preferably organized as contrastive idioms, are then selected as icons of these contrastive identities. That is how cultural variation is enrolled to serve as the basis for the social phenomenon of ethnic groups. Ethnic group membership is constructed without reference to the real diversity of culture, reaching right into the individual family, but through an overdrawn myth of contrast and sharing respectively (Barth, 1969).

While Barth involves state and power dynamics in the same article, he presents this relationship as actual ‘ethnic conflicts’ and recommends finding a common ground first by giving the example of the Scandinavian labor structure. His example of a Pathan [Peshdun] moving from Pakistan to Norway as a labor migrant is presented in such a way as if a Norwegian moving to Pakistan as a labor migrant would be in a similar position and face the same difficulties as a Pathan. One might suspect if any Norwegian would move to Pakistan as a labor migrant and his experience may be much different. Passports given to these two labor migrants by their designated states would have different actual capital values. While a Pathan male will have to learn Norwegian out of obligation, it is dubious that Norwegian migrant would learn Urdu or any of the other languages in Pakistan (Barth, 1969).

Ethnic identity, interests with the habitual distinctive characteristics of persons or groups which are noticeable in their interaction, such as physical type, religion, language, ‘character,’ ‘sense of belonging,’ collective focus on country of origin or ‘heritage,’ and occupational specialization from the socio-cultural point of view (Abbinck, 1984). Racial and ethnic identities are increasingly understood to be socially constructed, fluid categories that change according to contexts and experiences. Hence ethnic identity formation for the refugees is a multifaceted notion and should be analyzed taking several issues into consideration such as gender, age, previous experiences, religion, network, homeland, expectations, etc.

The connection between ethnic identity formation or reconstruction process with religion should be understood in light of the social, religious, and cultural context in which it takes place. One important aspect of ethnic identity is religion (Barth, 1969; Glazer & Moynihan 1975) and the role that religion plays in defining ethnic identity (Enloe, 1996; Mol, 1978). Religion is one of the ways to define identity and as it is stated above it is related with the cultural and situational context. The degree to which religion emphasized in ethnic identity varies among immigrant groups in the United States. While some immigrant communities stress their religious aspect of ethnic identity, some of the immigrant groups prefer to be identified with their ethnic identity and continue their affiliation with their religious institutions to preserve their cultural traditions (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). According to Andrew Greeley, both ethnicity and religiosity mutually reinforce each other and he gives an example from Irish community and Catholicism. He argues that the identification of Catholicism and Irishness cannot be separated in the United States. Therefore, it is more logical to acknowledge that “religion and ethnicity are intertwined, that religion plays an ethnic function in American Society and ethnicity has powerful religious overtones” (Greeley, 1971, p.82).

It is also important to note here that the relationship between ethnic identity and religion should be viewed as a variable in different groups. This is also the case for Muslim immigrants and refugees in the United States.

4. Being a Muslim Refugee in the United States

In the last few decades, due to the growing political and economic instability and poverty of various parts of the world, a large number of Muslim refugees have entered the United States.

These included those fleeing as a result of the Israel-Palestine war in 1967, the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo between 1992 and 1995. All are examples of the reasons behind the influx of Muslim refugee resettlement in the United States (Malooof & Ross-Sheriff, 2003).

Muslim refugees in the United States come from a variety of countries and cultural backgrounds. Although Muslims throughout the world share the same essential beliefs and values, cultural overlays cause differences in the ways in which individuals and groups observe their faith. Islam clearly defines the roles, rights and responsibilities of the family and its individual members; however, background cultures of the refugees have a profound effect on the interpretation of their religion (Malooof & Ross-Sheriff, 2003).

Being a Muslim in the United States after 9/11 and Boston marathon bombing was challenging as well. Much of the research about Muslim immigrant and refugee groups has pointed out that Muslims have a special case in terms of demonstrating their religious identity due to 9/11 and the misrepresentation of Muslims in general (Peek, 2005; Leonard, 2003; Schmidt, 2004). Even though the visible demonstration of a minority religion might provoke hostility and discrimination from the dominant population, some Muslims prefer to represent their identity and use a hyphenated identity such as Turkish-American or Arab-American (Peek, 2005). In contrast, although religion helps refugees to affiliate themselves with their country of origin, some Muslim refugees might prefer to identify with their ethnicity as opposed to their religion due to the predicted prejudice toward Islam in the United States.

Just like other refugee groups in the United States, Muslim refugees have faced challenges at the beginning of their resettlement related to housing, income, education, health and security. In addition to these challenges, they also have had to deal with the negative public stereotypes about Muslims. Most case studies about the challenges of Muslim refugees have been conducted happened at school among the children and adolescents. Prejudice or hostility have been found to be manifested as cruel humor, as shunning, or even physical abuse. After the several terrorist attacks in the last few years in the United States and across the world, refugee Muslim men and boys have experienced prejudice in part due to American stereotypes and fears about Muslim men.

Religion has been a critical component of Meskhetian Turk identity for decades. Even though their religion was one reason for the negative treatment and oppression of the group members by Russians and former Soviet Union officials, they never surrendered their identity of Muslimness. One influential consequence of the communist regime in the Soviet Union was the alienation of religion. Interviewees in this current study frequently referred to the oppression and segregation that they endured in Russia in terms of religion. Their ability to practice religion, perform rituals and fulfill traditions was hindered by a system denying religious freedom. As a community coming from a strict oppression due to their religion, Meskhetian Turks in the United States feel that their religion is respected and that they have religious freedom in the United States. Interviewees stated they feel respected and accepted within American society. Despite the recent erroneous associations of Islam and terrorism, none of the interviewees reported any negative experiences or interactions. On the contrary, their newly gained freedom regarding religious practices and the usage of language provides a very positive perspective regarding the acceptance of diversity in the United States. Although I was expecting the group to be hindered in their religious identity due to the negative stereotype, almost all of my interviewees expressed their appreciation of not being oppressed or ridiculed due to their religion.

5. Settings and Methods

This article is part of an ethnographic field research in Houston, Texas from the spring of 2013 until the spring of 2015. Four primary groups in Houston were selected as data resources for this study. The first group was Meskhetian Turk women from a variety of ages of 18-40. The second primary population was both adolescent boys and girls aged 13-17 whose parents and elder sisters and brothers were also involved in the research. The third group was Meskhetian Turk men, aged 20-55. The final group was elderly people who can give information about the pogrom in Uzbekistan and tell me the life stories of Georgia deportation and ethnic discrimination happened in Krasnodar Russia. Ethnographic research method was conducted to study the degree to which Meskhetian Turks identify themselves with their Muslimness in the United States. The data for this study was collected utilizing qualitative methods via unstructured open-ended interviews, in-depth life history and family history interviews and participant observations.

5.1. Sample Population

Given that this study is basically interpretive, 40 Meskhetian Turks including adult men, women, adolescents and elderly people living in Houston were interviewed. As for the sampling technique of the study, snowball and purposive sampling was used (Schensul et al., 1999; Bernard, 2012). Purposive sampling helped to interview those who remembered the deportation tragedies from Georgia and Uzbekistan, young Meskhetian Turks and their adaptation the United States. Tables 1 shows the breakdown of the interviewees by their age, gender and location.

Table 1.

Houston sample population breakdown

5.2.

Houston							
Girls		Boys		Women		Men	
Age 13-15	Age 16-18	Age 13-15	Age 16-18	Age 18-40	Age 40 and above	Age 18-40	Age 55 and above
4	7	3	5	11	2	6	2

Data Sources and Analysis

This research heavily relied upon unstructured interviews. The rationale for this decision was the individual nature of the questions and to gain different perspectives in different settings. Through individual interviews in a secure location, the researcher could gain more comprehensive and meaning-sensitive information from interviews than that gathered from a survey alone. (Bernard, 2012). All the interviews were conducted in Turkish, and audio-recorded.

The researcher also collected life histories from the elderly interviewees to collect information about the deportation from Georgia and Uzbekistan. This included information from those who remembered the deportation from Georgia, and those who were exposed to the violence in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan. All of the elderly informants were living with their sons and their families. Most of the Meskhetian Turkish parents believe that children learn from their extended family members including grandparents who teach the traditional Meskhetian Turkish way of life, and the children continue to learn from them as they grow up. So interviewing adults and the elderly in the household plays a critical role in developing an understanding the younger generation of Meskhetian Turks and their adaptation strategies in the United States. During this study, the researcher frequently visited the interviewees’ homes and met with their families and friends. Additionally, family history interviews with adult men and women were collected to investigate whether there were any changes in their family settings and rituals since they have been in the United States.

Social media and internet have significant effects on the transnationalism and sustaining constant social relations that link together all of the Meskhetian Turks in different countries. So many refugees and immigrants today built social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders and technology has a great contribution on it. In addition to this, Meskhetian Turks established a variety of cultural centers in different countries and connect with the other Meskhetian Turks via social media and forum sites of the cultural centers and associations.

During the data collection period, social media and above-mentioned forum sites were used in order to have a better understanding of Meskhetian Turk identity and the degree to which religion has a significant place in their new settlement, United States.

Participant observation has an essential role in collecting information about the lives of Meskhetian Turks in the United States. This method enabled the researcher to observe the rituals, traditions, and customs of the population. During 25 months of collecting data process, the researcher participated in wedding ceremonies, circumcision parties, birthdays, wedding rituals (parent meetings ceremonies of the bride and groom sides, engagement parties, and henna night).

6. Islam among Meskhetian Turk Community in the United States

Islam occupies a crucial place among the Meskhetian Turks who have resettled in the United States as an essential component of their identity. Relying on their religion, Meskhetian Turks practice male circumcision, celebrate major religious holidays with most adults and the elderly fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

According to the interviewees, they have learned the teachings of Islam from their parents and the elderly members of the community. In Russia, they used to have mullahs (imams-religious leaders); however, because of the strict ban on any religious teachings in Russia, they could not have any other religious authority in their community. Most interviewees in Houston moved to Russia from Uzbekistan where they had more access to religious institutions and resources. All of their information from religion is what they had in Uzbekistan. Therefore, most Meskhetian Turks are not very well informed about Muslim theology and practice “cultural Islam,” which was inherited from the Communist regime period in Central Asia and Russia.

Cultural Islam developed over seventy years of a communist political environment and state-sponsored cultural interference of Central Asian Muslims and their identity vis-à-vis Islam. Given the strong wish for the continuation of religious rituals, Muslims in Central Asia and Yugoslavia introduced ceremonies that set the course of a Muslim’s life and afterlife, including circumcision of boys, marriage rites and burial rites as either cultural or national practices. Every one of these cultural practices in each Central Asian culture and Muslim Yugoslavian culture had at their roots the same Islamic doctrines (although sometimes mingled with pre-Islamic vestiges including Shamanism and remote practices from Zoroastrianism). However, this was not generally discussed (Rowe, 2007). Communist officials allowed them as national anomalies and their relationship to Islam was either willfully ignored or overlooked through cultural ignorance or ideological shortsightedness. Other than these ceremonies, the declaration of faith, praying, observing holidays inclusive of Ramadan and even almsgiving can be done privately, and most Muslims in Central Asia and Yugoslavia continued to practice them. However, due to the non-existence of religious teachings, most of these practices were not passed on to other generations. Islam became a set of ceremonies and a religious identity for most of the ethnic groups in these geographies (Rowe, 2007). The Islam that Meskhetian Turks living in the United States follow falls under cultural Islam. The meeting of Meskhetian Turks with more pious Turks in the United States also brought up their cultural Muslimness.

Therefore, this current study analyzes the religious practices of Meskhetian Turks under Robert Redfield’s (1955) distinction of great traditions and little traditions. According to Redfield, all world religions, and some local religions could be divided into a great tradition and little tradition. The great tradition, the orthodox form of the cultural or religious center, is that of the urban elite. It is the religion of the reflective few and is cultivated in schools and temples and is consciously cultivated and handed down. Great traditions have also been called textual traditions, orthodoxy, philosophical religions, high traditions, and universal traditions. The little tradition is the heterodox form of the cultural/religious periphery (Lukens-Bull, 1999). The little tradition incorporates many elements of local traditions and practices.

The way in which Meskhetian Turks as well as many other Muslim communities lived under communist regime helped them develop an understanding of religion, which was a mixture of their culture and religious teachings of their parents and elderly relatives. For example, Mustafa expressed his understanding of being a Muslim:

I know many elderly, who pray five times here. In Russia, they couldn't do that. We believe in Allah. In Russia, in Uzbekistan, people didn't believe and we couldn't be good Muslims. But we all held it our religion inside us. We come together because we all believe in Allah.

Meskhetian Turks living in the United States learn about Islam, Islam based in text, from pious Turks. At the same time, they differentiate themselves from them as articulating more religious devotion and knowledge as a point of difference. For example, Hayriye said: *They know the Quran; they read and study more Koran than us. They are more devout Muslims. We appreciate Turks' knowledge of Islam. We lived in a communist state; we couldn't learn religion as much as Turks. Thankfully, Turks are teaching us.*

Although they appreciate and attend the weekend schools of pious Turks to learn more about their religion, Meskhetian Turks accept and internalize the religious teachings, “Big Traditions” to a certain extent. When I asked Naz if she wanted to adapt the Islamic way of dressing, she said, *“No, if I do I am going to look like a Turkish girl from Turkey but I am Meskhetian Turk, and we do not cover our head like pious Turks.”*

She also stated her hesitant to expose her religious identity in the United States through her outfit. Ali, 45-year-old Meskhetian Turk man, also stated that: *Turks do not drink alcohol, and we know that it is not acceptable in Islam but some Meskhetian men drink alcohol during some of the social gatherings. We were always drinking, and it is not that easy to stop it.*

Meskhetian Turks have a great respect and attachment to Islam and Islam is intertwined with their cultural identity. On the other hand, they have a way of understanding and practicing their religion, which has elements of folk culture and practices against the teachings of Islam.

Folk elements have played an important role for Meskhetian Turks in keeping their ethnic identity alive. They have variety of rituals during their social occasions such as weddings, circumcision parties, and New Year parties, among others. The majority of these rituals do not have any religious support or they are not shared by the dominant cultures that they have lived in. For example, during the religious wedding ceremonies, brides would never show their faces until the religious ceremony ends in order to be protected from the evil eye. The group believes that this is rooted in their Islamic belief; yet, this practice is not mentioned in any Islamic textual resources. The group has a plethora of practices, rituals and traditions like this that could be considered as little traditions. The Meskhetian Turks carry these practices forward from generation to generation, and they are practicing those in the United States as coping strategies to preserve and maintain their ethnic identity.

During my fieldwork, Ilyas, one of my elderly interviewees, passed away, and I was able to participate in all of the funeral rituals with the other women. From the beginning of the funeral ritual, men and women were separated and I was expected to stay with women. Ilyas passed away at his home due to a stroke. Once his family realized he passed away, they called an elderly man and woman living close by for advice and help. They also called the Turkish cultural center to receive religious guidance and prepare the religious funeral at the small chapel located in the cultural center. The elderly couple closed his eyes, tied his jaw and turned his head in the direction of Mecca, which is considered as the most holy city in Islam. They also his feet together, moved his hands side by side and put him on belly. They covered all of the body with a white bed sheet and put a knife on his abdomen. Then they all waited for the Imam from the cultural center. The Imam arrived with a group of men, and they took his remains to the cultural center where the rest of the funeral rituals were performed. I was not allowed to observe the rest of the rituals but received information about the process from Meskhetian Turk men. They removed all these clothes and washed the body, and then shrouded it. According to Islamic law, a body should be buried as soon as possible from the time of death. So a funeral prayer was scheduled for noon, which was announced via email to all members of the Turkish community. A funeral prayer was given in the small chapel. Meskhetian Turk men closely related to the deceased stood in the first line, followed by men, then children, then women. After the funeral, they took him to the cemetery designated for Muslims living in Houston. The Imam conducted another religious ceremony, and the deceased was buried with the head facing Mecca.

During these rituals, some of the women, including this daughter-in-law and close neighbors stayed at home to clean up and prepare food for the guests. From that day on, the house was full of the guests who visited to express their condolences. Every guest brought food in case the household members could not cook. For 40 days, they recited the Quran at home and served food for the people visiting them. Each and every member among the community followed the religious rituals during the funeral. Although almost all of the practices had a religious basis, the elderly couple's practices were very much cultural, which did not have any religious support meaning reference to Quran.

Religion is one of the most important and common element among the other Meskhetian Turks around the world. They had to hide their religion during the former Soviet Union (Aydingün 2007). Even after the collapse of USSR, due to the discouraging policy toward religion, Meskhetian Turks did not gain religious freedom particularly in Russia. Even though living in the United States has granted them the freedom to practice their religion without any fear, the prejudice against Islam and Muslim people does affect the way in which they live and represent their religion in the United States. For example, Veli, a 60-year-old Meskhetian Turk man said in one of his conversations with me during the religious festival dinner, "Meskhetians, first they are Muslims."

Hayriye, Ilyas' wife, told me her stories of religious restrictions in Soviet Uzbekistan: *We were not allowed to fast during Ramadan. While we were going to school, if the teachers found out that we are fasting they used to force us to eat lunch. They did not believe Allah. Also, we were not allowed to celebrate the religious festival along with the other Muslims such as Uzbeks. Our grandparents used to pray in private homes with couple of people.*

She also told me her story about how they would hide under the sofa when there was a knock on the door. She recounted: *When a group of children including me were studying how to read the Quran, the Holy book of Islam, in one of the imam's house, we used to hide under the sofa if the door was knocked. Every time we used to be afraid of being persecuted due to us studying religion.*

The oppression due to their religion affects the degree to which Meskhetian Turks preserved their religion and values.

7. Conclusion

When Meskhetian Turks came to the United States, they were exposed to the other communities who shared similar ethnic backgrounds or the same religion, Islam. The rituals and some religious practices, however, were different, which can be explained by the concept of the little tradition. While families struggle with teaching their culture and norms to their children, they observe the inevitable and certainly much faster adaptation than they had expected their children go through with the help of their peers. Some of the Meskhetian Turk adolescents and children have American friends at school and they become under the influence of American culture consciously or unconsciously. Parents understand that following exactly the same norms and traditions by their children is not a reasonable expectation. Therefore, they feel compelled to prioritize the norms, rituals, and religious practices that they believe they must pass on to the next generation. At this juncture, they have an increased sense of both the great and little traditions because they start comparing their practices with other Muslim or Turkish communities. These differences in little traditions indeed help parents to be easy on their children and speed up the adaptation process.

Despite the recent erroneous associations of Islam with terrorism, the majority of my interviewees stated they feel respected and accepted within the American society. None of the interviewees reported any negative experiences or interactions. They only mentioned people's curiosity about their history and religion at their work, but they have never mentioned any negative treatment due to their religion. On the contrary, their newly gained freedom regarding religious practices and the usage of language provides a very positive perspective regarding acceptance of diversity in the United States. Their positive stance, I believe, is also because of their negative past experiences in the former Soviet Union and Russia because they always compare their lives in both nations. They appreciate the welcoming and respectful nature of Americans in Houston.

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