

Answer to the question, who are the Muslim Meskhetians, is as complex as their history. History has given different names to them ‘Muslim Meskhetians’, ‘Georgian Muslims’, ‘Meskhetians’, ‘Meskhetian Turks’, ‘Ahiska Turks’ or ‘people from Akhaltsikhe’. The titles to this ethnic group would change according to social and political context and geographical location.

When I asked the same question to a Muslim Meskhetians living here, the narration began: “First commotion started when The Samtskhe-Saatabago was annulled as a state, and they started spreading Islam.” This lasted a few centuries, and changes started with religion, identity, cultural values, and food ration. Christian holidays were replaced by Islamic holidays, funerals took place with mixed traditions, couples married with mixed traditions, which means Christian and Islamic traditions were on equal standing, last names started to change as well. One night, in 1944, their lives just ceased to exist and continued in Central Asia. “Adigeni residents were the first ones to be put on a train. When the door bolt shut the wagon, it became dark all of a sudden... We were moving slowly... We were on the road half a month” (Vachnadze, 2005:33-39), recalls Nazira Vachnadze in her autobiographical material, when she happened to be deported to Central Asia from South Georgia. During almost a month of traveling, thousands died in the cold, out of hunger, out of not having enough air and sanitary conditions, Escorting soldiers would throw their dead bodies directly out of a moving train.

From this day, resettled people are constantly bothered by the question, when will they return home? This memory is transferred from generation to generation; some of them after overcoming numerous barriers, manage to return thanks to their independent efforts. One of the Meskhetians Muslims who tells us about his experience recalls – “When are we going to go to Tbilisi, it feels like I forget all my problems in Tbilisi.” Returning here is connected to many difficulties apparently.

With this article, I will try to speak about the identity of Muslim Meskhetians and answer the following questions: who are the Muslim Meskhetians today? How did they preserve through generations the signifiers of identity and tradition of Muslim Meskhetians? How are Meskhetian identifications connected to different social and political contexts and factors?

My starting point

It is difficult to convey in a few pages the contemporary history of Muslim Meskhetians, their traumas, shame, and life on the edge of hope and expectations. Muslim Meskhetians often

feel oppressed and pressured for having preserved their cultural identity. In spite, they happened to have enough willpower to safeguard the identity, social values and traditions in such a hostile environment.

I started working on this topic in the Spring of 2021. Initially, I spoke to several Muslim Meskhetians living in Tbilisi; later, I met one of Meskhetian family living in Rustavi. Initially, the primary research focus was urban environments and everyday religiosity. Everyday religiosity is religion as expressed and experienced in the lives of individuals. The individual religious world is connected to faith, moral forms, and religious practices (McGuire, 2008:4). To study cultural, political, and economic changes caused by modernity, attention must be paid to places where people live, where cultures and religious identities meet (Ammerman, 2007:221).

We used the qualitative research method for data collection: 1) in-depth interviews, biographically narrated. The focus of the in-depth interviews was on respondents' lives and presentation and reflection of historical events with personal stories 2) desk research reviewed research and historical sources on this topic.

The historical context

Numerous academic types of research were published on Meskhetian throughout the years: about their tragic resettlement from Georgia to Central Asia, their emigrant and deported lives in a third country, rehabilitation and resettlement, and at last long-awaited repatriation home.

The term repatriation means a return of those persons to citizenship, permanent residence or the place of origin, who due to different circumstances, happened to live on a different country's territory. According to Georgian legislation, persons with the status of a repatriate can receive citizenship of Georgia with simplified procedures and be exempt from requirements set against other foreigners. Within two years after receiving the status, the person with repatriate status can address respective organs with a request about obtaining citizenship. And within five years after the conditional citizenship order is issued with simplified procedures, the person must relinquish the other country's citizenship.

Repatriate Meskhetians are called different titles: Meskhetian Turks Muslim Meskhetian 'Ahiska' Turks (Akhalsikhian Turks) (Trier, 2011:5). They used to live in a historical region of Meskheta located in the south-western part of Georgia and were split between Turkey and Georgia, the northern part of which belongs to Samtskhe-Javakheti administrative territories. Until the 18th century, most Meskhetians were Georgian, but in the 18th century, a lot of Turkish people moved to this region (Sanikidze, 2004 :16). As a result of the Russia-Ottoman War in 1828-1829, Armenians started to settle in this region, and by the end of 19th century, they became the biggest community in Meskheta (Sanikidze, 2004:16). Throughout a total of 500 years of Ottoman and Russian Empires, throughout Soviet Union

and Georgian Republic, Meskhetian community used to live in changing borders and civilizations (Trier 2011:5), which conditioned the assimilation and segregation of people living in this region. Throughout these historical changes, Meskhetian locals were both rejected and recognized in the volatile political and social environment. Ottoman Empire and Iran established a treaty in 1550, according to which Iran transferred Eastern Caucasus to the Ottomans. According to this treaty, the Samtskhe-Javakheti region fell under Ottomans rule (Modebadze, 2010:39). According to Ottoman tradition about land ownership, only militaries could own land (Modebadze, 2010:40). Georgian landlords had two choices – one was to convert to Islam, or serve in the Ottoman army and keep the property. The other was to give up the land and leave the country (Modebadze, 2010:40). To preserve power and wealth, the feudal family reigning in the region – Jakhels, converted to Islam. Successors of Beqa Jakheli almost invariably held the Pasha title, this means that up until 1829, when Akhaltsikhe principality was revoked, they were almost never replaced as rules (Sanikidze, 2004:16). Initially, it was mainly nobles who converted to Islam while peasants kept Christian faith (Modebadze, 2010:42). By the end of 18th century peasants took Islam too and majority of them were Muslims (Gozalishvili, 2005:63). In February of 1921, after Soviet rule was established in Georgia, government of that period announced Muslim Meskhetians as “Turkish national minority”, opened Azerbaijani schools for them, invited teachers from Azerbaijan and started teaching children in Azerbaijani language (Gozalishvili, 2005: 69). The forced assimilation of Meskhetians got to the point when these people were forbidden to keep Georgian last names, while according to Russian census, these people were registered as Georgian Sunnis (Modebadze, 2010:47). “Starting from 1936, our people were gradually discredited in front of the Soviet Union’s central rule” – tells Khalil Gozalishvili the recollections of an Adigeni region village Ude secondary school director Latipshah Baratashvili. In 1942-44 provocations hit their highest point (Gozalashvili, 2005:71). First, it was in a village of Mokhe, near it a, military provocation should have happened, and there was going to be an atmosphere of anti-Soviet protests created artificially, besides, a piece of information was spread as if ammunition and military warehouses of arms were discovered, hidden in a cave (Gozalashvili, 2005:72). Particularly these events could have become the primary reason to their deportation. On 15 November 1944, the history of Javakheti and Meskhetians changed dramatically.

Tens of thousands of people, were deemed as unreliable to the government, and got resettled to the Central Asian republics on the 15th of November, 1944 from the border territories of Georgia – Adigeni, Aspindza, Akhaltsikhe, formerly Bugdanov (now Ninotsminda) and the Adjara region (Janiashvili, 2006:39). With the letter N7895 sent on July 24, 1944, Lavrenti Beria was notifying Stalin, that for strengthening the state border defense he deemed it necessary to evict 16,700 families of Turks, Kurds and Khemshins from Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, Bogdaovk, Adigeni and Aspindza regions as well as from several Adjara region villages (Janiashvili, 2006:43). Eviction would not concern: a) Turkish, Kurdish and Khenshian women married to different nationals b) members of the family who at the

moment of eviction were not at home (due to work trips, vacations, absences due to personal matters, etc.) would be put on a special register and additionally re-assessed (Бугай 1994:12). By the onset of 1945 27,859 people were living in Kazakheti resettled from Georgia (Бараташвили,1988:48). In the process of operations, the distribution was as following: 55 500 people in live in the Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan, 29 500 people in Kazakstan, 11 000 in Kyrgystan (Gozalishvili,2005:82).

The first stage of resistance towards resettlement was in 1956-57 years, when they decided to accept the offer by the Azerbaijani government and resettle to the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. One part of the deported population settled on Mughani Valley, in Satla and Sabirabad region (Janiashvili, 2006: 46). It was first in 1968 and 1974 when by the order of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union they could return (Kamushadze, 2005:387). Later, on March 12, 1979 there was a meeting of signatories with Shevardnadze, who promised to fulfil their request and told them that there would be a decree of Party Central Committee and the Council of Minister's coming about receiving deported population back to Georgia. This document was published on 4th of April 1979 (Kamushadze, 2005:387). Almost every representative of Georgian scientific and creative intelligentsia was imploring Eduard Shevardnadze, at that time the Secretary of the Central Committee, to "restore justice for heavily affected Georgian part of the population" (Vachnadze, 2005:5). Eduard Shevardnadze satisfied this request. Throughout his governance period three hundred Muslim Meskhetian families were settled in Georgia. On July 24, 1988 Ministers' Council of the Soviet Republic of Georgia adopted a decree about the opportunities of resettling Meskhetian families from union republics to Georgia (Umarov-Gozalashvili, 2005:97), but as time passed, these decrees and orders would only stay on paper. These documents never gave Meskhetians the right to settle freely in Georgia. The government would do everything not to allow Meskhetians resettlement to Georgia. The Central Committee or Supreme Council of the Soviet Union would return the sole answer: "Georgia must decide this on its own", while Georgia would answer: "Georgia can't decide such issues, please address Moscow" (Umarov-Gozalashvili, 2005:98).

In June of 1989, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, on behalf of a political union called "Round Table – for the Freedom of Georgia", led by himself, wrote in the newspaper called Tbilisi that it was essential to return 300 000 deported Muslims to the homeland, but those who lost Georgian self-understanding and felt as Turks, must have become objects of educational work (Vachnadze, 2005:5). According to the handwritten letters published in Omaz Chkheidze's book, Zviad Gamsakhurdia expressed his solidarity towards Muslim Meskhetians and said – "I ask you, Comrad Kimeridze, to ensure the safety of 9 families of Meskhetian (not Meskhetian Turks) living in Khashuri region villages Tskhramukha and Tsromi. We know them, they returned their surnames and nationality in their passports, they have their kids in Georgian schools and currently, everyone will be baptized as Christians at a Khashuri church. This means, they won't have anything in common with Turks. Please also help others in these

villages restore nationalities and last names.” The letter is signed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava. It is dated by June 27, 1989 (Chkheidze, 2007:99). Soon after a tragedy that took place in Perghan Valley, when Muslim Meskhetians had to be deported the second time, the topic of a return to Georgia was reactivated. In this period, Zviad Gamsakhurdia radically changed his positions and his motto became: ”Even a single Turk is not allowed on Georgian Land”! (Vachnadze, 2005:5). Nazira Vachnadze, in her autobiographical piece, assumes that such a transformation happened with the influence of Georgian humanitarian intelligentsia returning from Soviet Union’s Popular Delegates’ Council meeting, who had met those deported Muslim Meskhetian representatives who perceived themselves as Turks and wouldn’t speak Georgian (Vachnadze, 2005:5). Zviad Gamsakhurdia wasn’t an exception, in the same period Akaki Bakradze was saying on TV – “If a single refugee Meskhetian steps a foot on Georgian soil, the history of Georgia will end” (Vachnadze, 2005:5). Next to such negative dispositions, Patriarch of Georgia, Ilia II announced: “Sooner or later, these people will return to us. We are obliged to take care of them” (Vachnadze, 2005:6). Whole lot of people shared Patriarch’s position and expressed their readiness to take care of them, but the influence of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Akaki Bakradze turned out to be stronger. An anti-Meskhetian hysteria started, as a result of which in 1989-1991, the supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia resettled two hundred families of already adapted Muslim Meskhetian again from Georgia (Vachnadze, 2005:6).

After the Gamsakhurdia government was overthrown, already in 1992, “the Deported Meskhetian Repatriation Commission” was established under the supervision of, at that time, the State Council (Kamushadze, 2005:388). At that time, the leader of the government was Eduard Shevardnadze, whose contribution was positively assessed throughout his career in the Soviet Union due to resolving the matter of settling Meskhetians in Nasakirak (Sverdlov, 2004:12). The interest towards repatriation of Meskhetians was also high internationally. In 1998, with the initiative of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees and OSCE, there were meetings organized in the Hague and Vienna about repatriating Meskhetians, which were attended by Meskhetian organizations of Georgia, Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Ukraine and by Meskhetians living in these countries. Nonetheless, the Georgian government, at that period, still decided to avoid taking action to start repatriation. By the end of 2001, an official number of repatriates was 644 persons. But, by the information of UNHCR¹, the UN agency, there was not a single Muslim Meskhetian who settled in Georgia from the end of 2000. The number of illegal returnees is unknown. This group has harrowing experiences in terms of residence permits and civil rights. After returning to the homeland, they mainly settled in Imereti, Guria and Tbilisi. It is known of only eight families settled in the native territories of Samtskhe-Javakheti (Pentikäinen, 2004:17).

¹ UNHCR Global Report 2001 – Georgia. <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/fundraising/3dafdc0/unhcr-global-report-2001-georgia.html> Accessed on December 24, 2022

On July 11, 2007 a law was adopted (N5361) for forcefully resettled persons and their successors in 1940s by Soviet Union, allowing victims to address the state and claim the status of repatriate according to required documents and subsequently become eligible for the simplified procedures to receive Georgian citizenship. March 2011 Decree N111 established an interagency state council whose liability is to coordinate the work of institution that are involved in regulating repatriation matters and to fulfill specific recommendations and initiatives on this matter. Another step was made towards fulfilling its obligations by Georgia when on September 12 of 2014 a “National Strategy on Repatriating Forcefully Resettled Population from Georgia by USSR in 1940s” was adopted, by which the state showed its vision of dignified and voluntary return of repatriates and of supporting their integration in society. According to the adopted strategy, Georgian state aimed to restore violated dignity of the population and aimed at relative remedy of ethnocide results, which, for repatriates, entailed: 1) granting Georgian citizenship, 2) restoring nationality and the family name, 3) granting economic benefits and ensuring social protection according to existing legislation 4) adaptation – providing support in the process of repatriation. This process must have continued gradually, taking into consideration the existing resettlement infrastructure. Nonetheless, for years, existing legislation stays inactive, and Muslim Meskhetians return to Georgia avoiding the law. The population that has, for years, lived in Georgia is also left without citizenship. Community members have, more than just once, addressed state organs and the President of Georgia, Salome Zourabishvili to resolve this problem. Besides restoring rights, they would request from the government to take respective measures when wrong terms were in use in official or non-official addresses such as “Turks”, “Tatars” and “Meskhetian Turks” They also need socio-economic and regional integration, which at the onset, entails improving the knowledge of the state language and support in education. Recently, it seemed one step was taken in this direction. According to one paragraph of the state decree N534 issued on August 7, 2020, five students that had claimed the status of a repatriate according to the Georgian law on Repatriating Forcefully Resettled Population from Soviet Republic of Georgia by former USSR in 1940s, could claim full scholarship to study at Georgian accredited higher education institutions. Equipped with this law, Omar Khozrevanidze, a student at the Ilia State University, more than once applied to the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia for the scholarship. Along with Khozrevanidze, several other student with Repatriated status have applied to the ministry, however, none of them were granted with a scholarship. In an official letter from the Minister of Education and Science, their application are being processed.

According to the documents available to me, according to the existing data, there are more than four hundred Muslim Meskhetians who have claimed the status of a repatriate. Some of them live in Georgia, and others traveled temporarily to different countries with the hope that they will be back soon with restored citizenships and provided living spaces.

Self-identification

When discussing self-identification, we mean the self-perception of Muslim Meskhetians who have returned to Georgia. This part of the article will try to answer the questions asked at the beginning: 1) who are the Muslim Meskhetians today? 2) how did they preserve throughout generations those values that make them Muslim Meskhetians? 3) how is Meskhetian's identity tied to socio-political challenges?

Muslim Meskhetians identify themselves with their own families, villages, and, possibly, regions. The religion of the majority of Meskhsians is Islam, which is based on a Hanafi ritual of the Suni faith. Therefore, Meskhetians who see themselves as religious follow several traditions and rules of religion, they refuse to eat pork and fast during religious celebrations. Meskhetian communities have respect for Mullah, a servant of the Muslim religious cult and traditionally invite him to circumcision and marriage ceremonies and funerals. Among the most important religious celebration a lot of the Meskhetians celebrate two main religious ones both of which are very important for the Islamic world: Eid Al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. Eid Al-Fitr follows the Ramadan month, the first day of the tenth month of the Islamic Moon Calendar. Fasting starts a month before the celebration. During fasting, those who fast abstain from eating and drinking until the sun and from sunset. During the Ramadan celebration festivity starts with a light dinner after the sunset, and it is called Iftar. After the dinner they read prayers and recall passed relatives. For Muslim Meskhetians, the second important celebration is Eid Al-Adha, and it is celebrated on the tenth day of Dul-Hija month of the Islamic Moon Calendar. On this day, Muslim Meskhetians, who can, sacrifice domestic animals, primarily sheep. They distribute the meat among neighbors, relatives and friends for everyone to celebrate in case they missed the possibility.

For contemporary sociological researches, it is essential to study the influence of religion on society, with a focus on either individual or collective actors. In this unitary actor's model, religion is a stable, wholistic feature of an individual or a collective (Lichterman, 2012:15). Religious expressions differ outside religious councils according to context. During the exile, the possibilities of religion, rituals and traditions were hindered by a system that denied freedom of religion, and by the system we mean the state censorship of religion. Family members and the elderly of the society had an important role in teaching Islam because they couldn't have forbidden maintaining religious authorities in the society (Dogan,2018:5). Some members of the Muslim Meskhetian community think they don't know Islamic theology well enough, and they live "cultural Islam" inherited by them. According to her theory of Redfield, world religion may be divided into "big" and "small" traditions. "Big" tradition is the orthodox form of the cultural and religious centers. While "small" traditions are the non-orthodox forms that unite local traditions and numerous elements of practice (Redfiels,1995:13-21).

Due to their immense desire to continue religious rituals, The Muslim Meskhetian community established ceremonies concerning worldly and after-life periods. The roots of

each of these cultural practices lay in Islamic doctrine, combined with Christian traditions. „We have our customs that other Muslims don't have, and we practice religion this way” – said one of the interviewee. This was caused by the fact that from the day of taking Islam, publicly expressed religion differed from personal religiosity. Due to impositions, they were Muslims during daylight and Christians at night. In modern Georgia, expressing their religion is not a problem to them, this is what they believe. If they desire, they can freely pray at a Mosque. Muslim Meskhetians mainly go to Tbilisi Juma Mosque for prayers. In view of the fact that there are not many mosques in Tbilisi, there is a certain level of embarrassment during prayers created by the plurality of people. “before praying, I often need to search for a free spot, and it is particularly hard to navigate this situation” – said Said, a Muslim Meskhetian one of the interviewee, currently living in Tbilisi. He believes there should be additional space, we do not need to call it a mosque, just a place for prayers. Additionally, some of the interviewees think that tolerance towards different confessions has changed in society. Nowadays, people's religious freedom is treated more positively and is respected. On the other hand, youth, in particular, underscore the barriers that religious and ethnic minorities face when looking for jobs at public institutions. They believe that barriers to reintegration in their home country are mainly connected to their religiosity since Islam is a minor religion in Georgia.

After Meskhetians converted to Islam, there were some misunderstandings connected to their ethnicity. If before, they used to be registered the following way: nationality – Georgian, religion – Muslim; later, this changed and it said only Muslim. Public organs of that time realized that ‘Muslim’ is not a nationality. To correct themselves and assign new nationality, they recorded everyone as Turkish, which was met with resistance from Meskhetians. Those who resisted were recorded as Azerbaijanis, those who agreed to be registered as Turks but not lose their Meskhetian roots, their names had one letter changed: resettled Turks were registered as “Turks” and Meskhetians with changed nationality were recorded as “Tyurks”. According to some researches about Muslim Meskhetians, The community worldwide identified themselves with different cultural senses. Their geographic positioning, as well as their social and economic conditions influenced on their cultural identity. To take the example of Muslim Meskhetians living in the USA, migrants learn Islam from pious Turks, but at the same time they distinguish themselves from others. On the weekends, they are going to the school of religious Turks, they receive and understand the “Great tradition”, nonetheless, when the American sociologist Hulya Dogan asked one Muslim Meskhetian woman participating in her research whether she desired to adopt the Islamic way of clothing, she said that no, “if I behave like that, I will resemble a Turkish girl, I am Meskhetian, and we don't cover our heads like the religious Turks do” (Dogan,2018:21). One of the interviewee's wife wears the headscarf only on special occasions: when they visit parents in Azerbaijan and when they visit uncles here in Tbilisi. Since deportation, they reconnected with themselves as Muslim Meskhetian and a conscious ethnic identity were formed.

Traditions, relatives, religion and any other ethnic characteristics gained bigger importance after deportation. They had to accept new citizenship, but this was an official dimension of becoming part of a particular society, and it almost did not influence their national identity.

The young generation that was born and grew up in such a country as Azerbaijan or Turkey, for example, have a similar sense of being relatives and connectedness with Meskhetians. Beka, another participant in the research, was born in Azerbaijan. He was 17 when he arrived in Tbilisi to study. His father always wanted the son to return to his home country and learn the language, the native language. After arriving in Tbilisi, he took a preparatory course at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, and then he got admitted to the same University at the BA level. His Azerbaijani friends chose to stay, they desired to spend their elderly years in Azerbaijan, because they had spent the most significant part of their lives there and might not have gotten jobs in Georgia or lost contact with other Meskhetians, as the majority of their relatives lived there, in Azerbaijan.

Returning to Georgia is related to new challenges for Muslim Meskhetians, to the provision of housing, income, education, health and safety. Children who were born in Georgia couldn't shed shyness and fear. Fear of being different. Attitudes in society often change from negative to positive and vice versa. Those living in Georgia who were not granted Georgian citizenship in Georgia, remain to be Azerbaijani citizens and constantly have to be crossing the border once every three months, which is associated with additional spending and worsens their social condition further.

Conclusion

Muslim Meskhetians were compelled to resettle not once. Due to constant deportations, official data has changed, was presented with mistakes or was lost in papers and from minds. We may encounter Muslim Meskhetians with different titles worldwide, and their current number is also unknown.

The matters of the identity of Muslim Meskhetians are interconnected, this connection with history created the necessity of creating a Meskhetian culture; the importance of preserving the culture conditioned the significance of the community. Teaching children the past and helping them understand it, is proof that history helps create a specific practices in the present. It is the interpretation of history that creates their Meskhetian identity and helps them in self-identification. Preserving the religion, the language, are all closely tied to family and family traditions. This bond is created by a transfer of cultural components to the following generations and with the necessity to preserve them. Identities can spread their traditions through traditions and values that are important to them. The interaction with research participants also proves that keeping this identity was the most important strategy against the injustice that they had to face and still face.

It's been a while since any solid steps have been made towards resolving problems that Meskhetians living in Georgia and the people with repatriate status face. Meskhetians Georgian by their nationality is called Turks, Azerbaijanis or Tatars. Those families who live in Georgia for more than seven years now, and are eligible for Georgian citizenship according to Georgian legislation and the law on repatriation, are still on a waiting list. Their demands for improving infrastructure in Meskhetian-populated villages, are promoting education and housing are still unmet.

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