

Meskhetian Turks  
Exploring Identity Through Connections of Culture  
by  
Hatice Nurhayat Bilge

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Benjamin Broome, Chair  
Jacqueline Martinez  
Eric Margolis

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## ABSTRACT

This project explores the cultural identity of a refugee group named Meskhetian Turks, an ethnic group forced to relocate multiple times in their long history. Driven from their original homeland and scattered around Central Asia and Eastern Europe for decades, approximately 15,000 Meskhetian Turks have been granted refugee status by the American government in recent years.

The focus of this study is a group of Meskhetian Turkish refugees in the Phoenix metropolitan area. This is a narrative study conducted through twelve open-ended in-depth interviews and researcher's observations within the community. The interview questions revolved around three aspects of Meskhetian cultural identity, which were represented in each research question. These aspects were: how Meskhetian Turks define their own culture; how they define their connection to Turkey and Turks; and how they define Americans, American culture and their place within the American society.

The first research question resulted in three themes: history, preservation of culture, and sense of community. The second research question revealed two themes: Meskhetian Turk's ties to Turkey, and the group's relationship with and perception of Turks in the area. The final research question provided two themes: the group's adaptation to United States, and interviewees' observations regarding the American culture.

Exploring these themes, and examining the connection between these aspects provided a complex and intertwined web of connections, which explain Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity. Meskhetian Turks' cultural self-definition,

relation with the Turkish community, and perceptions of American culture are all inter-connected, which supports and furthers a dialectic approach to cultural studies. The study also contributes to refugee adaptation literature by examining cultural identity influences on the group's adaptation in the United States and offering insight and suggestions for improving the adaptation process.

## DEDICATION

Annem için...

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

This dissertation project explores the cultural identity of a refugee group named Meskhetian Turks, a cultural group forced to relocate multiple times in their long history. Driven from their original homeland and scattered around Central Asia and Eastern Europe for decades, approximately 15,000 Meskhetian Turks have been granted refugee status by the American government in recent years. The focus of this study is a group of Meskhetian Turkish refugees in the Phoenix metropolitan area.

My research has three major purposes: understanding Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity, exploring Meskhetian Turks' connection to Turkish culture, and examining Meskhetian Turks' adaptation to life in the United States. Using narrative research, I tried to understand Meskhetian perceptions and experiences through field research in the local community. The study extends knowledge within the field of communication about cultural identity issues and adaptation of refugees. Before describing my statement of purpose for the study, the next section will provide a personal narrative of the encounters that served as my "starting point" for this research.

#### **My Starting Point**

"You have to come in! At least for a few minutes..." She was holding the door open with such a warm smile on her face that I couldn't say no. It was the end of a very long day. I was helping to host a Turkish writer, who was in town for a conference. That particular day we had visited several places, spending the

day meeting people and having long conversations. That evening I was exhausted, as was my guest, yet we couldn't say no to a dinner invitation at a Turkish family's house. I was supposed to drive her to the family's house, and leave her there, but I failed to take into account that the host family was Turkish, which meant a quick "nice to meet you, goodbye," was out of the question. Hospitality is one of the more prominent characteristics of Turkish culture, meaning visitors to one's home are always welcomed and invited to join whatever activity is happening at the time. So when I was at the door, the lady of the house insisted that I at least come in for a few minutes. The few minutes turned into an hour, and the hour turned into persistence that I stay for dinner. That's how it is... if you are Turkish, then your door, your table, and your home are all open to others. And when someone invites you with an open heart, refusal is impossible.

I was hoping to at least leave early. As much as I liked my hosts, the conversations and everything about the night, my eyes were about to close, and my head was getting heavy. When it was almost time for dinner and the table was set, I realized there were two extra settings on the table. When I inquired about them, my hostess informed me that two more guests were expected. "They are Meskhetian Turks" she said.

The day before was the first time I ever heard the word Meskhetian. I didn't know of a place called Meskhetia, and people called Meskhetian Turks. I couldn't even make an uneducated guess about where Meskhetia would be or why there was a distinct name for this group. Isn't a Turk, a Turk? I had first heard the name the previous day at a conference. Three women had brought home-made

Turkish delicacies for lunch at the conference. They looked like women from a small Turkish village. The older woman was wearing a loose and long pant-shirt duo that many villagers in Turkey wear. The two other women were much younger, and their clothing was more “modern,” yet still not “stylish.” The older woman and one of the younger women were wearing head scarves. These scarves were another indication they were probably from a rural area. In Turkey, traditionally women wear scarves to protect themselves from the sun and to hold their hair in place while working in the fields. In more fundamentalist Islam, the scarf takes on a religiously symbolic meaning and is called a “turban.” A woman wearing a turban is making a statement of her religious and political affiliations, while a woman wearing a scarf loosely, just to hold her hair with most of her hair visible and free, is an indicator of a more rural life.

It seemed strange to me to see the traditional, rural Turkish appearance in Phoenix. Turks in the United States tend to come here for either education or business purposes. They can be here temporarily or permanently, but in either case they tend to have greater financial resources. Villagers in Turkey are not as likely to have the financial resources required for visiting, studying, or working in the U.S. Even if they migrate from the village, they tend to relocate internally within Turkey. The exception is in several European countries, where there are many Turkish communities from more rural areas. These communities tended to migrate to Western Europe after World War II through a European guest worker program. In the United States, however, one needs more resources for migration, which decreases the likelihood of migration from rural communities.

Like everyone, I have assumptions and expectations that are derived from my cultural perceptions, and seeing traditional and rural Turkish appearance in Phoenix was unexpected. I couldn't quite make sense of the picture. While I stood there, looking quizzically, one of the event organizers came up to me. A few of us were helping out with the organization, and one of our duties was taking pictures throughout the day. She was asking me to take pictures, and her words confused me even more:

“Can you take a few pictures of the Meskhetian Turks?”

“The who?” I asked, looking around for the strangers called “Meskhetian Turks.”

She gestured toward the three women. I was even more confused. Is there a village called Meskhetia in Turkey? Even if there is, why call them with the village name? One can refer to the region they're from, or in fact more appropriately one would refer to the city governing the village. It would be the equivalent of referring to an American as Californian or San Franciscan. After I took the photos I accompanied the three women to their car to help bring in lunch trays they had brought.

We introduced ourselves. I still couldn't make sense of who they were. Trying to look all casual and relaxed, and as a result, awkward and perhaps a little uncomfortable, I asked:

“So where are you from?” I felt I was almost asking “why are you dressed this way? If you are dressed this way, why are you here?”

My approach wasn't necessarily judgmental. It was more a desire to make sense of a situation that seemed out of sync with my cultural understanding of the current context.

"We are from Russia" said the older woman, who turned out to be the mother-in-law of the two younger women. Even more confused, I wasn't even sure what to ask. Hence, I dropped the matter and was left with my questions.

The next day, I asked and found out about their story. The Meskhetian Turks are a group of people forced to leave their home. In other words, they are refugees, and coming to the U.S. was not entirely a choice they had made because of a desire to leave their own country. So the next night, when my hostess informed me that a Meskhetian Turkish couple was to join us for dinner, confusion mixed with curiosity rushed back in. I started to wait for them anxiously.

When the guests arrived, a middle-aged couple, I was pleased to find myself part of a familiar social process of greeting and interacting. The previous day, when I had learned that the Meskhetian Turks are from Russia, I had assumed they were not Turkish but rather a Turkic group, such as the Azeri or the Turkmens. However, I was surprised to see how similar their language is to the Turkish we speak in Turkey. With Azeri and Turkish, for instance, though both are Turkic languages, the variation is quite pronounced. The Azeri make an extra effort to use Turkish words while communicating with Turks. With Meskhetian Turks, this problem doesn't seem to exist. There are some differences in

expressions, but not enough to present a language barrier. I felt we were speaking the same language, literally and figuratively.

As we sat by the table, I observed them with increasing curiosity. The concept of refugees brings strong images to my mind. When I think of refugees, I think of people who lack sufficient food, clothes, home, etc. Refugee for me means refugee camps, where people are fighting for safety and security. Refugee brings images of open wounds that need to be tended. The couple sitting across from me didn't fit that description at all. The man was making jokes, and his wife was inviting me over to teach me a special dish. They were laughing and seemed to be quite joyful. They seemed both to be so full of life, and I couldn't help but be mesmerized with them.

This particular couple had moved to Phoenix, Arizona, from Russia. In their lifetimes, they had to leave their homes and relocate multiple times. They are starting over in a new country with new cultural understandings, language, and way of life. Their pasts are full of pain and violence. Their future is unknown. Their home, Meskhetia, is unreachable. Yet, they told stories and jokes, reflecting a wisdom gained from many harsh experiences. By now I had forgotten all about how tired I was or the miniscule problems occupying my mind. I was there, in the moment, with two incredible people. There was an instant connection between us. And it was exhilarating.

Later on when I talked to them at a different setting, they told their painful stories, voicing a wish that people should hear about them and what is happening to their people. At that point I understood that the wounds are still fresh, that the

picture I previously held, of people with physical needs and wounds, was part of their recent past. I wanted to believe that once the physical needs were met and they had homes, jobs, and safety, then their wounds would be healed. I realized they do have open wounds, and perhaps they always will. However, these are wounds of the soul, not visible to the outsider. Their lives are in limbo as they try to build a new life in the United States. Building a new life is not limited to settling down in a new place and learning to operate in a new culture – it also means redefining who you are.

My encounters with the Meskhetian Turks during these two days served as the starting point for my dissertation. As a result of my interactions with them, I realized that I want to focus my research on the topic of cultural identity negotiation, studying the Meskhetian Turkish refugees in Phoenix. I hope to understand more about the Meskhetian Turks and how they are rebuilding a sense of community in this desert city, so far removed from their homeland. I am interested in learning about this group's perceptions of themselves, what they consider to be American culture and their place in it. With this research, I hope to make a scholarly contribution to cultural identity theory while promoting a better understanding of the identity challenges faced by immigrant ethnic groups as they adapt to their new home.

### **Justification and Purpose of Study**

Meskhetian Turks are an ethnic group originally from Meskhetia, otherwise known as Meskheta, a region in Georgia. Their exact population is unknown. In the past century, Meskhetian Turks have endured two forced

relocations, severe discrimination, oppression, and violence. In 2004, with the help of international agencies, the United States government granted over 15,000 Meskhetian Turks refugee status (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007). Numbers have continued to grow, although very gradually. As the group becomes larger, their cultural presence in the United States will become more pronounced. In order, to facilitate their successful adjustment to life in their new home, it is important to understand Meskhetian Turks and their culture, particularly the cultural identity issues that they will face.

Cultural identity of a refugee group plays a key role on their adaptation process (Kim, 1988). For any refugee group, cultural identity is a complex issue, and Meskhetian Turks are no exception. It is problematic to produce a single definition of Meskhetian Turkish culture and identity (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007), partly because the group has been scattered around Eurasia and Central Asia since they were initially driven from their traditional homeland in 1944. New generations of Meskhetian Turks now exist within different countries and cultures, and within each different culture exists variations in cultural identity (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007).

Despite variations of identity, Meskhetian Turkish communities around the world share certain cultural characteristics that possibly bind them across time and space. First, Meskhetian Turks have in common a strong connection to Turkish language. Even though Meskhetian Turks have not traditionally lived in or had close association with modern Turkey, Turkish is still the primary language of the group (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). In my initial contact with



Meskhethian Turks, I was surprised at how easily I was able to communicate with them in my native tongue. Second, there are many common cultural components between Turkish culture and Meskhethian Turks. During the time I have spent in Meskhethian Turkish homes, at cultural festivals they attended, and with various individuals, I observed commonalities in dance, music, food and even traditional clothing. Third, religion is another important aspect of cultural identity that Meskhethian Turks share with Turks, as both groups are predominantly Muslims. This leads Meskhethian Turks to participate in religious celebrations and rituals organized by Turkish groups in the area. Additionally, Meskhethian Turks have regular social contact and frequent interaction with the Turkish communities in the Phoenix area. Their social ties to the Turkish groups may indicate a connection they feel or they desire to build with these groups.

Perhaps because they feel more at ease with Turks than with others in the Phoenix area, Meskhethian Turks engage in extensive interaction with Turks living in Phoenix. As a result of common language and certain cultural and religious ties, they choose to spend more time with Turks and have developed close ties to various segments of the Turkish community in Phoenix. Since the majority of Meskhethian Turks started learning English only after their arrival in the United States, they experience a language barrier in their interactions with most Americans. They possibly find it easier to communicate and socialize with those who share a common language and culture.

In spite of apparent connections between Meskhethian Turks and Turks, it is important to avoid making presumptions that they identify with being Turkish

or that Meskhetian Turks and Turks are similar in all respects. Research shows that Meskhetian Turks living in different parts of the world have different ways of identifying themselves. Some Meskhetian Turks, such as those in Azerbaijan, feel more connected to Turks (Yunusov, 2007), while others, such as those in Georgia, strongly deny a connection and draw attention to their dissimilarities with Turks (Sumbadze, 2007).

Hence, their interaction with Turks may be a result of easier communication, and shared religion and not necessarily a cultural identity connection. One needs to ask the question whether their interaction with Turks is a result of their cultural connection to Turks, or if it is simply embracing an opportunity to express their religion and culture freely. Perhaps building a connection with a more familiar group is a coping strategy for dealing with the cultural differences surrounding them in the United States, and thus it serves as a tool assisting them in their adaptation to a new culture.

The relationship between Meskhetian Turks and Turks and the link between their cultural identities is a central concern of this study. As discussed above, my own observations regarding Meskhetian Turks and their interaction with the Turks led me to believe there is a need to explore this relationship. I believe understanding this relationship helps better understand Meskhetian Turks and their cultural identity.

Supporting the need for this study is the lack of research on Meskhetian Turks in the United States. Only one study, conducted when the group first arrived, has been reported, and it raises more questions than it answers

(Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007). Thus, more research is needed to understand the cultural identity of Meskhetian Turks in the United States, and my research on the Meskhetian Turkish community in Phoenix helps expand our knowledge about this cultural group.

Beyond understanding better the Meskhetian Turkish refugee group, my goal is to contribute to the field of communication by extending knowledge on cultural identity issues. Meskhetian Turks are one of many ethnic groups who have refugee status in various cultures around the world (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). While the focus of this research is the Meskhetian Turkish refugee community, my hope is that by exploring their cultural identity and how they perceive themselves, I am able to enrich our theoretical understanding of cultural identity and identity issues.

### **Summary of Chapters**

The chapters in this dissertation present an explanation of the study, review previous research, explain the research design, reveal answers to interview questions, explore an interpretation of the answers and finally offer a discussion regarding the study. Chapter I describes my personal entry into this research and provides a general overview of the Meskhetian Turks' situation. In this section I explain the justification and purpose of the study. Chapter II has three sections. The first section is an examination of literature regarding Meskhetian Turks and their history. This section provides the reader with a historical context for this ethnic group as well as the need for further examination of their culture. The second section of the chapter explores theoretical foundations of the research by

examining the concept of culture and offering a literature review of cultural identity theory. The last section of this chapter proposes research questions that will be examined in the study. Chapter III presents the research methods. This section explains the methods of the study, research process, and procedures. Chapter IV examines the interviews I conducted through themes, which emerged through interviewees' answers. Interpretation of interview themes in regards to their respective research questions, as well as the connection between research questions are explored in Chapter V. Finally, Chapter VI is a discussion regarding the study. In this chapter, I explore the implications and challenges of this research and share suggestions for future studies.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Historical Context**

Meskhethian Turks are an ethnic group from the region of Meskhethia in the Caucasus region of Eurasia. Throughout history, this area has changed hands between the Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). After Georgia regained independence in 1991, the region became a part of the newly formed country of Georgia.

Meskhethian Turks have lived in the region for centuries. They are ethnically different from Georgians. The greatest difference is religion. Meskhethian Turks are Muslims. Thus, they are sometimes referred to as Muslim Georgians. However, there is a distinction between Georgians who are Muslims and Meskhethian Turks (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). As implied in their name, the group embraces components of Turkish culture, most notably the Turkish language. Although new generations were born and lived in various locations amid different cultures, they still speak Turkish. It is the language used among group members and within families (Aydingün, 2007).

Meskhethian Turks have a history of oppression, segregation and displacement. Two major events in the Meskhethian Turkish history shaped their ethnic fate and resulted in their situation today: the exile of 1944, which resulted in displacement of all Meskhethian Turks, and the Fergana events of 1989, which affected primarily those Meskhethian Turks who had been relocated to Uzbekistan. Although the latter may have not affected every Meskhethian Turk directly, the

repercussions impacted them all. These events are described in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

Despite cultural differences with Georgians and their minority status within the dominant Georgian culture, Meskhetian Turks lived peacefully in their homeland of Georgia until 1944 (Sumbadze, 2007). In the heat of World War II, Russian leader Joseph Stalin issued an order for certain groups to be relocated within the Soviet Union (Sumbadze, 2007). Although Meskhetian Turks were the largest ethnic group affected by this order, there were several other groups deported from “Meskheta and from neighboring region of Ajara” (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007, xxi). These groups included Hemshins, ethnic Armenians who are Muslims; Terekeme, a Turkish-speaking group, who resettled in the area in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; and Kurds, who arrived from Turkey while the region was under Ottoman rule (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007).

In fact, between the 1920s and 1953 (when Stalin died), around six million people were displaced. Throughout the USSR people were forced to relocate within the country's borders to various parts of Central Asia, Siberia and Far East. Some groups, such as Volga Germans, were deported from the country. According to Trier & Khanzhin (2007), these groups were subjected to violence and deportation as a collective punishment with the reason of “collaborationism or treason” solely “because of ties these groups had with ethnic kin in neighboring countries with which the Soviet Union was fighting or planned to wage war against” (p. 1). Turkey never entered World War II, but historical events between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, followed by Turkey’s opposition to

Communism, led Stalin to fear collaboration between Turkey and Muslim or ethnically Turkish groups within the USSR.

As a result, Meskhetian Turks were forced out of their homes and their land to be relocated to various areas within the USSR. The exile took place between 14 and 18 November 1944. Their involuntary journey took about 18 days from Georgia to Central Asia. During relocation thousands went missing (Sumbadze, 2007; Trier & Khanzhin, 2007; Veyseloglu, 1999). Once they arrived in their destinations, deportees were given restrictions that limited them to certain areas. They were confined to live within these zones, called “special settlements” (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007, p. 3), and could not leave the zones without permission from local authorities. Non-compliance was to be punished with 15-20 years of forced labor in a Gulag camp (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007).

In 1956, three years after Stalin’s death, certain restrictions were lifted. Some groups, such as Karachai, Kalmyks, Balkars, Chechens and Ingushs were permitted to return to their homelands. Meskhetian Turks, along with Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars and other smaller groups were freed from restrictions, yet they were not permitted to return to their homelands.

After 1956 Meskhetian Turks moved around the USSR. Some Meskhetian Turks holding Azerbaijani passports moved to Azerbaijan, those who had the means moved to Turkey, others to various areas such as Kirgizstan, Kazakhstan, and a vast number to Uzbekistan. In the decades following 1956, Meskhetian Turks endured discrimination and “repeated displacement” (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007, p. 4). Nearing the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly established ideal

of nationalism in the Soviet states caused ethnic tensions, fueled by immense poverty and lack of resources. Tensions led to segregation and, at times, even violence. The event that had the greatest impact on Meskhetian Turks, in terms of violence and segregation, took place in 1989. These events are known as Fergana events or Fergana Pogrom.

According to Chikadze (2007) the events started on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1989, in Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan. A group of young Uzbeks gathered in Tashlak near Fergana, where “the most aggressive among them rushed to a building where Turks lived and began to set fire to Turkish houses and beat the owners” (Chikadze, 2007, p. 118). The first killing took place on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, and continued afterwards. The media reported the events as a large scale disturbance in the region on June 6<sup>th</sup> without mentioning the violence that the minorities endured. On June 7<sup>th</sup> the events took a turn for the worse. A part of the valley where about 1500 Turks lived became the center of the events. Turks who were trying to flee the region were stopped by militia posts and were subjected to violence. Riots in the region continued until June 11<sup>th</sup>, when the Soviet Army gained control of the situation (Chikadze, 2007).

After the army gained control, Turks were gathered at a military training ground near Fergana. Between June 9<sup>th</sup> and June 18<sup>th</sup> Turks were evacuated by air to Russia. During the evacuations a total of 16,282 Turks were relocated (Chikadze, 2007). Turks residing in other regions of Uzbekistan followed and “by September, more than 50,000 Turks had left Uzbekistan” (Chikadze, 2007, p. 118). According to Chikadze (2007), Meskhetian Turks left the region because of



fear that these events could repeat. Hence, for the second time in their history, Meskhetian Turks were forced out and displaced.

The evacuation from Uzbekistan took the group to the Krasnodar Krai region in the southeastern part of Russia, bordering Ukraine and the Black Sea. Their situation in Krasnodar Krai is the reason why some Meskhetian Turks eventually moved to United States. After the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, local government in Krasnodar voided Meskhetian Turks' citizenship rights. Although Meskhetian Turks were Soviet Union citizens, Krasnodar government refuses the group citizenship to this day. Since, Uzbekistan gained independence as a result of USSR's collapse, Krasnodar officials claim Meskhetian Turks should be Uzbeks, not Russian nationals. The legal system refuses to provide any rights or benefits to the group (Kuznetsov, 2007). Legally, they have no status. For the people of Krasnodar Krai they are considered “illegal immigrants” (Kuznetsov, 2007, p. 227).

Because Meskhetian Turks settled in the area in 1989, they are not considered locals. Rather, they are viewed as “stateless persons” who are in the region on a “temporary stay” (Kuznetsov, 2007, p. 227). According to Kuznetsov (2007), Meskhetian Turks endure frequent harassment from authorities by means of a “regular passport control raid,” and “penal sanctions applied to those arrested often verge on blackmail” (p. 226). Furthermore, they are “still not accepted for work by local businesses and organizations, do not receive pensions and other social benefits, higher education is practically out of their reach, and free medical services are not available to them” (Kuznetsov, 2007, p. 227).

As their situation in Krasnodar Krai became more severe, diplomatic talks regarding Meskhetian Turks' desire to go back to their homeland reemerged. Since 1956, several diplomatic and official representatives petitioned Russian and Georgian governments for Meskhetian Turks' return to their homeland. After several attempts at a resolution, as a result of rigorous efforts, 250 Meskhetian families were allowed to go back in 1969. Afterwards, the Georgian government refused to let any other Meskhetian Turk's return.

In the recent years, on-going negotiations between the Georgian government and the Council of Europe led the issue to resurface. As a condition of Council of Europe membership, Georgia agreed to a 12-year framework to let the Meskhetian Turks return home. However, there is one condition that Georgia is demanding: in order for Meskhetian Turks to immigrate to Georgia, they have to take on Georgian names and assume Georgian identity. Because Meskhetian Turks cannot accept these conditions, they are once again left without any hope of going back home (Izzetoglu, 1997).

Their situation in Krasnodar Krai evoked the protests of international organizations and various governments. Ultimately, these responses, facilitated by non-governmental organizations, led the U. S. State Department to take action and grant a refugee status to Meskhetian Turks. The United States grants refugee status to thousands of people every year as a result of "special humanitarian concerns" (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007). The main reasons for the U.S. government's decision to take action were the statelessness and discrimination

Meskhetian Turks face in Krasnodar Krai as well as Georgia's unwillingness to let the group relocate to their original homeland in Meskheta.

Various researchers and Meskhetian Turks who have written on the issue claim that returning to Meskheta and reclaiming their homeland is a collective desire for Meskhetian Turks (Aydınün, 1998; Aydınün, 2007; Aydınün, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov, & Swerdlow, 2006; Izzetoglu, 1997; Mert, 2004; Pentikäinen and Trier, 2004; Sezgin & Ağacan, 2003; Sumbadze, 2007; Veyseloglu, 1999). Sumbadze (2007) states that although in the last 64 years Meskhetian Turks have endured injustice and displacement, resulting in great losses of family, kin, home and freedom, "what they have not lost during this long period of time is the hope for justice and a return to their motherland. They have preserved their own patterns of communal relations, traditions, and images of the past" (Sumbadze, 2007, p. 288).

Sumbadze's suggestion that the idea of their homeland and hope of return may very well be a strong component that brings the group together and reinforces their identity, or in other words, their sense of self as a group. On the other hand, care should be taken in making this assumption, especially for those who have moved to United States. Meskhetian Turks, who are still in Eurasia or the surrounding area, may have a different perspective than those who moved to the United States. Now they are far away from their homeland, and they are in the United States with refugee status, providing them with certain rights and benefits they lacked for decades.

Perhaps some Meskhetian Turks see United States as their final destination. Still, if the idea of homeland is as strong as the literature suggests, hope of reclaiming it may yet be very much alive, at least for the older generation. The strength of conviction may be much less apparent for younger generations, especially those who are coming of age in the United States. Either assumption needs to be tested, which is one task of this study.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### *Culture*

Theories of cultural identity, ethnic identity and identity issues in relation to forced migration comprise the theoretical foundation of this research. Researchers generate and utilize these theories from various scholarly standpoints (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). At the core of all these theories is the concept of culture. Thus, before examining these theories, I will first explore the concept of culture and explain how I utilize this concept for my research.

It is problematic to try presenting a universally accepted definition and understanding of the concept of culture: “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams, 1983a, p. 87). The meaning of culture has altered and evolved through history changing its academic and everyday use (Williams, 1983b). For scholars, the perception and definition of culture varies for different academic communities (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2007) and methodological approaches (Martin & Nakayama, 1999).

Culture once meant cultivation or tending of crops and animals (Williams, 1983a). After the industrial revolution culture became synonymous with art and

appreciation of art (Williams, 1983b). The reason for this shift in meaning was the altered understanding of intellectualism. When intellectualism became a commodity after the industrial revolution, culture's meaning changed (Williams, 1983b) from agriculture to art and education. Williams (1983b) relates this shift to the changing definition of art and the artist. Artist, according to Williams (1983b), meant one who created art, including artisans. After Industrial Revolution an intellectual component was attributed to art and the artist, resulting in art becoming a commodity. Finally, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, culture's meaning shifted once again and it signified "a way of life" (Williams, 1983b).

The shift to seeing culture as a way of life is a result of change in society and social conditions, which led to questions of society, after which culture emerged as a social idea (Williams, 1983b). Seeing culture as a way of life comes from seeing society as being "composed of very much more than economic relationships" (Williams, 1983b, p. 83). Williams links this idea to a developing social consciousness, which leads to understanding society as a complex system that goes beyond economical balances. "Culture, then, is both study and pursuit. It is not merely the development of 'literary culture', but of 'all sides of our humanity'. Nor is it an activity concerning individuals alone, or some part or section of society; it is, and must be, essentially general" (Williams, 1983b, p. 115).

The academic definition of culture is derived from the understanding that culture is a way of life. As mentioned before, this general understanding differs in its embodiment for various academic and methodological orientations (Martin &

Nakayama, 1999). As a result, “various metatheoretical assumptions of culture and communication research” (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 2) focus on different qualities of culture. For some researchers culture is quantifiable (Ting-Toomey, 1984; Kim, 1988), while others see culture as a qualitative notion (Geertz, 1973). Culture can be viewed as a social structure as derived from works of Comte or Durkheim (Martin & Nakayama, 1999), or as an embodiment of social power relations (Foucault, 1978), or as a subjective interpretation that needs to be understood rather than analyzed (Collier, 1988, 1998; Martin & Nakayama, 1999).

Despite the variety of standpoints, there are certain commonalities which represent at least an understanding of culture for communication scholars. For the communication discipline culture is a learned process that is continually changing (Sarbaugh, 1988). People learn behavior, beliefs, values, ideas, and how to make sense of the world through socialization, which results in the survival of cultural characteristics. Hence, a common culture points to an integrated system based on symbols (Samovar et al., 2007, Carbaugh, 1990). Culture is “learned patterns of perception, values, and behaviors” (Martin & Nakayama, 2008, p. 27), in other words, culture is a collection of “values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society” (Harrison and Huntington, 2000, xv. as quoted in Samovar et al., 2007). Society creates culture through “shared background characteristics such as histories, institutions, core values, beliefs, attitudes or world views, heritage and traditions, technologies, as

well as shared behavioral characteristics, such as verbal and nonverbal styles” (Collier and Thomas, 1988, p. 102).

Shared values, beliefs, religion, language, and many other elements comprise a culture. The communicated process of culture connects people through these elements (Samovar, et al. 2007) and acts as a unifier as it “forges a group’s identity and assists in its survival” (Orbe & Harris, 2001, p.6). Cultures communicate these elements through traditions, habits, rituals, practices, and artifacts (Fong, 2004). These components symbolize a specific culture, and its unique identity. Since each culture creates its unique identity, by nature culture is subjective (Samovar, 2007).

Communication is the key for the process of culture. It is through communication that people learn and understand culture (Samovar et al., 2007). Furthermore, people communicate their cultures and cultural identities by performing them through their interactions (Collier & Thomas, 1988). Applegate and Sypher (1988) argue that people are “active interpreters” (p. 42) of their social environments. According to the authors, both theory and practice of scholars should, therefore, focus on the social construction of people that lead to their particular interpretation of the world. Understanding their world can only be done by understanding the culture from which the social constructs emerge, since “culture precedes and profoundly influences our conscious understanding” (Martinez, 2006, p. 298).

“The concept of culture I espouse... is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the

analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.”

(Geertz, 1973, p. 5)

My standpoint, for this particular research, is an interpretive approach.

Interpretive research aims to understand culture, “rather than predict human behavior” (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). As Martin and Nakayama (1999) articulate, culture “in the interpretive paradigm, is generally seen as socially constructed and emergent, rather than defined a priori” (p. 6). Communication is “a complex and multidimensional process” (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 2003, p. 27). Communication and culture mutually influence each other in such a way that, “culture may influence communication but it is also constructed and enacted through communication” (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 6). In order to understand the complex relationship between culture and communication, I use an interpretive approach or a “cultural perspective” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 27). This approach helps me and my reader to understand the “creation and enactment of identity” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 27) through communication, which “provides a unique focus by emphasizing the points of interaction through which culture is created and confirmed” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 28).

Thus, my understanding of culture in this research is that it is “historically and socially emergent” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 28), and “as human beings, we are situated within culture, history, and the discourses produced therein” (Martinez, 2003, p. 119). Subsequently, in order to explore a specific culture and its identity, I believe I need to understand the complexities of its past and present as well as



how its members perceive themselves (Martinez, 2000; 2003). After all, “culture is a system of interdependent patterns of conduct and interpretations, and perceptions provide a rich source of interpretive data (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 27).

“The idea of culture describes our common inquiry, but our conclusions are diverse, as our starting points were diverse. The word, culture, cannot automatically pressed into service as any kind of social or personal directive. Its emergence, in its modern meanings, marks the effort at total qualitative assessment, but what it indicates is a process, not a conclusion” (Williams, 1983b, p. 295).

In this section I discussed the meaning of culture and my standpoint.

Culture, as explained here, is a complex concept, which can be an indicator of various social identities such as nation, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality (Alcoff, 2006). Next I will explore the concept of cultural identity, explain ethnicity and examine identity issues specifically for refugees.

### *Cultural Identity*

“At any moment, identity is what it was, currently is, and is becoming, and exists on individual, social, and societal levels across time and space.”

Hecht et al., 2003, p. 41.

Culture, as discussed in the previous section, is a constantly changing process. Consequently identity of a culture is similarly dynamic and ever-changing. Social identities, as Alcoff (2006) states, are fluid and embedded within a social context. Hence, a culture’s identity, and even perhaps the way we define identity, is fluid. Hecht, Collier & Ribeau (2003) argue “culture emerges in social interaction” (p. 29) and “persons co-create and maintain culture as a function of identity” (p. 30). In this section, I will explore explanations of cultural identity

various theorists propose. I will talk about components of cultural identity, focusing particularly on language, history, religion, artifacts and symbols, as these concepts are essential for this research in determining the particulars of Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity. Next, I will focus on ethnicity as a cultural identity. Finally, I will examine cultural identity in relation to refugees and displaced communities.

Each culture has a unique composition. Many different norms, values, beliefs, traditions, understandings, habits, historical perspectives and social dynamics combine to create the composition of a culture (Parisi, Cecconi, & Natale, 2003). Members of a culture may not practice, internalize or take part in all the aspects of a cultural composition, yet, overall there is an understanding, an outlook on life and a sense of self that is shared by the members of a society. This overall understanding is called cultural identity. Cultural identity is the character of a society that makes a culture unique, it is the “perceived membership of a culture” (Hecht et al., 2003, p.41).

As “the emotional significance that we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with the larger culture” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p.30), cultural identity gives a direction to the sense-making process (Hecht et al., 2003; Rousseau, 2002). There is a universal human need to belong to a culture (Bromwich, 1995). “To belong, that is, to a self-conscious group with a known history, a group that by preserving and transmitting its customs, memories, and common practices confers the primary pigment of individual identity on the persons it comprehends” (Bromwich, p. 89).

Each tradition, ritual, and symbol is a representation of a culture's identity and is a way through which a culture communicates its identity (Fong, 2004). Subsequently, one cannot separate communication from the emergence and continuation of a culture's identity. These identities are shared and passed from one generation to the next through communication; written and oral stories, histories, continuous traditions, rituals, and usage of symbols are the tools for this purpose (Kim, 1988). Furthermore, through communication within members of the group as well as communication with other cultures, these identities are shaped, influenced and redefined through time (Kim, 1988). Identities exist within a context of time and place (Alcoff, 2006; Katriel, 1995; Martinez, 2003; Hecht et al., 2003). Communication with different cultures, exposure to other beliefs, traditions, habits, values and such provide an opportunity for cultural identities to alter (Orbe & Harris, 2001).

Cultural identity, then, is how people define themselves as a part of a culture. It is "the identification of communications of a shared system of symbolic verbal and nonverbal behavior that are meaningful to group members who have a sense of belonging and who share traditions, heritage, language, and similar norms of appropriate behavior" (Fong, 2007, p. 6). In short, shared use and understanding of language, religion, values, lifestyles, habits, rituals, traditions, artifacts and such are the verbal and nonverbal representations of culture, which indicate a unique cultural identity (Chuang, 2004; Fong, 2004; Kim, 1988; Ting-Toomey, 1999). People perceive themselves as belonging to their cultures "as a means of making sense of who they are" (Hecht et al., p. 30). For each individual

there may be multiple identities (Hecht et al., 2003; Martinez, 2003), “in a continuous state of enactment and change” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 41). People decide how they “want to be treated by others,” whom they want to “interact with,” and how they “will treat others” (Hecht et al., p. 30) by understanding their identities. Through this process of identity negotiation, as Hecht and colleagues argue, “the creation and maintenance of culture interacts with the establishment and expression of cultural identity” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 30).

Cultural identity is the product of the collective, however, this does not mean that every member will follow or internalize each and every aspect of a culture’s identity. Still, what makes cultural identity a collective product is the understanding of its components by the members (Kim, 1988). Some people may not subscribe to certain beliefs or traditions. However, they understand the meaning attributed to its components, as well as their significance to the group. This common thread of understanding is what ties a group together and creates a unique identity (Fong, 2004).

Pragmatically, concepts such as language, religion, traditions or artifacts are tools that a group uses to sustain a common life. However, their significance surpasses their practical or pragmatic use. There is a shared meaning attributed to each ritual, artifact, language use, or tradition (Chuang, 2004; Fong, 2004; Kim, 1988). “Identities ...move in and through time and space and are composed of diverse elements, such as geography, politics, economics, sociology, psychology, and history” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 41). According to Samovar et al. (2007), history, religion, social organizations (social structures) and language are the

fundamental elements that “mark a collection of people as a culture” (Samovar et al., 2007, p. 18).

Among many elements of cultural identity, language, history, and religion are significant as they directly influence many other components, such as rituals, traditions, social structures, and values (Alcoff, 2006; Fong, 2004; Samovar et al., 2007). Subsequently, artifacts and symbols are essential, as they are representations or signifiers of all aspects of a culture’s identity. Therefore, I will explore these essential components in further detail.

Language is a direct representation of culture (Samovar et al., 2007). Language is what connects members of a culture together, in the sense that through language cultural identities are created, communicated and maintained (Fong, 2004). Shared language is the initial unifier in a culture. Language is the “basic tool by which humans make society function” (Samovar et al., 2007, p. 166). Yet, it is more than a tool that a culture’s members use to communicate (Samovar et al., 2007), it “shapes cultural perceptions and attitudes” (Steinberg, 2001, p. 46).

Samovar et al. (2007) argue that language is the “primary means of preserving culture and is the medium of transmitting culture to new generations,” furthermore, language establishes and preserves a community by “linking individuals into communities of shared identity” (Samovar et al., 2007, p. 166). Language “can help solidify cultural identity” (Chuang, 2004, p. 56). It can be used to “differentiate the in-group and out-group members” (Chuang, 2004, p.

56), because cultures establish boundaries through shared meaning of linguistic tools (Samovar et al., 2007).

Language helps cultures sustain and transmit histories, traditions, rituals, values and other cultural elements that comprise their identities (Samovar et al., 2007). History is an important element because “all cultures seem to believe in the idea that history is a kind of chart that guides its members into the future” (Samovar et al., 2007, p. 18). Romanucci-Ross (2006) argues histories are the fundamental unifiers for cultures and that “events remembered are the first reality of an identity as a group that has a common experiential past” (Romanucci-Ross, 2006, p. 52). Samovar et al. (2007) state that the study of intercultural communication and history cannot be separated as history itself and its interpretation define a group as a culture.

Interpretation is a key element in these statements. Groups interpret and internalize histories or past events. One can gain an insight to a group’s cultural identity through the historical events that are deemed significant, the interpretation of events and the way the past impacts the present (Samovar et al., 2007 & Romanucci-Ross et al., 2006). Groups create a self-identification through history, to which they own up (Waters, 1990). Martinez (2000) argues “the cultural body, like the lived body of the person, embodies the terms of its very existence” (p. 11). Painful pasts, such as Meskhetian Turks, leave people with wounds that are passed from one generation to another. As Broome (2004) says “war injures people, and it leaves scars” (p. 290). History is not the past, but a way for cultures to construct a reality in the present. As Martinez (2000) states,

the past lives in a culture's "consciousness" and it is reflected as "concrete practices of the present" (p. 65).

History helps shape a culture's self-identification (Waters, 1990). This self-identification emerges from a culture's interpretation of the world, in other words, their worldview (Samovar et al., 2007). Religion has perhaps the strongest impact on cultures' worldviews (Samovar et al., 2007). Religion offers people a way to live their lives as well as a way to interpret the world. Religion involves "both theology and everyday experiences" (Samovar et al., 2007, p. 77). When people are united under the same beliefs and values of a certain religion, they gain a sense of self and an identity (De Voss, 2006).

History tells people of the past and religion guides them for future (damnation versus salvation, afterlife...etc) (De Voss, 2006). Meanwhile, they both guide and shape the present. History and religion influence rituals, traditions, norms, values, and lifestyles of cultures (Samovar et al., 2007). In short, they form the characteristics of cultures.

Artifacts or symbols are representations of a culture's characteristics. Samovar et al. (2007) claim culture is based on symbols, which they transmit to other cultures and future generations. According to the authors, any tangible product of a culture is a representation of its identity. These symbols can be found in a culture's products such as books, newspapers, media, icons, religious writings, clothes, flags, and various cultural relics. Symbols "acquire meaning through shared cultural convention" (Westerfelhaus, 2004, p. 106). These symbols may be common in several cultures, yet they may have different

significance for each culture because members of each culture interpret and assign meaning to symbols from their culture-specific perspective or worldview.

Cultural identity is a product of culture, which possesses components such as history, language, religion and symbols. Subsequently, culture constantly redefines and reproduces these components (Hecht et al., 2003). Culture and cultural identity emerge through time and space, through generations and social interactions (Hecht et al., 2003), “this means that culture is an historically transmitted system of symbols, meanings, and norms” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 29). Culture is a dynamic process that is constantly changing and to understand its identity, one needs to explore its components from the unique cultural perspective in which they reside. “Understanding culture is an interpretive process” (Hecht et al., p. 45) that provides a cultural perspective, which “examines the structures and processes that emerge and change over time and are handed down to new members” (Hecht et al., 2003 p. 29).

#### *Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity*

Cultural identity is “employed broadly to include related concepts such as subcultural, national, ethnolinguistic, and racial identity” (Kim, 2007). In other words, cultural identity signifies various elements such as nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion. Although these elements intersect and influence each other, each is unique and need to be differentiated from one another. In this section, I will focus on ethnicity as a cultural identity.

Concepts of culture, nationality, and ethnicity are all intertwined. Each nation has a culture, though it may be comprised of different cultures within its



borders. Cultures can include different ethnic groups, yet each ethnic group has a particular culture. Ethnic identity is different than racial identity, though the two have many commonalities. Ethnicity is cultural and includes many socially constructed elements (Orbe & Harris, 2001) such as race, history, geography, and social context (such as religion).

Ethnicity is a complex term as the meaning of it is created differently by each group (De Vos, 2006; Waters, 1990). Sometimes territories determine the boundaries of an ethnic group, other times nations, religion, or race. Each group's definition of ethnicity determines their identification of their own ethnic identity and consequently the determination of who belongs to that specific group. In short, how a group defines ethnicity determines how they define who they are as a group (De Vos, 2006).

Ethnicity, as any aspect of culture, is “subjective, symbolic” and “emblematic” (De Vos, 2006, p. 11). The ethnic identity of a group is “perceived separate origin and continuity, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups” (De Vos, 2006, p. 11). Certain cultural practices such as language, food, ceremonies, religion, weddings and funerals, clothing, and holidays (De Vos, 2006; Waters, 1990) are representations of the meaning of ethnicity and ethnic identity for each group. Belonging to an ethnic group is similar to belonging to a family (Romanucci-Ross, 2006), there is a common feeling of kinship, strong ties and loyalty (De Vos, 2006; Romanucci-Ross, 2006; Volkan, 1999; Waters, 1990) and the boundaries of it changes through space and time (Romanucci-Ross, 2006).

Certain commonalities and cultural elements signify an ethnic group's identity, yet initial generation of an ethnic identity usually comes from the need to establish ethnic boundaries, usually as a result of common "historical events," "political struggles," or simply a "common fate" (Fong, 2007, p. 44). De Vos and Romanucci-Ross (2006) indicate "ethnic identity is related basically to pride in a positive way, or to shame and degradation in a negative way" (p. 396), each group's identity is based on dignity and humanity in relation to other groups or what the group endured historically. Similarly Volkan (1999) explains that ethnic identity takes precedence and becomes significant when there is a common threat to the identity of a particular ethnic group. Throughout history there are many examples of ethnic identities emerging as a result of a common threat (Gilliland, 2006; Volkan, 1999), mostly in conflict areas such as former Soviet Union, Sudan, and Rwanda. In the former Yugoslavia, for instance, national identity had precedence over ethnic identities and only as a result of a war and dissolution of the country, ethnic identities of Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia and Herzegovina and their subsequent independent countries emerged (Gilliland, 2006).

Ethnic consciousness and an ethnic identity, then, are strengthened and sometimes even formed by a common threat to identity. Furthermore, these shared struggles (Volkan, 1999) help maintain the identity of the ethnic group for generations to come (Steinberg, 2001). United States is a country comprising many ethnic groups. Research shows that immigrant groups, whose ethnic identities are shaped by a common threat, have stronger ethnic identities, which

are preserved for generations, rather than disappearing within the collective society (Steinberg, 2001).

According to Aydingün (2002), the same notion is true for Meskhetian Turks. The author says before their deportation in 1944, Meskhetian Turks “had little consciousness of having a separate ethnic identity” (p. 3). Aydingün (2002) argues ethnic or national differences had a secondary importance in 1944 Russia, while other cultural characteristics, most significantly religion, had stronger presence. The author explains “most of the time, local identities of kin, village, class and religion were very important and national consciousness was only beginning to take shape” (p. 3).

The Meskhetian Turks identified themselves with their families, villages, religion and perhaps the region, but a strong understanding of Meskhetian Turkish ethnic identity was established when that identity was thrust upon them as a reason of hatred and violence (Aydingün, 1998; Izzetoglu, 1997). The sense of this identity has manifested itself in different levels of strength, depending on the subsequent fate of scattered Meskhetian Turkish groups. Similarly, generational differences impact Meskhetian Turkish identity (Yunusov, 2007). Younger generations, who were born and raised in countries such as Azerbaijan (Yunusov, 2007) or Turkey (Aydingün, 2007), don't have the same sense of kin and attachment to Meskheti as the older generations.

As mentioned above, ethnic identities emerge and strengthen when they are under attack (Volkan, 2003). People unite against the threat and their ethnic identity becomes a unifying commonality (Volkan, 1999). After deportation

Meskhetian Turks united under a sense of self as Meskhetian Turks and a conscious ethnic identity was established (Aydingün, 2002). Traditions, kinship, religion, and any other ethnic characteristic had a greater importance after deportation. Aydingün (2002) says that deportation itself was an “ethnicity-based discriminatory” (p. 4) act. Once the Meskhetian Turks experienced discrimination because of their ethnicity, their consciousness of that ethnicity was heightened.

Resettlement took Meskhetian Turks to previously unknown regions and brought them into contact with unfamiliar groups (Aydingün, 2002; Izzetoglu, 1997; Veyseloglu, 1999). The new and distinct differences they encountered after being persecuted, strengthened their ethnic identity and their sense of self (Aydingün, 2002). The ties of the community got stronger and “through interaction with other ethnic groups, they have experienced a strengthening of their identity” (Aydingün, 2002, p. 4). Whether these claims are true for all Meskhetian Turks, or the very least those who have moved to the United States is yet to be explored.

*Immigration and Adaptation:*

Meskhetian Turks have a refugee status in the United States. They came from the Krasnodar Krai region of Russia as stateless people and became a part of the America. They are American residents, and are in the process of becoming citizens. Becoming American implies taking part in a national identity. There is a great difference between national and cultural or ethnic identity (Waters, 1990).

Immigration comprises of individuals or groups changing their nationalities, assuming new citizenships, and becoming a member of a new

country. It is the demonstration of participation in a certain life (Poole, 2003).

Citizenship is the official and tangible portrayal of being part of a nation. Holding citizenship means a person is a part of a certain nation. However, national identity is much more complex than just citizenship as there is a political power in relation to citizenship and nationality (Anderson, 2006).

National identity and cultural identity have a different significance, especially for immigrants. Nation refers to a concept that is more tangible and easier to define. Nations have a physicality to them (Anderson, 2006) and are defined by borders. There is a sense of recognition for nations, such as the United States, France, Greece, or Turkey. There is a political and economical aspects associated with belonging to a nation: a wealthy country run by monarchy or a democracy. There are tangible symbols to nations, such as flags, anthems, constitutions, official buildings, and historical places (Anderson, 2006). People carry identifications indicating their national identities: driver's licenses, or passports. Overall, national identities are much more visible through symbols and representations.

Immigrants change nationalities (Waters, 1990). This is a very simple way of explaining immigration; however, it is a flawed or the very least an incomplete statement. Immigrants, when becoming citizens of a new nation, bring along their cultural identities (Kim, 1988). The cultural characteristics such as their history, ethnicity, traditions, beliefs, values, perspectives, and social structures are all attached to them and who they are. So, citizenship for immigrants is the marriage

of their ethnic/cultural identities with the new national identity they are given (Waters, 1990).

Poole (2003) says that national identity is the primary form of identity which defines a person, and it takes precedence over any other identification such as religious, ethnic or racial. The author explains that our sense of national identity starts to form “on our mother’s knee. We discover our nation – as we discover ourselves – in the bed-time stories we are told, the songs which put us to sleep, the games we play as children, the heroes we are taught to admire and the enemies we come to fear and detest” (p. 275).

So can immigrants truly be a part of a nation? Poole (2003) argues national identity has deep historical roots. How can immigrants internalize the national history? How can they take part in the collective memory? Is it possible to assume a national identity without being a part of that nation’s past? Similarly, Bayart (2005) questions how much of a culture or a nation is heritage and how much of it is production.

Immigration implies adaptation. The immigrants have to exist within the new society somehow (Kim, 1988). They need to adapt to their new situations, and their new identities as immigrants, newcomers, and outsiders. Cultural adaptation is a process, which entails a change in identity. Hall (2003) says that “we think about identification usually as a simple process, structured around fixed ‘selves’ which we either are or are not” (p. 92). Immigration and adaptation complicate the idea of self. The immigrant’s sense of self alters. His new national

identity alters his cultural and ethnic identity, which are culturally constructed (Hall, 2003).

Meskhetian Turks do not have a nation, with which they can identify. For over 250 years, Meskheti was an Ottoman state. For centuries before and after that period, it was a part of Russian empire. When Meskhetian Turks were forced out of their homeland, it was a part of USSR. Today, their homeland is in Georgia. For the last 64 years, they have lived in various countries. Hence, whether they identify with one nation at all is questionable. A few, who are still in Georgia, do identify with Georgia as a nation (Sumbadze, 2007). Yet, Meskhetian Turks in other countries do not subscribe to this notion (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007).

Communication scholars approach these immigration issues from various perspectives: trying to understand the immigrant identity, or trying to understand the adaptation process. Some focus on the relationship between the dominant culture and the minority (Orbe, 1998). These are all essential aspects of the cultural and national identity in the concept of immigration. However, I think there is a need to better understand individual experiences. Most research theorizes over the general immigrant experience, or the impact of immigration on the national identity of the host culture.

Furthermore, research is western-oriented and most of it is derived from the United States. This fact actually makes sense as United States possesses fertile ground for immigration and identity research, both as a result of the social structure and the fact that communication discipline is centered here. However, scholars such as Kim (2002) urge communication scholars to step outside the

mainstream Western approaches to culture, identity, and communication.

According to Kim (2002) scholars need to take on non-Western perspectives to understand non-Western cultures. Moreover, scholars should try understanding individual experiences and how these experiences are embodied. When scholars conduct their inquiry from a limited perspective and try to understand the bigger picture without completely understanding the details of which it is composed, their understanding will be limited (Anderson, 1991; Behdad, 2005; Ben-Sira, 1997, Kim, 2002b).

Cultures have specific characteristics that make them unique (Kim, 2001). Each culture is shaped through its history, geography, social structure, religion, traditions, beliefs, and interaction with other cultures. When two cultures meet or interact, they define each other through their differences (Yep, 2001). Yet, accomplishing mutual understanding between cultures requires a much deeper look than solely the differences. Scholars need to understand the history, traditions, logic, philosophy, and outlook on life that a culture possesses in order to comprehend the unique characteristics of its identity.

The only way for communication scholars to understand these identities is through establishing a dialogue (Kim, 2001), which will provide an opportunity for both the host and immigrant cultures to understand each other. Cultures cannot be assessed with the traditional understanding of cultural identity, which entitles values and norms that are derived from historical structures of cultures. Dallmayr (2002) says “the international arena hovers precariously between clash and



dialogue between civilizations” (p. 143). Dialogue is the key in understanding each other and establishing relations.

Immigrants rebuild their national identities and their ethnic identities. Hence, their adaptation to the new culture is immensely important determining how their identities will be shaped. The Diaspora literature (Hall, 2003; Radhakrishnan, 2003) shows that assimilation and alienation are possible results for refugee groups, which are both problematic.

Assimilation is the process where members of the non-dominant culture are integrated into the new or dominant culture. Assimilation implies de-culturation, which according to Kim (2001), means losing some or all of the old cultural traits or habits. Kim’s theory of adaptation (1988, 1989, 2001, 2002b) examines the idea of assimilation and alienation. Adaptation, according to Kim (2001), is not assimilation. As adaptation occurs, a certain amount of de-culturation is inevitable. De-culturation is not necessarily an indication of one losing his or her cultural identity. Certain cultural habits and traditions are altered or replaced, which is the inevitable result of any cross-cultural interaction. Cultures learn from each other, and through interaction they alter each other.

De-culturation might produce a fear of losing one’s own culture. Once people realize that their own culture is being altered through this interaction, they may try to hang on to their traditions even more, a phenomenon that Berry (2005) calls “reactive acculturation.” When fear becomes pronounced, alienation can occur and resistance to change can be manifested by refusal to participate in the new culture. Cultures change over time, and they are redefined and reshaped

because they grow and change (Kim, 1988; Yep, 2001). However, natural growth and change is interrupted when fear of de-culturation leads to people clinging on to their traditions, which otherwise might become irrelevant.

Concepts of assimilation and alienation are mostly the products of “plural societies” (Berry, 2006). Numerous scholars (see, for example, Broome, 1996; Berry, 2006; Kim, 2001) have pointed out that society once demanded assimilation and sought ways to accomplish a “melting pot”, where differences melted away within the larger cultural setting and the newly introduced culture completely integrated. This view of adaptation or cultural exchange comes from “an overriding goal” of “one people, one culture, one nation” (Berry, 2006), which is not only problematic, but also impossible. As Berry (2006) states: “...there is no contemporary society in which one culture, one language, one religion and one single identity characterizes the whole population” (Berry, 2006, p. 27).

Today, scholars present a multicultural approach to the concept of plural societies (Broome, 1996; Berry, 2006). Cultures co-exist as “mosaics of ethno-cultural groups” (Berry, 2006). All the differences and different parts come together individually and form a picture of unification, yet with the individuality and identity of each segment are intact (Broome, 1996).

In the melting pot view of society, newly introduced groups need to assimilate and be alienated from their own cultural roots or be in danger of being alienated from the host society. The process of assimilation or alienation often produces conflict. When one is alienated in the dominant culture, there is conflict

between the dominant and non-dominant groups. When one is assimilated, then he is alienated from his own culture, hence a similar conflict occurs. Therefore, Kim (2007) says there should be a middle ground where these two ends meet and adaptation occurs.

Berry's (2005) answer to finding the balance is acculturation. Kim (2001) argues that acculturation is on the macro level, and is a middle-ground between assimilation and alienation. Berry (2005) explains acculturation as a dual process of cultural and psychological change, a result of contact between different cultures. Acculturation has two levels: individual and group/social. Acculturation on the individual level effects a change in behavior. On the group or social level, a change occurs in structure and cultural practices (Berry, 2006).

Because acculturation is a result of interaction between two or more cultures, change happens for both groups, although it may not occur to the same degree. Each minority group, each culture within the larger nation, and each different cultural perspective help shape or re-shape cultures. Interaction between cultures is the reason for change, and Berry (2005) says any kind of interaction, whether tourism, immigration, military invasion, or colonization, leads to change. The change can be minor, such as introducing new terminology, or profound, such as influencing the values or belief system. Acculturation continues as long as there is contact between two cultures. As contact is prolonged, Berry (2005) says, change is more pronounced.

Acculturation, as Berry explains it, or adaptation, as Kim describes it, is not always possible. Assimilation and alienation occur frequently. Assimilation

and alienation become very distinct possibilities when the differences between the two interacting cultures are profoundly distinct or when there is a great fear of losing one's own culture. Equally important are the social and political situations. For instance, in today's world, cultures are introduced to each other from great distances. Through the media, entertainment sector, and the internet people are more in contact with other cultures than ever. At the same time, globalization provides an opportunity for different cultural traits to be introduced to each other such as restaurants, books, clothing, even special cultural holidays that are being established in different places. As a result, cultures are becoming much more familiar with each other.

For the most part, Americans are not familiar with Meskhetian Turks and the Meskhetian Turkish culture. Similarly, Meskhetian Turks had no prior cultural interaction with Americans at the time of their immigration. Veyseloglu (1999) urges scholars to study Meskhetian Turks and their “ethnic structures, social lives, religious traditions and linguistic characteristics (p. 18). Only by understanding Meskhetian Turks, we, as scholars, can help propose ways to make their lives better and their adaptation easier, which is beneficial not only to the Meskhetian Turks, but to the American society as well.

Meskhetian Turks are a very specific ethnic group. However, they are one of countless examples of ethnic groups forced to immigrate to a new world. Refugees from Iraq, Darfur, Somalia, Burma and many other countries immigrate to United States every year. As mentioned before, in Russia alone many groups such as Hemshins, Terekeme, Volga Germans and Kurds were forced to become

displaced refugee groups. Hence, it is important to explore these ethnic groups and their adaptation processes.

As mentioned above, when two cultures come in contact acculturation occurs (Berry, 2006). Acculturation doesn't mean that the newly introduced culture, for instance the immigrant or refugee group, will be the only party enduring the change (Berry, 2005; 2006). The host or dominant culture will also alter as a result of their interaction and co-existence with the newly introduced culture. As the interaction prolongs, the mutual cultural exchange and influence will be more prominent (Berry, 2005; 2006; Sam, 2006) as a result of "continuity of diverse cultural communities and the participation of these communities in the daily life of the plural society" (Berry, 2006, p. 27).

Hence, both scholars and society in general need to understand Meskhetian Turks and get to know their culture well, because they are a part of the American society. If their interaction with the host culture is problematic, then this would impact the larger society. Through mutual understanding acculturation can be successful. Mutual understanding implies that as much as Meskhetian Turks need to have a deeper comprehension of their host culture, society in which they reside also needs to gain knowledge about them. This study will provide an initial step towards better awareness and knowledge of Meskhetian Turks and their culture, while aiming to contribute to cultural identity and adaptation theory.

## **Research Questions**

As mentioned before, the existence and situation of Meskhetian Turks is generally unacknowledged in countries throughout the world, even in Turkey. This is a group whose names, language and traditions have a connection to “Turkishness.” I have already explained my own lack of knowledge and the events that led to my introduction to the group. There are two different Turkish groups in Phoenix, both acting as cultural communities that aim to bring together Turkish people living in the area. Both of these groups have been working with the resettled Meskhetian Turks in the valley since their arrival. Every member of these two groups with whom I have conversed declared that none of them had even heard of Meskhetian Turks before Meskhetian Turks were relocated to the area and they were asked to help. This is significant, because part of our culture as Turkish people is a strong sense of bond with our kin, such as people of Turkic states. Thus, our lack of knowledge regarding Meskhetian Turks is an indication of how unknown Meskhetian Turks are.

Predictably there is also a great lack of academic knowledge regarding Meskhetian Turks. Only a handful of literary works are available on the subject (Veyseloglu, 1999; Mert, 2004; Aydingün, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov, & Swerdlow, 2006; Sezgin & Agacan, 2003). Scholarly work is even scarcer, though a few studies have been done recently (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). Trier and Khanzhin’s publication on nine concurrent research projects of the group is the single comprehensive study on Meskhetian Turks. This specific study examined Meskhetian Turks, their situations and constructed identities in nine countries,

where Meskhetian Turkish people reside. The study demonstrates how culture and identity of Meskhetian Turks vary, and how their perceptions of their own identity differ from one location to the other.

Trier and Khanzihn's study focused on eight countries, where there are significant Meskhetian Turkish populations and Georgia. Although there isn't a large Meskhetian Turkish population in Georgia, it is a significant country as today Meskheta is within Georgian borders. These countries are Kazakhstan (Savin, 2007), Kyrgyzstan (Ray, 2007), Uzbekistan (Chikadze, 2007), Azerbaijan (Yunusov, 2007), Russian Federation (Kuznetsov, 2007), Ukraine (Malynovska, 2007), Georgia (Sumbadze, 2007), Turkey (Aydingün, 2007), and the United States (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007). Most important issue that rises from these studies is identity. Meskhetian Turks do not endure violence or are not in imminent danger in many of the countries explored in the study led by Trier and Khanzihn (2007). Compared to countries such as Uzbekistan and Russia, they live in relatively better conditions (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). However, they still face unique social and economical challenges (Yunusov, 2007; Savin, 2007).

Results of Trier and Khanzihn's (2007) study provide a foundation for the research questions governing my study. Hence, in this section I will propose my research questions while exploring the relevant findings of the studies presented in Trier and Khanzihn's (2007) research, which led to these questions. The study conducted in the United States is especially significant for the purpose of this research as it demonstrates the need for more information as well as more in-depth exploration regarding Meskhetian Turks' lives and identities in this country.

There are three research questions in this study. These questions are broad and comprise sub-questions that clarify them and help explore the subject more in-depth.

**RQ 1: How do Meskhetian Turks define themselves?**

- What are cultural determinants of being a Meskhetian Turk?
- To what extent is their cultural identity tied to their history of forced migration?

The theoretical foundation of this study demonstrated that cultural identity is a complex concept. Many elements, such as history, religion, language and culture-specific symbols are parts of what constitutes as cultural identity.

Literature on Meskhetian Turks shows that these characteristics are important for Meskhetian Turks. In this section, I will focus on Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity and knowledge that led me to the first research question.

So who are Meskhetian Turks? The answer to this question is as complicated as the history of the Meskhetian Turks. Throughout the history they have been known as “Georgians, Muslim Georgians, Muslim Meskhetian Turks, Meskhs, Turks, Azeri, Meskhetian Turks, Ahiska Turks, or Akhaltsikhe Turks” (Trier & Khanzihn, 2007, p. xx). The name of the group has changed depending on the social and political situation as well as the geographical location (Trier & Khanzihn, 2007; Aydingün, 1998).

According to the collective research led by editors Trier and Khanzihn (2007), in Georgia the group is known to be Georgians, who converted to Islam and were “Turkified” (p. xx) during the Ottoman rule of the land. On the other



hand, Turks and Turkic groups (such as Azeri) claim the group is Turks who have been living in the Meskhet region long before the Ottoman rule (Aydingün, 1998; Izzetoglu, 1997; Trier and Khanzihn, 2007).

In 1956, restrictions were lifted and Meskhetian Turks moved to various countries in Central Asia, such as Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizstan, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. A small number managed to move back to Georgia. Meskhetian Turks, due to their scattered positions and the constant changes in the Soviet and Post-Soviet nationalism (Trier & Khanzihn, 2007), were registered as “members of other ethno-national groups, such as Turks, Azerbaijanis, or Uzbeks” (Trier & Khanzihn, 2007, p. 15).

Meskhetian Turks were forced to relocate multiple times. As a result of these migrations official records about them got lost, altered, or misrepresented. In every region Meskhetian Turks were given a different name. Besides the ramifications of identity, this confusion of names caused the real numbers of Meskhetian Turks to be unknown. For instance, majority of Meskhetian Turks in Kyrgyzstan were recorded as “Azeri” (Ray, 2007). However, since they never held citizenship of Azerbaijan, officially they are stateless.

Various studies report different numbers of population. The numbers range from 90,000 to 345,000 (Izzetoglu, 1997; Aydingün, 1998; Aydingün, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov & Swerdlow, 1996). The latest data, which is derived from the multiple country research on Meskhetian Turks, report around 450,000 Meskhetian Turks around the world (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). In the United States alone there are over 15,000 Meskhetian Turkish immigrants.

Therefore, Meskhetian Turks in different places and in different situations may identify with various nations. It is impossible to generalize and make assumptions for the whole group.

Internationally the group is known as Meskhetian Turks. According to Trier and Khanzhin (2007), Meskhetian Turkish communities prefer different names in different parts of the world. The preference, authors claim, changes depending on how the group identify themselves. In Turkic countries such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan they prefer the term “Ahiska Turks” (Savin, 2007; Yunusov, 2007). Ahiska is the Turkish name for Meskheta, and this, according to Trier and Khanzhin (2007) shows their willingness to identify with their Turkish Heritage. In Kazakhstan, Savin (2007) reports Ahiska Turks “mainly thought of Turkey as a ‘historical’ homeland” (p. 45).

Azerbaijan has a unique position. The country has very strong connections with Turkey. Both countries have long-standing relations both diplomatically and culturally. Ahiska Turks living in the Azeri culture, according to Yunusov, share in Azeri’s feelings of kin regarding Turkey. Ahiska Turks are well received and well accepted in Azerbaijan (Yunusov, 2007). One curious fact is that there are more published articles and books about Ahiska Turks in Azerbaijan than in any other country (Yunusov, 2007).

In Ukraine, they are known as Meskhetian Turks or simply as Turks. According to Malynovska (2007), after losing their homeland, the idea of homeland became a choice for Meskhetian Turks. Homeland, the author states, “is usually not something one chooses, like one’s parents” yet, it “became for the

Turks a matter of choice” (p. 261). Depending on the context, Meskhetian Turks identify with “USSR, Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Turkey” as their homeland. Nonetheless, their connection to Turkey is implied, as they are most often referred to as Turks in Ukraine (Malynovska, 2007).

In Russia and Uzbekistan, they are marginalized, and socially excluded (Kuznetsov, 2007; Chikadze, 2007). Research shows that historically they have been assigned different names, Georgians, Georgian Turks, Meskhetian Muslims...etc in these regions (Trier & Khanzhin, 2007). According to Chikadze (2007) and Kuznetsov (2007), most want to be called Ahiska Turks or Meskhetian Turks. The authors both suggest that identifying as Turks may be a way for the group to differentiate themselves from Russian and Uzbek people, as well as a way of defining an identity for themselves.

After rigorous political efforts, 40 Meskhetian Turks managed to move back to Georgia in the early 1960s (Sumbadze, 2007). After 1969, 250 Meskhetian Turkish families from Azerbaijan resettled in the area. By 1990, the number of Meskhetian Turks back in Georgia was 1,270. However, “because of ethnic conflicts, the negative attitude towards repatriation and economic difficulties, the majority of these were forced out again” (Sumbadze, 2007, p. 294). As of 2005, there are 592 Meskhetian Turks left in Georgia.

Self-identification of Meskhetian Turks in Georgia is different than in any other region (Sumbadze, 2007). According to Sumbadze, the label of Meskhetian Turks became widespread after the Fergana events in 1989. Before that time, the group, at least in Georgia, was known as Meskhetian Turks or Georgian Muslims.

Today, the author claims, Meskhetian Turks in Georgia are opposed to being identified as Turks. Because they are a small group of people who managed to go back to their homeland, they did not encounter the identity and labeling issues other Meskhetian Turks faced in various countries.

Sumbadze (2007) states Meskhetian Turks strongly identify with being Georgian. They say they were born in Georgia, live in Georgia, and are a part of Georgia. “Those living in Georgia speak more of their Georgian origin, although as a rule do not claim to be Georgians and instead prefer to say their ancestors were Georgians” (Sumbadze, 2007, p. 315). This is an interesting dilemma. Meskhetian Turks in other regions report their unwillingness to be associated with being Georgian, so much that scholars and Meskhetian Turkish leaders are opposing the use of the term Meskhetian Turks and propose the use of Ahiska Turks, which is a Turkish term (Aydingün, 1998.; Veyselöglu, 1999).

One common element between Meskhetian Turkish communities around the world is religion. Meskhetian Turks are Muslims. Under the Soviet regime, Meskhetian Turks were forbidden to practice their religion (Aydingün, 2007). Even after the collapse of USSR, those in Russia or Uzbekistan never gained a religious freedom. My own observations and interaction with Meskhetian Turks has shown me that religion and religious freedom are very significant for them. A Meskhetian Turkish elderly woman explained this to me during a religious celebration with a Turkish association in Phoenix:

*She was sitting there with her Meskhetian Turkish friends, making jokes, laughing and having a good time. I sat by them, exchanged “hayırlı bayramlar”*

*(celebratory greeting for Eid, introduced myself and started talking. They were curious to know who I was. I told them about myself, and my interest in Meskhetian Turks.*

*“Very good thing” The older woman said. Her younger friend agreed “I’m happy you will talk about us.”*

*After finding out about my research, they started talking about Ramadan (which had just ended) and Bayram (religious celebration marking the end of Ramadan).*

*“We’ve been here since this morning” the older woman said. “We came for the prayer, left, and now we are back.”*

*There is a special prayer performed as a group on the morning of Bayram. It is considered to be the most sacred prayer. Moderates do not practice these religious rituals; however, for conservatives and devout Muslims it is a great ritual that needs to be fulfilled. The special “namaz” which is the Muslim praying ritual, needs to be done as a group, accompanied with a sermon to commemorate the day.*

*“This is dream for us” the older woman declared.*

*“Do you mean the center?” I asked*

*“Having a place for our prayer, celebrating Bayram, being a good Muslim...” she said. And continued, “In Russia, we begged for a place. We said we’ll pay and rent a space only for Bayram. Just show us a place, we’ll pay and we can have our Bayram prayer. They never let us. They didn’t even let us rent a*

*place. Men had to do their prayers on the street, in snow. For years, they all prayed in snow.”*

*“Now we have a place, and no one tells us you can’t pray, you can’t be a Muslim” the younger woman joined in.*

As this conversation and research (Aydingün, 2007; Yunusov, 2007; Trier and Khanzhin, 2007) demonstrate, religion is important for Meskhetian Turks and freedom to practice their religion is very significant. Aydingün (2007) explains that Meskhetian Turks as a group are conservative and devout to their religion. However, they are not fundamentalist or rigid. As I mentioned in the beginning of this project, some women in their community wear a head scarf, which is a traditional piece of clothing and not the political extreme head scarf (Turban). Although there are quite a few Meskhetian Turkish women wearing the scarf, not all of them do. I have observed that younger women tend to wear them less. However, age alone cannot be listed as the reason. On several occasions I observed that women in the same age group, same social status, and even in the same family may demonstrate differences in this matter. I have met sisters, in-laws, mothers and daughters where one woman was wearing the scarf, while the other wasn’t. The reasons for this diverse attitude, their perception of religion and the impact of religion on their identity needed to be explored.

As literature suggests, Meskhetian Turkish communities around the world identify with a different cultural sense of self. Their geographical positions as well as their social and economical situations influence their cultural identity. In every culture there are sub-groups and internal cultural variations. Despite these

variations within the culture, most members would at least have the ability to understand and operate within that culture as a result of commonalities and characteristics that are familiar to all.

However, it is more problematic to make a similar argument for Meskhetian Turks. After 1944, Meskhetian Turks were scattered around Central Asia. Although the incidents that followed the exile of 1944 did affect the majority, their impact varied. They were relocated to different areas after both incidents of 1944 and 1989. Today there are Meskhetian Turkish groups all around. Hence, when we talk about Meskhetian Turks, we need to make the distinction and ask which Meskhetian Turk? Where were they before the exile? Where did they end up after 1944 (exile out of Meskhetia), 1956 (end of restrictions) and 1989 (Fergana events) and where are they today? Their histories, although influenced by the same major events, may have been shaped quite differently as a result of their location, social and economical situation (i.e., whether or not they could become citizens), education level and many other factors.

Meskhetian Turks are a group, who has endured violence, discrimination, and displacement solely because of their ethnic identity. They have been persecuted because of who they are (Aydingün et al., 2006). Their history is a proof of the fact that their ethnicity and ethnic identity has been used as an excuse to discriminate and oppress Meskhetian Turks. Scholarly and literary authors claim this painful history is a part of Meskhetian Turkish identity (Aydingün et al., 2006; Aydingün, 2007; Yunusov, 2007; Trier and Khanzhin, 2007). The

question is whether this history impacts how they establish a cultural identity in the United States. Scholars such as Veyseloglu (1999) and Aydingün (1998) claim Meskhetian Turks have a strong sense of self, in other words, they had to establish a strong sense of self as a result of being persecuted because of their identity. Whether this is the case for Meskhetian Turks living in the United States, without an imminent physical danger to their existence because of their ethnicity, is a question that needs answers.

The first research question this study aims to answer is: How do Meskhetian Turks define themselves? While searching for the answer, I will be focusing on two major aspects: “What are cultural determinants of being a Meskhetian Turk?” and “To what extent is their cultural identity tied to their history of forced migration?” I believe answering these questions will help me understand how Meskhetian Turks in the area identify themselves.

**RQ 2: How do Meskhetian Turks define their relationship and/or connection with the Turkish communities living in the area?**

- What are certain Turkish symbols, habits, and cultural components they embrace?
- What is the significance of these cultural components for Meskhetian Turks?

Many scholars as well as Meskhetian Turkish literary authors claim a similarity, even kinship, between Turkish and Meskhetian Turkish cultures (Aydingün, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov, & Swerdlow, 2006; Izzetoglu, 1997; Mert, 2004; Sezgin & Agacan, 2003; Veyseloglu, 1999; Yunusov, 2007). In this



section, I will explore this claim and the relation between Turkish and Meskhetian Turkish cultures, which led to the second research question of the study.

As mentioned above, the greatest scholarly contribution regarding Meskhetian Turks is the collective study, which was conducted in eight countries concurrently (Trier & Khanzihn, 2007). For my research purposes, the studies conducted in the United States and Turkey carry the most significance.

Meskhetian Turkish migration to Turkey is not recent. In various periods of history, willingly or unwillingly, groups of Meskhetian Turks moved to Turkey (Aydingün, 2007).

Most recently, Ministry of Internal Affairs of Turkey granted permission to some 39,000 people to move to Turkey. The latest groups arrived to Turkey between 2004 and 2005 (Aydingün, 2007). Because the Turkish economical situation is temperamental, the Turkish government refused to grant refugee status to more Meskhetian Turks after 2005. Since then, there are those who still make the move. However, they can only relocate to Turkey by their own means, which is extremely difficult (Aydingün, 2007).

Their situation in Turkey presents some advantages, as well as challenges. Shared language, freedom of religion and common cultural components give them a sense of security and ease (Aydingün, 2007). They have well-established associations around the country, such as Ahıska Türkleri Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği (Ahıska Turk Association for Solidarity and Culture) (Aydingün, 2007). The sole global Meskhetian Turkish written media is a tri-monthly magazine, *Bizim Ahıska*, published in Turkey and in Turkish. Aydingün argues that *Ahıska*

Turks are both well-integrated into the Turkish society, and yet still endure legal problems, since there is a large number without a status. Those who moved to Turkey by their own means do not have a refugee status, so after their tourist visas expire, they become illegal immigrants. There are tens of thousands of Meskhetian Turks in Turkey who moved there by their own means, but because many of them are illegal immigrants, there is no way to verify the actual number of them (Aydingün, 2007).

Culturally, Aydingün claims, Meskhetian Turks are well-integrated and are well-situated within the Turkish society. They have regular contacts with their Turkish neighbors, socialize with Turkish people and overall “feel at home” (Aydingün, 2007, p. 366). There are some interesting reports of differences Meskhetian Turks observe. They mostly live in big cities, such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Bursa and Iğdır. These are urban cities, largely populated and cosmopolitan. Meskhetian Turks, Aydingün states, live in middle-class neighborhoods. According to Aydingün (2007), religious practices in Turkey are surprising to Meskhetian Turks.

Aydingün (2007) reports Meskhetian Turks in Turkey were surprised by the practical variations of Muslims. Turkey is a secular country, where the majority of people are Muslims. Most people are moderates. They follow certain traditions of religion, but cannot be considered devout as they do not follow all practices. There is also a fundamentalist group of people, who are rigid in their practices and utilize the symbol of the turban. According to Aydingün (2007), both the moderate middle-class understanding and fundamentalist practices were

unfamiliar to Meskhetian Turks. Aydingün (2007) claims that Meskhetian Turks are having difficulty understanding why on one hand, people claiming to be Muslims do not follow the practices, and on the other hand teenage girls are wearing turbans.

Some scholars, such as Aydingün (2007) and Yunusov (2007), claim that moving to Turkey is a shared dream for most Meskhetian Turks. As time goes by, researchers say, Meskhetian Turks are either losing faith in the possibility of a return to Meskheta, or their willingness is diminishing with the possibility of enduring similar difficulties in the event of their return. Thus, Turkey provides them an alternative for a homeland. Many Meskhetian Turks, though having never been to Turkey, still dream about moving there one day (Aydingün, 2007). Although it is impossible to make that assumption for Meskhetian Turks in different parts of the world, some Meskhetian Turks I encountered reported the same desire.

*“All we wanted was to move to Turkey. It’s a Muslim country, we are siblings (kardeş- sibling, at the same time signifies kinship). But Turkey doesn’t help us, they didn’t help us. So we had to come to a foreign land” the older woman at the Bayram gathering said.*

*Her younger friend added “They say if you can come on your own, then come. But no one has the means for that. Wouldn’t we want to be in a land where our language, religion, and kin are? But, they couldn’t help us.*

During one of our conversations, a Turkish woman, who is one of the people in charge of a Turkish cultural center in Phoenix, revealed that

“Meskhetian Turks are very resentful toward Turkey. They want Turkey to help them out, welcome them. Don’t even ask them about Turkey, some are very very upset.”

*Returning from a visit to Turkey, I flew 11 hours and made it to United States. I still had to clear customs, and catch a connecting flight to Phoenix. With eyes half closed I waited for my luggage that never came. After talking to a few airline employees, they found my luggage. I was told to go through customs, wait outside where luggage is re-checked in for connecting flights. Meanwhile, I was with a teenage Turkish girl, whom I had met in the passport line, who needed help with the process as it was her first international flight.*

*Waiting for the luggage, the teenage girl and I were talking to pass the time. After a few minutes, a man approached us. He was wearing an airport employee uniform.*

*“So you are Turkish” he said with a big smile on his face. He was speaking Turkish, but with a distinct accent.*

*“Yes we are” I replied, returning his smile. I told him my name.*

*“I am Jamal” he said.*

*Though we do have the name Cemal in Turkish, something about the way he pronounced his name made me curious and I asked him where he’s from.*

*“From Russia, but I’m Turkish” he said. Before he could add anything, I enthusiastically cut him off.*

*“You are Meskhetian!”*

*He laughed at my excitement. “Yes! I am.”*

*During our hour- long conversation, Jamal wanted me to know a few things, he claimed “you have to know, if you’re studying Meskhetian Turks.”*

*“First of all” he said, “you know we have no home” referring to a homeland.*

*“We are Turkish, we speak Turkish. Some younger Meskhetian Turks, who grew up in big cities in Russia speak Russian, but even they speak Turkish at home. In reality Meskhetian Turks speak Turkish.”*

*Jamal has never been to Turkey. The Turkish people he met are those he met in the United States. Yet, he feels a strong connection with Turkey and has a desire to move there.*

*“This (United States) is not our land, but we have opportunities here. No one wants to kick us out because we are Turkish.”*

*He says he wants to save enough money to get him to Turkey.*

*“If only I had a home in Turkey” he said gazing afar. “A home and enough money to feed my family... I wouldn’t want anything else.”*

Jamal’s statements are incredibly powerful and they support Aydingün (2007) and Yunusov’s (2007) claims. Although literature and my own personal encounters so far support these claims, the same may not be true for many Meskhetian Turks, especially those who have moved to United States.

Religion creates a strong bond between people (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007). Whether it is a determinant to Meskhetian Turks relations with Turks is a question that needs further investigation. In Phoenix, there are two distinct Turkish communities. Both of these communities have their own unique

associations, separate activities and events, organize gatherings and meetings, organize celebrations on holidays, offer Turkish classes to children, and act as focal points for their communities. There are two separate groups because of political differences.

One group, which is an association, is a moderate cultural group, aiming to bring Turkish people together. They hold special celebrations on holidays, both religious and official (such as October 29- the day Turkish Republic was formed, which is the most significant holiday for secular Turks), teach children Turkish and organize gatherings such as picnics. This is an association, without a center or a physical space bringing them together. They communicate through e-mail, and charge, though minimal amounts, for their activities.

My initial encounters with Meskhetian Turks took place through this association's activities. Meskhetian Turks are involved in these activities. However, their numbers are not too great and usually the same few people can be seen at these gatherings, including, the social leader of Meskhetian Turks, who has strong ties to many Turks; three Meskhetian Turkish ladies, who provide traditional Turkish food they make and sell out of their home; and a few families whose children are married to Turks.

Most of my contacts and interactions with Meskhetian Turks took place through a second group, which is a religiously motivated group. They opened a Turkish Cultural Center, where they hold their activities, offer weekend classes to children, and provide a physical space for people to come together. The center is newer, yet has a much stronger presence than the association. Their activities are

completely free of charge and are supported by volunteer community members. They also have private funding from a controversial religious Turkish community leader.

During the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast during the day. Each night, it is a tradition to get together with friends and families to welcome the end of fasting and celebrate this time with an elaborate dinner all together, called Iftar. The last Ramadan was the Center's first. Volunteers took upon themselves to prepare the traditional dinners. In each of the 30 nights of Ramadan, the Center offered the traditional Iftar dinners. On average 120-150 people attended these dinners every night. According to the Center's leader, on average a third of this number were Meskhetian Turks.

The first time I went to the Center, I explained my research and asked them to help me contact more Meskhetian Turks. The Center wasn't completely operational, and there was only one Turkish man who was overseeing the preparations. He sat down with me and after listening, he said they would be very happy to help me in any way. He explained that even though the Center was new, members of his community were very much involved with the Meskhetian Turks from the start. "Meskhetian Turks are always with us. You know, they are very attached to their religion" he said proudly.

During the Bayram celebrations, I witnessed that there were over 50 Meskhetian Turks among the more than 200 people gathered for the day. The number is vastly different than the number of people participating in the association's activities. There may be a few different reasons for this. One is the

fact that Meskhetian Turks here in Phoenix are finally free to practice their religion freely after decades of oppression Aydingün, 2007; Yunusov, 2007; Trier and Khanzhin, 2007). Perhaps the religious aspects of the Center provide an avenue they lacked for their faith for a very long time.

By contrast, the association is comprised of more moderate and liberal people. They present a demographic that has adapted to the American culture very well. Perhaps, Meskhetian Turks perceive them to be more different from themselves, and feel the community of the Center is culturally more familiar. It is not possible to make an assumption either way. Whatever the reasons, they will provide a better understanding for Meskhetian Turkish identity and they need to be explored.

Cultures communicate their identities through tangible and intangible symbols (Carbaugh, 1990; Fong, 2004; Kim, 1988; Samovar et al., 2007). Tangible symbols are artifacts that have unique meaning for a particular culture (Carbaugh, 1990). During my research I have come across various examples of Turkish artifacts that are utilized by Meskhetian Turks. The Turkish flag is the most significant artifact among those. Anderson (2006) claims that flags and anthems are the most prominent signifiers of a nation. These are not just artifacts. There is a historical and emotional meaning people attribute to them (Anderson, 2006).

Pictures of Meskhetian Turkish weddings, festivals, and gatherings frequently portray the Turkish flag. In a few homes I've visited, I noticed the Turkish flag, whether on a pillow case, a knick knack or simply a flag on the wall.



Jamal, the Meskhetian Turk I met at the airport, was wearing a necklace featuring the crescent moon and the star of the Turkish flag. This necklace has a very specific meaning in Turkey. Although the flag is a source of pride and national identity, the necklace is a symbol, which indicates political associations. It is used as a political symbol by those who are extreme nationalists. For seculars, liberals and moderates this necklace is a symbol, which carries a negative connotation.

Jamal has never been to Turkey, therefore one can assume that he is not making a political statement about Turkish government as he wears this necklace proudly. One wonders, though, what the significance of these artifacts are to Meskhetian Turks. For Meskhetian Turks, these artifacts may be means to connect with Turkey. On the other hand, they may have a completely different meaning for the Meskhetian Turks utilizing them. Hence, in this study, I will be asking questions about the utilization of these artifacts and their significance for Meskhetian Turks.

In conclusion, there are many similarities and commonalities between Turkish and Meskhetian Turkish cultures. Various scholars and numerous members of Meskhetian Turkish community claim these similarities and commonalities suggest that these cultures are like two branches emerging from the same root.

Certain commonalities and strong similarities do exist between these cultures, such as food, music, clothing, traditions, values, religion, and, perhaps most importantly, language. However, simply pointing out these similarities and claiming that these are somehow parallel cultures is oversimplifying the concept

of culture. Shared language may demonstrate shared cultural components between Turks and Meskhetian Turks, yet one cannot assume a cultural connection as a result.

Among the many aspects of culture, one can include history, geography, religion, language, traditions, habits, norms, values and many more ideal and practical components that intertwine to create a cultural identity. With this consideration, identifying a collective cultural identity is much difficult. Claiming that Turkish culture and Meskhetian Turkish culture are long lost brothers, who in the core are the same, is an argument for an idea of a one dimensional cultural identity.

What is Turkish cultural identity? There are historical and social threads winding though the country and therefore cultural practices and perspectives that are familiar and easy to understand for those who consider themselves a part of the Turkish culture, whether living in the country or living elsewhere. However, it is impossible to make the prediction that all those who ascribe to being Turkish will embrace all the cultural components that can be considered “Turkish.”

Furthermore, one has to consider different cultural practices within what is considered to be the collective Turkish culture. Even within the same country, there are significant cultural variations among different groups and among members of those groups. These differences may emerge depending on the location, social and economical composite, educational level, religious beliefs and many other determinants of culture.

For instance, I am a Turkish woman, who grew up in Istanbul, which is a cosmopolitan metropolis, composite of 13 million people of all origins, beliefs and diverse life styles. My life mostly revolved around the more educated, cultured and upper-class people. By studying sociology, I gained insight into other social, economical, and cultural groups within my own city and country. My perception and understanding of these groups were framed with my own background. Therefore, the way I interpret Turkish culture, and utilize a lifestyle as a result, is very dissimilar than someone with a different background or from a different part of the country.

As I mentioned before, there are those, both scholars and members of Meskhetian Turks, who claim that Turkish and Meskhetian Turkish cultures are similar, almost the same. While this may very well be the reality for some, it is not appropriate to make the same prediction for all. Perhaps Meskhetian Turks, who can trace their families back to Turkey or have relatives in Turkey, can make this argument freely. Similarly, those who have relocated to Turkey or a Turkic country, such as Azerbaijan, may feel much more connected to Turkey and the Turkish culture and embrace the similarities much more strongly.

Equally important is to avoid predicting definite major cultural differences between Meskhetian Turks in various locations as well as between these Meskhetian Turks and Turks. Culture is shaped through time. It is a process. Hence, it is a strong possibility that Meskhetian Turks, who lived in Eastern Russia, Kirgizstan, Ukraine, or Kazakhstan, for the last few generations would present significant differences than those who lived closer to Turkish or Turkic

communities. Their cultural orientations, religious practices and many other habits, traditions and perspectives may have been shaped as a result of their interaction with these cultures.

At the same time, it is possible that some may have hold on to their “Turkishness” to preserve an identity, which faced significant alterations as a result of their situation. For instance, those such as Jamal or the two Meskhetian Turkish women I met during Bayram, who have never been to Turkey, have no apparent ties to Turkey, and met the first Turkish people after their relocation to United States, still profess a strong connection with Turkey and Turkish people.

One cannot assume that this will be the case for all Meskhetian Turks, yet one cannot deny these strong ties that exist for many. The question is why do these ties exist, why do some Meskhetian Turks feel this strong connection, is this connection a part of their cultural identity? Even the group’s name: Meskhetian Turks, tie them to Turkey and the Turkish culture.

The reality is, it is impossible to make an assumption. Therefore, it is vital to learn about individual experiences of Meskhetian Turkish community members and explore how they situate themselves. For this purpose, the second question of the study is: How do Meskhetian Turks define their relationship and/or connection with the Turkish communities living in the area? While answering this question I will be inquiring about these two components: “What are certain Turkish symbols, habits, and cultural components they embrace?” and “What is the significance of these cultural components for Meskhetian Turks?”

**RQ 3: How do Meskhetian Turks define the American culture and their place in the American society?**

- How do Meskhetian Turks perceive the American culture?
- What kind of cultural differences do Meskhetian Turks report when comparing their culture with American culture?
- How do they perceive their place in American society?
- How do they cope with cultural differences between what they define as Meskhetian Turkish culture and perceive as American culture?
- What are their biggest concerns regarding preserving their Meskhetian Turkish identity as refugees in the United States?

The third research question aims to understand Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity in the context of U.S. society. The only research on Meskhetian Turks in the United States was conducted by Koriouchkina and Swerdlow (2007) in 2005, shortly after the Meskhetian Turks' arrival. The Meskhetian Turks who participated in this study described advantages and comforts they found in the United States as well as unique challenges.

The language barrier is perhaps the initial challenge for Meskhetian Turkish refugees (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007). Meskhetian Turks, who were granted refugee status in the United States, came here from the Krasnodar Krai region of Russia. Therefore, they speak Russian and Turkish. However, with their access to education being limited (Kuznetsov, 2007), proficiency in English language is not common for Meskhetian Turks.

Despite language barriers, Koriouchkina & Swerdlow (2007) claim Meskhetian Turks manage to adapt to their new surroundings, such as comfortably operating within their social environment and socializing outside their own cultural group. This claim is problematic, as the authors continue to say that Meskhetian Turks tend to socialize and interact with Russian-speaking communities and people from former Soviet countries.

Koriouchkina & Swerdlow (2007) mostly focused on Meskhetian Turks' relations with Russian-speaking communities. According to the authors, Meskhetian Turks shop at Russian stores, form friendships with Russian-speaking people and feel more "at home" (p. 399) as a result of their connection to Russian communities. There are also a number of inter-group marriages between ethnically Russian and Meskhetian Turkish people (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007).

The authors propose that bonds between Russian-speaking communities and Meskhetian Turks is a result of a common language, in other words the ease of communication creates a connection between these communities. Meskhetian Turks shop at Russian markets and socialize with Russian speaking people because they can speak Russian and common language provides convenience.

Regarding Meskhetian Turks' relations with Turks, the authors say "as with Russian-speaking immigrants, language plays an important role in facilitating these contacts and religion strengthens them further" (p. 401). However, the researchers also point out that the "Turkishness" is a significant part

of who Meskhetian Turks are. Consequently, their relocation to United States depended on their “Turkishness” (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007).

According to Koriouchkina & Swerdlow (2007), the criteria for a Meskhetian Turk’s eligibility to apply for refugee status were: “(1) Prove that he/she is an ‘ethnic Turk,’ (2) Prove that he/she resided in Krasnodar Krai before 1 January, 2004 and continues to reside there, (3) Had fled from Uzbekistan, (4) Experienced difficulties ‘fully integrating’ into Russian Federation” (p. 385). Therefore, the Meskhetian Turks’ connection to Turkey and Turks cannot be denied.

Koriouchkina & Swerdlow (2007) report an encounter they deem significant during the study’s completion, which revealed a strong connection between Meskhetian Turks and Turks. The authors observed the inclusion of Meskhetian Turks in the annual Turkish parade in New York. When they talked to the participants of their study about the parade, they found “the extent to which many Meskhetian Turks already view themselves as a part of the larger Turkish community” (p. 401). When researchers asked one of their participants whether the parade was for Meskhetian Turks only, the participant answered “No, it’s for all Turks. We’re all going to try and be there” (p. 401).

Meskhetian Turks in the United States are renegotiating their identity, in many ways redefining who they are (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007).

According to Koriouchkina and Swerdlow (2007), Meskhetian Turks are trying to understand their place in the American culture. For instance, one participant explained that his race has changed when he moved to the United States. When he

was filling a form he checked the box, which said “Black” (p. 422). His supervisor corrected him and told him that he is Caucasian, therefore should check the box, which said “White” (p.422). The participant was surprised as “back in Krasnodar, we were referred to as ‘Blacks’ and now we turned into ‘Whites.’ Unbelievable” (p. 422).

Nonetheless, the Meskhetian Turks observe the complex racial and ethnic relations within the United States (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007). They are trying to place themselves and understand where they fit as an ethnic group. For instance, many have witnessed the ethnic inequalities toward Mexicans in the United States (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007). During their study of Meskhetian Turks, Koriouchkina and Swerdlow (2007) came across the same statement from their participants, which is “In Russia, we used to be Meskhetian Turks. Now we move to the States and we’ll become Mexican Turks” (p. 423). The authors say that “even as a joke, however, this statement reflects the Meskhetian Turks’ understanding of their position in the social hierarchy” (p.423). The authors go on to state that many Meskhetian Turks drew connections between ethnicity and social inequality.

Cultural identity theory shows that identities are reshaped and redefined when the social dynamics and conditions change (Fong, 2004; Kim, 1988; Samovar et al., 2007). The situation of Meskhetian Turks has certainly changed in the last few years. As legal residents of United States they have certain opportunities which were unavailable to them before. They can hold jobs, get education, healthcare, and as Izzetoglu (1997) puts it “they can hope.”



Nonetheless, now they are faced with challenges of being a minority ethnic group in the United States. The unique challenges they face, as well as the strategies they develop to cope with these challenges, are important issues that need to be explored. Perhaps by discovering these issues, this study may uncover valuable knowledge, which can benefit cultural identity theory.

As the literature shows, there is much to explore regarding Meskhetian Turks in the United States. The information is very limited and does not address several issues regarding Meskhetian Turkish perception of American culture, their place in the American society and how their identity is influenced as refugees in this country. Thus, the final research question of this study aims to explore these issues and provide a deeper understanding.

## Chapter 3

### METHODS

This project employs qualitative methods to explore Meskhetian Turks' accounts of experiences and life styles in the United States. Data is mainly derived from narratives, ethnographic participant interviews, and documents analysis. In this chapter, I will discuss the purposes of the study, researcher positionality, participants, methods, data collection, and analysis procedure.

Trier and Khanzhin's (2007) study provides invaluable insights to Meskhetian Turks' situation in the world and proposes solutions to resolve the issues they face. However, Meskhetian Turkish personal narratives, life experiences and perceptions still need to be explored.

Another crucial point is the researcher standpoint in these studies. For instance, the study in Turkey was conducted by a Meskhetian Turkish scholar, who lives in Turkey. Her perception of Meskhetian Turks and their relation to the Turkish people is derived from her own experiences and her worldview.

On the other, the part of the study which took place in the United States was conducted by two Russian descendent scholars, Koriouchkina and Swerdlow (2007). The researchers chose to explore Meskhetian Turks' relation and connection to Russian speaking communities, and greatly overlooked their relationship with Turks. These studies demonstrate the impact of researcher's own standpoint.

I realize that as a Turkish woman, my perception and my approach are driven by my own cultural perceptions. After all, my inquiries and interpretation

of the knowledge I gain are products of my own cultural identity. Thus, I believe inquiring about Meskhetian Turks' life experiences and asking them to tell their own narratives provide me with a more accurate understanding of who they are.

### **Researcher Positionality and Validity**

Fisher (1990) indicates that narrative is not a representation of inquiry in one specific discipline. On the contrary it is "meant to reflect an existing set of ideas shared in whole or in part by scholars from diverse disciplines, particularly those whose work is informed by, or centers on narrativity" (p. 234).

I believe experiences and thoughts could be reflected through narratives. "In effect, narrative method is a part or aspect of phenomena. Narrative is both the phenomenon and the method of social sciences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000p. 18).

Qualitative research aims to understand complexity of lived experience (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Goodall (2000) defines narratives as "episodes of disclosure that are used to situate, coordinate, detail, and explain or retell pivotal events" (p. 104).

Similarly Ellis (1993) presents the lived experience and claims that narratives are powerful tools helping us to explore a phenomenon. Narratives are the doors opening to experience (Van Manen, 1990). In this study I focus on the stories, which "reveal an individual's or one's cultural identity" (Foss, 1996, p. 401).

I began this dissertation by narrating my standpoint. I believe being a Turkish doctoral student in the United States influenced my desire to work with a

group of refugees, who have observable similarities and commonalities with the Turkish culture. I am aware of the fact that my personal experiences, beliefs and values shape my research in some respects. “Narrative inquiry is always multilayered and many stranded. To give a sense of this complexity and the nested qualities of stories told, lived, co-composed, and eventually narrated in a research text, I try to place myself alongside my participants” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xvii). However, I try to be objective and detach myself from the setting as much as possible.

There were times when I find myself asking specific questions to participants to clarify some unclear and vague responses. There were also times a participant asked me a question, which led another series of questions that I hadn't thought of asking previously. My experiences as a researcher helped me to channel these conversations to achieve valid responses.

According to Maxwell (1996), we all interpret the world through our own prior experiences, which creates a potential for bias and a question of validity. As the researcher, I am aware that my personal experiences and cultural perspectives may cause biases. Therefore, the study's data collection and analysis procedures are established to address these issues.

Qualitative research is interpretive. Furthermore, interview process depends on the researcher's ability to listen and process what is said by the participant. Hence, qualitative research by nature is open to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. In order to minimize this bias, I constantly clarified my understanding of participants' revelations with follow up questions. Interviews

were conducted at either participants' homes or the home of their community leader, where they feel comfortable and confident. While gathering data through interviews and my observations, I communicated my understandings with the participants constantly. I minimized misunderstandings by asking for clarifications, providing my interpretation, and soliciting their opinions on my perceptions (Maxwell, 1996). I welcomed both their input and clarifications, which contributed to the validity of my study.

As a narrative inquirer, it is important for me to address these questions of how their field texts are positioned because their position has consequences for the epistemological status of the texts and ultimately, of the research texts that draw from them. Without this careful positioning of my field texts and my explicit knowledge of how they will be positioned, "the research texts ultimately constructed from them are endlessly open to unanswerable questions and criticisms about knowledge claims being made and meanings generated" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 118).

### **Summary of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to investigate Meskhetian Turks' accounts of their ethnic identities and life styles. Using a narrative approach my primary goal is to identify their stories as an ethnic group living in another country. The research questions for this study are:

#### **RQ 1: How do Meskhetian Turks define themselves?**

- What are cultural determinants of being a Meskhetian Turk?

- To what extent is their cultural identity tied to their history of forced migration?

**RQ 2: How do Meskhetian Turks define their relationship and/or connection with the Turkish communities living in the Phoenix area?**

- What are Turkish symbols, habits, and cultural components they embrace?
- What is the significance of these cultural components for Meskhetian Turks?

**RQ 3: How do Meskhetian Turks define the American culture and their place in the American society?**

- How do Meskhetian Turks perceive the American culture?
- What kind of cultural differences do Meskhetian Turks report when comparing their culture with American culture?
- How do they perceive their place in American society?
- How do they cope with cultural differences between what they define as Meskhetian Turkish culture and perceive as American culture?
- What are their biggest concerns regarding preserving their Meskhetian Turkish identity as refugees in the United States?

**Research Sites**

Sample sites in narrative studies are small, and cases are often drawn from unrepresentative pools. There is a tension in narrative studies between generalization, and the unpacking of speech and close attention to narrative form

(Riessman, 1993, p. 70). Being aware of these dilemmas discussed in the narrative scholarship, I do not intend to generalize my results and present solutions to the current status of the Meskhetian Turks; rather, I try to present a preview of the experiences and thoughts and shed light for further studies that could be conducted.

Since I was first introduced to Meskhetian Turks in 2006, I have developed a rapport with a number of Meskhetian Turks. I encountered them in social settings, religious holidays, Turkish national celebrations, and other venues. My most important contact is the person who is socially accepted as the leader of the group.

As the leader, this participant is in contact with every Meskhetian Turk in the area, in possession of documents regarding Meskhetian Turks, and is involved with a nationwide Meskhetian Turkish network working together for the benefit of Meskhetian Turks. Besides the Meskhetian Turkish leader, I have also developed relationships with two different Turkish groups.

These groups operate separately, yet they are both involved with the Meskhetian Turkish community since their arrival. Most of my social encounters with Meskhetian Turks have been taking place during activities and gatherings organized by these groups.

Involved members of these groups have brought me to their Meskhetian Turkish friends' homes, introduced me to dozens of Meskhetian Turks, and provided me with their own perceptions of Meskhetian identity and their lives in

the United States. Their perceptions are invaluable, as they have been interacting with Meskhetian Turks from the early stages of their relocation to Phoenix.

As a result, I have developed many contacts within Meskhetian Turkish community. Participants to the study volunteered to be interviewed. The volunteers were either my contacts in the community or people I met through my contacts during the process of the study.

### **Data Collection**

This study strives, in part, to document cultural identities of Meskhetian Turks. Through this research, I aimed to have a better understanding about the backgrounds, beliefs, perceptions, and lives of Meskhetian Turks. I investigate these issues through their narratives. Participants reported their backgrounds, beliefs, and perceptions through in-depth interviews.

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

Data collection procedures for this project included semi structured interviews and group interviews. I secured approval from Arizona State University Institutional Review Board, prior to data collection. Consent was obtained from participants prior to interviewing the participants. Each participant received a letter informing them about the research, details of their participation, and requirements from them. I obtained informed consent from all participants via this letter. To interview participants, I contacted them in person requesting their participation. They were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary and that there were no consequences if they declined to participate.



Participants were also reassured that their identities and all identifying information would remain confidential. I informed the participants that they would be identified by pseudonyms. Throughout the study, documents and data relevant to research did not contain any real names. I invited the interviewees to choose a pseudonym for themselves, which they all did. As I interviewed each participant, I employed reflective listening, which entailed that I remained open and non-judgmental in the process. After each interview, I completed a “Contact Summary Form” as suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994). This document helped me summarize each interview, record main points my observations; which were vital in the final analysis of data.

Most Meskhetian Turks, especially older generations, do not have advanced English skills. However, they all speak Turkish. Therefore, I conducted the interviews in Turkish. Each interview was recorded with the participant’s permission. The recorded interviews were transcribed.

To expedite the transcription process, I acquired assistance. The Turkish speaking community in Phoenix is relatively small, hence, getting help from any Turkish person in the area was disconcerting because of confidentiality issues. Turkish people involved with the Turkish cultural groups in the valley know most of the Meskhetian Turks. Thus, it would raise ethical issues to request help from them.

Therefore, I have contacted an Assistant Professor of Education in a private university in Istanbul, who teaches qualitative research methods. Through this contact, I have managed to arrange an assistant of this department to do the

transcriptions. This person has extensive experience transcribing qualitative interviews. The interviews were recorded digitally. After each interview was completed, the transcriber received an electronic copy. Once the transcription was complete, I listened to each interview while following the transcription to ensure accuracy.

All the data remained anonymous. The interview recordings only revealed the pseudonyms of each participant. I kept a record of each participant's corresponding pseudonym, hence I was and still am the only person with access to information about their identities.

#### *Narrative and Ethnographic Interviews*

The main source of the data were semi-structured interviews. Prior to interviews, I piloted my questions with three participants to ensure questions were formulated in a way to allow data to emerge. Based on these preliminary interviews, I developed my questions in a way to allow participants to contribute more effectively. I was mindful about my questions. During any interview, if I discovered a different way of asking a certain question to allow more detailed answers, I employed this improvement in the following interviews. I based my method on narrative interviews yet at times I also used ethnographic interviews with the belief that conversations and dialogues emerge naturally during the process might provide new insights to the project.

Voices are powerful tools and provide vital insight for research. Narrative research facilitates necessary circumstances for these voices to be heard (Jalongo, Isenberg & Gerbracht , 1995; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Because of the

importance and value of using voices, data on Meskhetian Turks' backgrounds, beliefs and reported practices were collected through in-depth, individual interviews. Each participant was interviewed at least once. The shortest interview was a couple minutes shy of an hour, while the longest lasted over 4 and a half hours.

The purpose of in-depth interviews is to understand the experiences of other people and the meanings they make of those experiences (Seidman, 1998). Hence, there were no time limits on the interviews and I allowed, more than that I welcomed, the participants' conversations without interrupting them with time constraints. I conducted the interviews in familiar surroundings for the participants to ensure they would feel comfortable and confident. Most interviews took place in the home of the participant, with three exceptions where I interviewed one participant in the home of a friend and two in the home of a relative. In this way I believe they were able to reveal their inner thoughts, feeling and experiences comfortably.

In each of the interviews, I used a protocol which also served as a guide for the interviewees. Participants were encouraged to share any thoughts or experiences that they find meaningful. I took an objective stance as much as possible through active listening. However I also elicited the topics or ask questions that could allow the participants to bring forth their accounts in a more specific and clear manner.

The use of an interview protocol ensured that I gathered information from each participant on the same topics (Patton, 1987). It also enabled me to gather

detailed descriptions of each participant's background, beliefs, and experiences.

As Seidman (1998) stated, I encouraged participants to share their stories freely to ensure their experiences and perceptions illuminate us.

### *Interview Protocol*

Interviewer Opening Remarks: I would like to spend some time today asking you about your life experiences and perceptions. We will start the interview today and continue it in a few days. With your permission, I would like to ask you some questions seeking your thoughts and experiences. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. I would also greatly appreciate your permission to record this interview. With your permission, I will also be taking some notes of what you say to supplement the audio recording. Do you have any questions?

Topic	Exploration
Participant Information	<p data-bbox="857 275 1276 380">Tell me about yourself (age, job, family, education)</p> <p data-bbox="857 422 1292 527">How long have you been living in the USA?</p> <p data-bbox="857 569 1243 598">Where have you lived before?</p> <p data-bbox="857 640 1227 745">How long did you live in the previous location?</p> <p data-bbox="857 787 1260 816">Have you lived anywhere else?</p> <p data-bbox="857 858 1321 1039">Can you tell me about the circumstances which brought you to the United States?</p> <p data-bbox="857 1081 1289 1110">Have you ever been to Meskheta?</p>
Meskhetian Turkish Identity	<p data-bbox="857 1157 1268 1262">Tell me more about Meskhetian Turkish identity?</p> <p data-bbox="857 1304 1219 1333">Who are Meskhetian Turks?</p> <p data-bbox="857 1375 1289 1404">How do you define your identity?</p> <p data-bbox="857 1446 1263 1551">What constitutes as Meskhetian Turkish culture?</p> <p data-bbox="857 1593 1281 1768">What are the most important characteristics of the Meskhetian Turkish culture?</p>

Relation to Turkey and Turks

How would you describe a typical Meskhetian Turkish man and woman?

How involved are you with the Turkish community here in Phoenix?

What kind of events or situations provide your interaction with the Turkish community?

Which Turkish community do you feel closer to? (There are two, one is more liberal, the other strongly religious)

In what ways do you think Turks and Meskhetian Turks are similar?

In what ways do you think Turks and Meskhetian Turks are different?

Have you ever been to Turkey, do you have any connections in Turkey?

Mesketian Culture in the USA

Can you describe the American culture from your perspective?

What are the most important characteristics of the American culture from your perspective?

How is your life in the United States?

How do you think you are perceived in the American society?

In what ways living in the USA affect your identity?

How do you maintain your culture in another country?

What kind of concerns, if any, do you have in terms of preserving your Meskhetian Turkish identity in the United States?

Do you think your life would be different if you lived somewhere else? (such as Turkey, or if you could go back to Meskheta)

Do you believe that there is a difference between the young and old generation in terms of protecting cultural values?

Living as a Refugee in the USA

What kind of problems do you experience as a refugee?

Were there any instances that you felt discriminated? Can you talk about those instances?

Do you get satisfactory support from the US government?

How did you learn the language?

Which language did you learn first?

Do you get support from Turkish Communities?

Can you give examples?

Roles

Do you believe you have a mission to contribute to Meskhetian Turkish identity?

What is the best way to perform ideal roles as a Meskhetian Turk in another country?

Closing

Is there anything you want to share?

Is there anything else I should have asked you?

Do you have any questions?

---



## *Participants*

Participants were recruited based on age and gender

### *Demographic Description of the Participants*

<i>Category</i>	<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Number of</i>
<i>Participants</i>		
Gender	Male	6
	Female	6
Age <sup>1</sup>	Older Generation	6
	Younger Generation	6
Education	Elementary	3
	High school	6 finished, 2 got GEDs in the U.S.
	Bachelors Degree	1 finished, 1 pursuing in the U.S.
	Masters Degree	
Languages Spoken	Russian	12
	Turkish	12
	English	12
	Uzbek	12

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<sup>1</sup> Generational divide is explained thoroughly in Chapter V

## Sample Contact Summary Form

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### Contact Summary Form

Contact Type

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What were the main issues or themes in this contact
  2. Summary of the information (or failed to get)
  3. Anything else that struck me as salient, interesting, illuminating or important in this contact?
  4. What new (or remaining) target questions do you have in considering the next contact with this site?
-

## **Data Analysis and Coding**

### *Analysis*

The analysis of the data focused on the interviews with the Meskhetian Turks. As Marshall and Rossman (1999) explained, the analysis procedure contained five steps: a) organizing the data, b) identifying themes, patterns, and categories, c) testing the emergent hypothesis against the data, d) searching for alternative explanations of the data, and e) writing the report. Once the more general themes emerged as a result of this process, I coded interviews selecting excerpts demonstrating initial categories. Later, I searched for connections within these themes (Seidman, 1998).

I started with excerpts answering questions regarding each research question and created documents for each. Afterwards, I looked for themes within each research question, and created sub points or minor themes. I created various folders for each of the emerging categories. Finally, I incorporated the data into the various folders by category.

Once the themes emerged fully, I analyzed interview responses searching for cross-case and cross-over information (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 1988). As a result, themes or categories and respective sub points or minor themes formed, which incorporated interview excerpts that revealed participants' narratives (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Next, I developed narrative summaries, or *thumbnail sketches* (Maxwell & Miller, 1991). These summaries presented significant points from the

interviews. This process was vital in revealing participants' perceptions, as I used their voices and their experiences throughout.

McMillan and Schumacher (2001) discuss the appropriateness of sampling by case type in qualitative research. I explored the data to see if age and gender were determinants, whether there were common experiences or standpoints participants in the same age and gender group report. I discuss the gender and generational differences in Chapter V as it is my interpretation of age and gender's influence.

#### *Analysis Procedures*

The process of this study was iterative in nature since collecting data, identifying themes, reviewing and comparing data and collecting data and refining themes were conducted simultaneously (Charmaz, 2001). The interviews were transcribed by an assistant working in the Education department of a private university in Istanbul. This person transcribed interviews for multiple qualitative studies in the past. Therefore she has prior knowledge on qualitative methods and experience in transcribing interviews and dialogues.

The transcripts were full verbatim. All the interviews were transcribed as I collected the data. I used the transcribed texts of interviews to ask for participant feedback. Participants were able to provide feedback, clarification and further inquiry. However, in order to assure objectivity and academic nature of this research, they were not able to 'interrogate particular words and other lexical choices' (Riessman, 2008, p. 46).

As I began to move away from data collection to analysis, I needed to focus more directly on reading and rereading field texts and on beginning to compose research texts. This does not imply that the close relationships with participants ended but rather that the relationships shifted from the intensity of living stories with participants to retelling stories through research texts. As work proceeded, I discovered that aspects of my study have features of ethnography, and some aspects of phenomenology.

As I made the transition from field texts to research texts, these theoretical considerations once again came to the fore as I position my research texts theoretically. In this study, narrative view of experience was the focus of my writing, with the participants' narratives of experience situated and lived out on stories as my theoretical methodological frame (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and emergent theory to explain data. The crucial phase of coding leads directly to developing theoretical categories, some of which a researcher may define as his or her initial codes (Charmaz, 2001, p. 341). I analyzed the interviews by categorizing and coding the data looking for emerging themes and patterns (Patton, 1987).

Due to the narrative nature of the study, some data allowed mutually exclusive categories. For this reason, I used pattern coding at the early stages early as I continued the interviews. I used pattern codes to identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. I used pattern coding as a way of grouping those summaries into smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs.

As an inductive study, I looked for recurring phrases or common threads in the informants' accounts or, alternatively, for internal differences that I or informants noted. I arranged the pattern codes around four, often interrelated, summarizers: themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people and more theoretical constructs (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

## Chapter 4

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Twelve in-depth interviews provided the answers for the study's research questions. However, these answers were not alone in providing valuable understanding about Meskhetian Turks and questions regarding their cultural identity. My observations within the community as well as interactions I had with community members and the interviewees outside the recorded interviews also offered insights for the study.

In this section, I will explore the results of the interviews along with additional data I gathered throughout the study. In order to explore the findings further, I will discuss answers relevant to each research question and their follow-up questions individually. I will be explaining the results without inference. My inference of study's results will be discussed in the next section. I believe separation of these two sections will help the reader evaluate my interpretation of the data more clearly.

#### *Meskhetian Turkish Cultural Identity:*

The interview questions revolved around three aspects of Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity, which were represented in each research question. These aspects were: how Meskhetian Turks define their own culture; how they define their connection to Turkey and Turks; and how they define Americans, American culture and their place within the American society. The answers to these questions produced 7 major themes, all of which also had minor themes

supporting them. I will discuss these major and minor themes under the research questions each of them clarify.

**RQ 1: How do Meskhetian Turks define themselves?**

- What are cultural determinants of being a Meskhetian Turk?
- To what extent is their cultural identity tied to their history of forced migration?

Who are Meskhetian Turks? What is Meskhetian Turkish culture? What is essential to Meskhetian Turkish identity? These are some of the questions I explored through the interviews. Asking directly for the interviewees to explain the culture was challenging.

It is not an easy task to try and define one's own culture. Nonetheless, the answers resulted in three major components or themes, which illustrate Meskhetian cultural identity. These components are: history, preservation of culture and sense of community. Next, I will explore each component and its significance.

*History*

The past is a strong part of the Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity. Questions such as "who are Meskhetian Turks" or "what does it mean to be a Meskhetian Turk" were answered with an explanation of the group's past. In this regard, three different, yet inter-connected, minor themes emerged: Turkish heritage, not having a homeland, and ties to Meskheta and the past.



### Turkish Heritage:

*Mr. Işık<sup>2</sup>: Meskhetians are pure, genuine Turks. We were left on the Russian side, because Turkey (the Ottoman Empire) could not protect us. The same people, the same kin. I mean our relatives still live in Poskof, in Ardahan... [Eastern Turkey]. But there is a hundred and seventy years in between [since their families lived in the same region]. We don't call on each other anymore. In 1928 during Ottoman and Russian war the area was divided. They drew a border and we were left on the other side.*

Işık is not alone in his sentiments. Six out of twelve interviewees' first answer to questions such as "how would you describe Meskhetian Turks" or "who are Meskhetian Turks" was about their Turkish heritage. This notion is different than their connection to Turkey or Turks, which are revealed in the second research question. This is not a connection to the land or people of Turkey, but a connection to cultural heritage and ethnicity. It's a historical bond that shapes Meskhetian Turkish identity. The general result of this question is that Meskhetian Turks see themselves as Turks: culturally, ethnically and historically they are Turks. Circumstances separated them from Turkey, but they are Turks.

*Mr. Mustafa: Alright, Meskhetians... Who are Meskhetians? Of course, Meskhetians, first they are Muslims. Second they are Turks. They are Turks who remained in the Meskhete region of Georgia. Their culture is rich. From food to traditions, it's rich. Even today, they continue without forgetting their traditions. They continue as they were"*

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<sup>2</sup> All names used in the study are pseudonyms chosen by each participant. The names are first names, the gender acronyms are added to help the reader determine the gender of the speaker.

Meskhethian Turks separated from Turkey and continued living within the Georgian society in Russia. Still, they preserved an identity of being Turkish. The interviewees revealed that their roots are in Turkey. The strong connection to the Meskhethian Turkish history of coming from Turkey shows that having a Turkish heritage is an identifier of being Meskhethian Turkish.

*Ms. Faiye: Who are Mekshetians? How shall I say it? They are Turks in Russia. Turks not in Turkey but in Russia. They just lived in a region called Meskheti...*

*NB: So they are Turks*

*Ms. Faiye: Yes, they are Turks*

#### Not Having a Homeland:

*Mr. Işık: First of all, we have been exiled three times, and those, who are guilty, never took on the responsibility. Today, those responsible for our people's death are still alive. Not only are they alive, but they live in comfort, getting awards, being praised by America. Gorbachev and animals like him. Murderers. Three countries: Georgia, Russia [Russian Empire], and Soviet Union. Their heir is Russia today. And Uzbekistan, the injustice they enforced on us should stay with them forever and they should apologize to our people.*

Second theme, which emerged from a connection to history, is the notion of not having a homeland. This is different than being stateless. Today, they found a home in the United States; which means they do have a country that accepts them. Gradually all Meskhethian Turks are gaining citizenship from the American government. They are a part of U.S., but they lack a homeland. The loss of a

homeland and the idea that they do not have the choice or right to go back are still strong identifiers of being Meskhetian Turkish. After being Turkish, lack of a homeland is the second most important aspect of being Meskhetian Turkish in terms of their connection to their past.

Interviewees revealed a connection to Meskheti, which I will discuss in the next section. This theme, not having a homeland, is not about a connection to their homeland; but the lack of a homeland being a unifier between Meskhetian Turkish people. Meskhetian Turks are not simply ethnically Turkish people from the Meskheti region. Not having a homeland, the notion of not being able to belong to a tangible, actual homeland is an identifier of the culture. It is a notion, which makes Meskhetian Turks, who they are.

*Mr. Irmak: We never had a flag, yet it was taken down. For all people, their culture, alphabet [language], school [traditions] should be irreplaceable. Yet, we don't have them. We have the culture, but not the flag. We have no sins, we are innocent. Exile after exile... some lived, some died... That is our story.*

Over the years, they have been working hard to right the wrongs and regain the right to their homeland. One of the interviewees, Işık, lived his whole life to help regain the rights of his people. His efforts were so strong that he lived in Moscow for three years in the 80s while his wife and six children were in Uzbekistan. He had to leave Moscow as a result of Fergana events, because his family had to move from Uzbekistan. In Moscow, and afterwards in Krasnodar, he was organizing Meskhetian Turks, trying to meet with government officials, organizing protests in front of the capital and generating international attention

about the situation. He is responsible for Amnesty International's intervention to the situation and their relocation to United States.

Another interviewee, Göksel, along with hundreds of Meskhetian Turks, joined these efforts. These efforts secured a safe future in the United States for thousands of Meskhetian Turks. Still, Işık, Göksel and other interviewees indicate the loss of their original home, not having a homeland, is a wound they all share. In the end, this wound creates a bond and shapes their culture.

*Mr. Irmak: Each nation [cultural group] has a history. They have a homeland, village, city... we wish we have a village of our own, where our mothers and fathers were born, where our grandfathers were born; we wish to live there, too, see our own village.*

Desire to have a land to call home and having an actual piece of land, which belongs to them and cannot be taken away are strong sentiments. These sentiments are apparent in the daily lives of Meskhetian Turks. The first and foremost goal of community members is to own a home. Gradually, Meskhetian Turks are buying homes in the United States. It is very important to them to also have a piece of land, something as simple as a backyard. Every home I visited had a garden and even animals in the back yard.

The interviewees also referred to relatives or friends who could move to Turkey. The conversation always points to how fortunate those in Turkey are, because they could buy a house, and own a land of their own. Owning a land; belonging to a tangible, physical place; is another indicator of the importance of wanting to belong, wanting to have a homeland for Meskhetian Turks. Owning a

home in the United States or in Turkey is not comparable to having a homeland; yet, in the absence of an opportunity to reclaim their homeland, the interviews show that turning the land they can have into a home is the second best choice.

Ties to their past and to Meskheta:

*Mr. Irmak: We survive but every moment Meskheta is in our hearts.*

*Homeland, homeland... Wherever we go, that's what occupies our minds:*

*homeland...*

Each interview started with the interviewee's background: where and when they were born; where they lived; their education, occupation and family; when they arrived to United States; and their life (occupation, education, family) here in the States. In each interview, the personal story of the interviewee was entangled with the story of Meskhetaian Turks. It was never as simple as a location of birth, but the story of their family and their people, which led to that location. Each story is tied to Meskheta, where the idea of homeland is.

They all start with the first exile. I asked each interviewee if they ever had a chance to visit Meskheta. The older male interviewees answered yes. While they had Russian citizenship, they had opportunities to visit their homeland. After 1991, when they lost their status as citizens and Georgia became an independent country, this opportunity was lost because they did not have passports, hence travel was out of the question. Even when they held citizenship, travel was not safe. Therefore, the female interviewees indicated, they didn't travel back to Meskheta.

Whether or not the interviewees had a chance to travel to Meskhети, each claimed a strong connection to their homeland. One of the interviewees, Faiye, was born in 1985. She was only a toddler when Fergana events took place and her family was forced to move to Krasnodar region. She lived under oppression, without any rights, most of her life. She never had a chance to visit Meskhети, in fact she is removed from the land by two generations. Yet, she states:

*NB: Have you ever visited Meskhети?*

*Ms. Faiye: No, never.*

*NB: You never visited, so you never had a chance to be there.*

*Ms. Faiye: No, I only dreamt it. I never went.*

*NB: You really dreamt about it?*

*Ms. Faiye: Yes*

*NB: Just once, or do you have dreams about Meskhети every now and then?*

*Ms. Faiye: Not once, a few times.*

*NB: What did you dream about?*

*Ms. Faiye: What... You see on television; the mountains, the green, the homes, like that. I dream about Meskhети being the way I think it will be.*

*NB: Have you only seen pictures of Meskhети?*

*Ms. Faiye: Yes, a video of it.*

Faiye dreams about the land she only saw in a video. She's removed from the land by two generations, yet it occupies her dreams. She is the only one, who specified she dreams about Meskhети; however, she is not alone in her strong

sentiments about Meskheta. Every interviewee, one way or another, stressed the importance of Meskheta for them. Below are excerpts from three different interviews as examples of these sentiments:

*Mr. Osman: Our roots are there....*

*Mr. Mustafa: That's where our grandparents grew up..... That is our land, our home....*

*Ms. Fatima: Meskheta is our home. That's where we belong.*

As these statements show, interviews demonstrated strong connections to the Turkish heritage, to loss of the homeland, and to Meskheta and the past. These connections are identifiers of the Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity in relation to their history. Next, I will discuss preservation of culture as a component of identity.

#### *Preservation of Culture:*

Meskhetian Turks defined their culture first with a strong connection to history. They stated the ties they have to their Turkish heritage, homeland and everything their people endured craft who they are. Second, preserving a culture that is a product of this history is crucial. Every interviewee stated that it is vital for them to hold onto their culture. For generations, they endured oppression, segregation, and even violence because of who they are. As a result, preservation of their culture became an important part of their cultural identity.

In this section, I will first discuss the interviewees' comments about general cultural traits of Meskhetian Turks and the importance of preserving their culture. Then I will explore how they define the important components of their

culture, which, they believe, need to be preserved. These components are religion, language, hospitality and family traditions; such as family relations, gender roles, raising children, and marriage.

Cultural Traits and Importance of Preservation:

*NB: What would you say is the essence of Meskhetian Turks?*

*Mr. Işık: Very hardworking, very proud, very stubborn, very humane, friendly, and able to protect themselves... How shall I say it? They are able to preserve their identity.*

.....

*Mr. Işık: That is what we resisted. We integrate but never assimilate. That's why Russia exiled us to Uzbekistan. First they wanted to unify Georgia [assimilate all cultural differences], we didn't become Georgians, they exiled us. In Uzbekistan, [they thought] we're alike, we'll melt within, but we didn't. We resisted. Not our religion, not our language; we did not lose. So they tried to scatter us in Russia, that didn't work either.*

Işık's comments are representative of interviewees' sentiments regarding Meskhetian Turkish culture and the importance of preservation. The group endured three exiles in their history. The interviews demonstrated that these exiles resulted in a strong sense of identity and perhaps even a stronger need to preserve it.

*Ms. Selvi: Essence... yes. Our people lived under all those nations for all those years. Yet, they never forgot their language, or their religion, or their ways.*



*They held their religion, their culture in Russia, as they did in Meskheti. Our people guard their ways.*

*Mr. Osman: Yes... How shall I say. We try our hardest to keep our culture, to keep our language. Because in the past, they tried very hard to lose us [to assimilate our culture], they pressured us so much. But we all stood together. We didn't lose our culture, our language.*

One of the interviewees, Ms. Faiye, sees a downside to preservation. According to her, Meskhetian Turks *"are very loyal to their culture, to their past,"* which makes them *"very difficult people."* When I asked her to clarify what she meant by "difficult," she stated *"they are used to difficulties, they faced so many of them in the past. Now, the elders still think everything will be difficult. No matter where they are, what they do, they create hardship for themselves, because that's what they're used to."* Even though she perceives negative implications of preservation efforts, she also stated *"I teach my children who we are, what our ways are. They have to learn,"* which demonstrates the importance of cultural continuity.

The strength of conviction about the importance of preservation was evident in all interviews. When asked about what specifically needs to be preserved, the interviewees first provided a more general understanding of their culture. General comments about Meskhetian Turkish cultural traits included concepts such as morality, ethics, integrity, diligence, determination, sense of responsibility for their families and their community, and preservation of core values such as religion, language and traditions.

Follow-up questions and more detailed inquiries led to religion, language, hospitality and family traditions as main components of Meskhetian Turkish culture. Family traditions comprise aspects of marriage, elders, children, gender-roles, and family relations. Next, I will discuss these components individually.

Religion:

Every interviewee, one way or another, referred to religion, more specifically being Muslims while talking about Meskhetian Turkish culture and identity. To restate Mustafa's words, previously mentioned in the history section, "*Meskhetians, first they are Muslims.*" They are by no means fundamentalist or radical when it comes to religion; but they are devout and every interviewee, without exceptions, talked about the importance of their religion, preserving the religious identity, and passing it on to their children.

Importance of their religious identity is also strongly tied to their history, their connection to Turks and their adaptation in the United States. The impact of religion in terms of Meskhetian Turks' connection to Turks and their adaptation in the United States will be explored in the respective sections. The connection between history and their religious identity comes from the oppression they endured under Soviet Russia.

Besides their ethnic identity, religion was the second greatest reason for discrimination, according to the interviewees. The negative view of religion in the Soviet Union, paired with discrimination against their ethnicity, resulted in their beliefs to be undermined in Russia.

In Chapter II, I described a conversation I had with two elderly Meskhetian Turkish women, where they told me how they weren't even allowed to rent a place for the community to come together for their religious holiday prayers, and how people would gather on the streets, lay their seccades (prayer rugs) on snow and pray there. The interviews produced similar stories:

*Ms. Selvi: Islam is of course essential. When we were under pressure from the Soviet government in Georgia, first they exiled teachers [religious teachers/ leaders]. They thought if we exile teachers, the rest will lose their way.*

.....

*Ms. Selvi: So they thought if we exile educated ones, they will lose their culture.*

.....

*Ms. Selvi: [In Uzbekistan] When we fasted, they would make us eat bread at school. Only believe in Father Lenin, don't believe in Allah, they were saying. There is no Allah, they were saying. If they discovered a teacher [religious teacher/ leader] they would force him away. So we would keep our ways a secret. During Ramadan, or even during Bayram [religious holiday marking the end of Ramadan]we weren't allowed to pray. That's why people would keep it [religion] a secret, so they wouldn't be sent away.*

Mr. Işık, during a conversation we had outside the interview, talked about similar experiences. "In order to do any kind of business in Russia", he said, "we had to bring Russians alcohol and drink with them. They would tell us, drink, so we know you're not Muslim. Otherwise they wouldn't sell us crops or let us sell

*our produce in the market."* Whether in Georgia, in Uzbekistan or in Russia; Meskhetian Turks faced pressure to hide their religious beliefs and lifestyles. Preserving their values and holding onto their religion, as a result, has become an important part of their identity.

*Mr. Murat: I know many elderly, who pray five times<sup>3</sup> 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 [pointing to his heart]. We come together because we all believe in Allah.*

Language:

As interview excerpts by interviewees Mr. Irmak, Mr. Işık, Ms. Selvi, and Mr. Osman in previous sections reveal, language is another important aspect of Meskhetian Turkish identity. When talking about preserving their culture, these interviewees specified language as one of the components Meskhetian Turks sustained. As Mr. Işık indicated "Meskhetian Turks were exiled three times," endured oppression, even violence, because of who they are. They lived in three regions, which today are three separate countries. Even when all three were a part of Soviet Union, people of these regions had their own language.

All interviewees speak Russian and Uzbek, and now varied levels of English. Nonetheless, every interviewee said the first language they learned, what they consider as their native language or mother tongue, is Turkish. Certain words from Russian and Uzbek are mixed into their vernacular. Younger interviewees

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<sup>3</sup> One of the five pillars of Islam is to perform the ritualistic prayer, called Namaz, five times a day.

even use some English words in their discourse. Even so, Turkish is the language at home, and the language they specifically state they preserve.

Importance of preserving their language is also reflected in their view of raising children and their relation to Turks in Phoenix, which will be discussed in more detail in the respective sections. It is, however, noteworthy that interviews revealed the need to teach Meskhetian Turkish children their language and to make sure language is never lost.

*Mr. Göksel: [Criticizing some families] They speak English at home; speak Turkish! That's why I bought the satellite, so they [the kids] can watch Turkey, they can see Turkey. So they won't forget the language. In similar ways, we have to work on this [preserving the language]. At home: Turkish, Turkish, Turkish. When you're out the door, speak English, fine, but when you're here: Turkish.*

When talking about cultural traits and components, the interviewees frequently referred to family. Preserving the culture is also preserving family values and; equally important, teaching children about their culture, so the culture can be passed to the new generations. Next, I will explore family values or traditions in several aspects.

#### Family Traditions:

Family is at the core of Meskhetian Turkish values. Family is above and beyond anything else. Everything in their lives is tied to their families; life choices and future plans are made with and for the family. When Meskhetian Turks talk about family, it is more than the nuclear family of parents and children.

Grandparents are a part of the immediate family, and extended family is also essential. Family is an entity, where the members care for and sustain the norms.

The interviews and my interaction with the community revealed that Meskhetian Turks have a traditional understanding of family. All families are close-knit. Many members live either together, or close enough to interact daily with each other. Even members afar, such as daughters married in Russia, in other states in USA or in Turkey, are in constant contact with their families. In order to understand family traditions more thoroughly, I will explore them in several aspects: family relations, gender roles, raising children, and marriage.

*Family Relations:*

Family traditions and generational roles are very unambiguous in the Meskhetian Turkish culture. Generations, however, are not defined by age, but by social positioning. For instance, two interviewees; Mr. Osman born in 1960 and Ms. Ala born in 1963 are considered to be the younger generation in the community, and consequently, in the study. Subsequently, Ms. *Şenalkod* born in 1966 is a member of the older generation.

The former two interviewees are referred to as "the young" in the community for two distinct reasons: one is that they are the niece and nephew of older generation members and two they have young children. Having young children is an indication that the person is still in the period of building a life, taking care of his or her kids and creating a future for them. They have the responsibility to take care of their families, including their elders.

Being elderly or belonging to the older generation is a status within this community. Mostly when one has grandchildren he or she becomes an elder. The elder is a guide for the family. Younger generations take on the responsibility of earning for the family, elders may still work but they are expected to lead more than earn for the family. Hence, in this study when I refer to younger generation and older generation, age is secondary to the social status of the person as the younger or older generation.

Meskhethian Turkish families are very hierarchical. Elders are revered and their place in the family, as well as the community in general, is very high. They are respected to a point that life decisions are made with their consult and approval. These decisions vary from which job to take, whom to marry and how to raise children. Elderly are the heads of the family.

When children become adults, marry and have children; they leave the house, except for one son. Those, who move out, almost always live close by because they share the responsibility of their parents' wellbeing. Daughters may live far away more frequently than sons; because when they marry, daughters become a part of the groom's family.

When parents get older, it is the responsibility of the sons to take care of them. One son, usually the youngest or the one who marries last stays at home with his parents. Below is an excerpt from the interview with Ms. Şenalkod. Her husband was in the room, when I was interviewing her and made a few comments during this conversation. His addition to the interview helped clarify certain points.

*NB: So, if I understand correctly, you're saying that in the Meskhetian Turkish culture, the son takes care of his mother and father.*

*Ms. Şenalkod: Yes.*

*NB: Daughter-in-law comes into the house and the family lives together.*

*Ms. Şenalkod: Yes.*

*Mr. Murat: The son, the youngest, is with them.*

*NB: The youngest son stays at home.*

*Ms. Şenalkod: Yes, for example, let's say there are five sons. You get four out of the house [get them married], the youngest stays with me.*

*NB: The youngest would live with you.*

*Ms. Şenalkod: Yes, we don't leave mothers and fathers alone.*

*NB: Mothers and fathers are not left alone.*

*Ms. Şenalkod: Never.*

*NB: Yet, it is not the responsibility of the oldest son, but the duty of the youngest.*

*Ms. Şenalkod: Now, that can be a choice. For example, all the sons might be married and the oldest may want the parents to be with him.*

*Mr. Murat: (laughing): It depends on the daughter-in-law.*

*NB: Yes, I was just about to ask that! Does the decision have anything to do with the daughter-in-law?*

*Ms. Şenalkod: Of course.*



*Mr. Murat: Mother and father don't like the youngest daughter-in-law [here youngest is not necessarily youngest by age, but the one married to the youngest son], so they live with the older son.*

*Ms. Şenalkod: It can be either way, but the parents always live with one son.*

Parents are never alone; children take care of them. At the same time, parents never stop teaching and guiding their children, their sons and daughters-in-law, and their grandchildren. Adult children consult their parents and seek their approval before making decisions.

Each family is an entity, almost like a culture of its own. Each new member is taught and guided to learn the ways of the family, which mostly means they talk less and listen more when they are around their elders. This is true not only for children, who are taught to be respectful to their elders; but also for sons and daughters-in-law. The strongest performance of this notion is apparent in the daughter-in-law living with the parents.

*After dinner the family received some guests. The whole family along with the guests gathered together in the living room. Tea was brewing and in a blink of the eye, the coffee table was decorated with sweets, snacks and tea cups.*

*Everyone was talking, almost all at once. The lively chatter and occasional laughter enlivened the whole house. Children were sitting on the floor, by the coffee table. They were listening intently the conversations around them. When someone asked one of them a question, he or she answered quietly, even shyly.*

*The daughter-in-law living with the family was running back and forth from the kitchen bringing more snacks, fruit and tea. When she knelt by the coffee table to refill the tea cups, I asked her a question. Only then, I realized that she hadn't said a word in a long while. At first she only nodded yes to my question, then she answered almost in a whisper. It took me a moment to understand that she was purposefully quite. After the guests departed, the father of the house explained it to me; "in our tradition," he said, "the daughter-in-law doesn't speak when the father is in the room. She is the youngest and the newest of the family. So it is her job to listen and learn."*

This notion is not to oppress or belittle women. She is not quite because of her gender, but because of her status in the family. She is the daughter-in-law, who lives with the family. She is not disrespected in any way, but she is expected to learn the ways of the family as the newest member.

I also had the opportunity to observe the same family's interaction with one of their daughters, their son and the husband of another daughter. Their children interact very respectfully with both parents, but are more vocal and more intimate. They voice their opinions freely, disagree with their parents and joke with them.

Their son-in-law, though not as quiet as the daughter-in-law, is still very respectful and abides by the rules of listening more than talking when interacting with his parents-in-law. Father of the family explained to me that because the son-in-law doesn't live with them, the same expectations do not apply to him; it is a matter of circumstances, not gender.

These and similar interactions I observed, indicate that traditional family values, preserving and passing them to the newer generations are essential for Meskhetian Turkish culture. Family members' statuses are well-defined and interaction between family members are products of these statuses.

*Gender-Roles:*

According to the interviewees and my observations, Meskhetian Turkish families are patriarchal. Certain roles, such as daughter-in-law's interaction within the family are set and at first glance may seem unequal. However, interaction between spouses, younger or elder, are very equal. Every couple I met were joking with and teasing each other. They all made jokes, laughed with each other and seemed to have an equal relationship.

Nonetheless, the men are seen as the breadwinners and women are the homemakers. The traditional gender roles within the family and the patriarchal make-up of the community results in men being the decision-makers of the household. In the past Meskhetian Turkish women could not or would not work outside the home. They couldn't, because the circumstances left them with lack of education and rights to obtain work. They wouldn't, because even if they could find employment outside the home, safety was a concern.

Their lives in the United States give them opportunities they didn't have before. Every young female interviewee stated that they gained and/or pursuing education in the United States. Same interviewees also indicated they have employment. Two of the interviewees work in hospitals as phlebotomists. One of these women is also pursuing a college degree in fashion design. Another

interviewee works as a seamstress. Although they have employment outside the home, the dynamics within the family hasn't changed. Women work outside, but they are still responsible for the home.

*Ms. Faiye: I think Meskhetian women are stronger than other women; because they manage to work outside, but they don't neglect their work at home. They also take care of the children. If you asked an American to come, live like this for a month; she wouldn't be able to do that. At least I don't think so.*

*NB: So women are responsible for all the work at home, is that right?*

*Ms. Faiye: Yes, she would never ask: why do I have to do it? Not just Americans, but many other women look at us. They ask us: why do you work so much? You work at home, you work outside; they say. For men, it's easy. They work outside, then they come home. They work, so they can take care of the family.*

*NB: Does that mean, earning for the family is the man's job?*

*Ms. Faiye: Yes, yes. Americans<sup>4</sup> are surprised when we tell them, men have to pay the bills. Earning is their job. Our job is home. They tell me, "we pay our own bills." Bills, working, they're all on the woman's shoulders for American women. With us, the woman works if she wants or stays at home; they [men] wouldn't say anything. Earning is man's responsibility.*

*NB: Man's responsibility... Can a man tell a woman not to work, then?*

*Ms. Faiye: Yes, he can. He can say, stay at home, jus take care of the kids; for example, if they have many kids.*

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<sup>4</sup> She is referring to conversations she has with her co-workers at the hospital, where she works.

As Faiye's perceptions demonstrate, gender roles are very traditional and strongly defined. Responsibilities are divided between genders. Men are accountable for earning for the family and securing a future for the children. Home is women's domain. Although taking care of the children is primarily the woman's duty; raising them; teaching them values and traditions, is the responsibility of both parents.

Continuity of culture, according to the interviewees, depends on raising children "right." Raising them right means teaching them about who they are, the values and traditions of their community and the desire to preserve their culture; so they can teach their own children, when the time comes. I will discuss these concepts next.

*Children:*

*NB: You said, if people get too comfortable, they may lose their culture.*

*How do you preserve your culture?*

*Ms. Faiye: In the family, people don't have a chance to lose their culture. If you are tied to your family strongly, you are also tied to your culture. It's up to the family.*

*NB: Do you have concerns for your children? Do you ever worry that they may lose their culture?*

*Ms. Faiye: I teach them. I teach them to be respectful to their mother and father. I worry them becoming like people here [Americans]. Here you can yell at your parents, you can even hit them. I look at Americans, most have given their children too many liberties. In our culture, even if the father is very old, the son*

would listen to him [obey him], so would the daughter. Here, it's different. You tell the children to do something, they can tell you "I don't want to do it."

*NB: That's not how you raise your children.*

*Ms. Faiye: I just teach them, respect your mother and father; respect your elders.*

.....

*NB: Are you concerned they will forget their language?*

*Ms. Faiye: Our children live with their grandmother, my mother [who lives close by] and their grandfather [Faiye and her husband live with his parents]. As long as we all live together, I don't think they will forget. They always speak Turkish.*

*NB: If the family is together, elders and youngsters, then the culture continues.*

*Ms. Faiye: Yes, culture continues with family.*

Children are at the center of the need to preserve the culture for Meskhetian Turks. Talking about preserving cultural values, traditions, religion, language and all other aspects of their identity; the conversation always related to children and the desire to raise them right.

Raising children right, according to the interviews, means passing on these cultural traits; which indicates the importance of preservation. As Ms. Selvi puts it: "we have to teach our kids about our culture, our history" for the continuance of the culture. Similarly, teaching them about Meskheta is essential. In this regard,

Mr. Osman says "We try to teach our children love for Meskheti. We try to continue being guided by our love for Meskheti."

*Ms. Şenalkod: Meskhetians hold onto their cultures.*

*NB: How do you think, Meskhetian Turks managed to maintain these traditions and values; even though they were displaced three times?*

*Ms. Şenalkod: Now, how shall I say it, people teach them. In our house, that's the way. I tell my daughter, this is our tradition, this is our way. We cannot lose it; our culture, our way. Culture is more important than anything else. We cannot lose it. Wherever you are, your culture is yours. If we lost a bit every place we lived, we would lose both our children and our culture. Our children's future depends on the culture.*

When it comes to raising children and teaching them cultural values and traditions, the whole family is involved. Grandparents are as involved as the parents, sometimes even more so. Parents, the younger generation, have to work hard to provide a future for the children. Grandparents step in and help pass on Meskhetian Turkish culture to the new generations.

*Ms. Selvi: Now, I will raise my grandchildren. These [her children] are grown-up. Now, they can work and I'll take care of the grandkids.*

*NB: When taking care of them, do you also want to tell them about Meskheti and your past?*

*Ms. Selvi: Of course we will teach them. Our mothers and fathers taught us. My mother-in-law did the same thing. When I was working [around the house], she would tell me "come, sit" and she would tell me "this is how we lived in*

*Caucasia [in Meskheta], this is how we would go to the mountains, how we would raise animals, go to the gardens..." She would tell me about their life, their ways, their work; she would teach me. My mother also told me about their culture, their ways. Now, of course, we teach our children, our grandchildren about our ways.*

Similarly, Mr. Mustafa's remarks portray the involvement of grandparents:

*Mr. Mustafa: The children go to the Turkish school on Saturdays. We have to teach them Turkish, we have to teach them history, and our ways. At first, I was taking them; now I work on Saturdays, so their grandfather takes them.*

Teaching children about the past and traditions, according to the interviewees, have been a priority. In Uzbekistan and Russia, they struggled to perform certain traditions and rituals, as discussed in the section on religion. Here, in the United States, performing these rituals and maintaining traditions gain a new importance. They have the opportunity to live according to their beliefs, hence, they freely maintain their ways. The interviews revealed that sustaining traditions is also strongly tied to their children: in a way, they continue the traditions, so the children can learn them.

*Mr. Mustafa: Especially Bayrams [religious holidays] are important. We take the children to the center [Turkish Cultural Center]. It doesn't matter if we're busy, or if we have work. We still take the children.*

*NB: Take them to Bayram celebrations...*

*Mr. Mustafa: We especially have to show Bayram to our children. During Bayram, everybody comes together.*



As the interviews suggest, preservation of culture revolves around children. Families continue on the traditions, and work to pass on their culture to the next generations.

*Marriage:*

Marriage rituals and traditions were not intended components of the study. However, the subject came to focus during the interviews. While talking about preservation of culture, family and traditions; the interviewees referred frequently to marriage and norms to accompany. As mentioned before, Meskhetian Turks are very family centered. Hence, all aspects of marriage; such as choosing a spouse, rituals of wedding, and the future of the couple; are products of this orientation. Traditions regarding marriage demonstrate how culture evolves, yet the essentials are preserved in the Meskhetian Turkish society. In this section, I will explore how marriage traditions relate to preservation of culture.

Family is vital when people choose their future spouses. There are no arranged marriages, but it is crucial for families to meet, not only the prospective spouse, but his or her family before any decision is made. The approval of the families is the initial step in a marriage. According to the interviewees, the children meet after the family's approval.

For instance, Ms. Şenalkod's daughter is married and lives in Chicago. Before our interview the family showed me videos of her wedding, her life in Chicago and her kids. I asked how their daughter met her husband. The story was sweet and revealing of norms surrounding marriage. Their son-in-law was watching the wedding video of a family friend. He saw his future bride on this

video. He was so taken by her that he asked his mother to find out who she was. It turns out, his mother and her mother were friends when they were children. Their families had to part ways years ago, but they both cherished the childhood friendship.

After this discovery, his family contacted her family; asking if he could meet her. Once, her family approved; he traveled to Phoenix. They met, spent some time together, and once she decided she wanted to marry him; they got engaged. There is no pressure from the families to choose each other; the choice is the couple's. However, the parents' approval is the first step to get anything started.

Parents' approval depends on their perception of the other family. Ms. Şenalkod states, the families would ask around, try to get to know the other family through third-parties and try to find common friends. This approach is an indication of the community's influence on individuals. In a way, parents' approval depends on the community's approval.

Once families approve, certain steps are taken. According to Ms. Ala, the engagement is called *şerbet*, which is the name of a sweet beverage made with fruits, usually grapes. Families come together, the groom's family asks the bride's family permission for her hand; which is another indicator of family's importance. Marriage is not only between the groom and the bride; but a unification of two families. Hence, it's not the groom asking for the bride's hand; but his whole family. During *şerbet*, the couple gets engaged, a date is set for the wedding and many details are decided. After *şerbet*, according to Ms. Şenalkod, the families

and the couple see each other as much as they can; in a way they prepare to become one family.

The night before the wedding is the *henna night*. On this night, women get together with the bride, have a big celebration entailing certain songs and dances, which are traditional. On the day of the wedding, everyone gets together. While the bride is leaving her parent's house, people play instruments, sing songs and accompany her to the groom's house, where a religious ceremony takes place.

Both Ms. Ala and Ms. Şenalkod stated, certain changes do apply to these traditions. For instance, more and more people are getting married in hotels or halls they rent, especially here in the United States. Traditionally, men and women would assemble in different homes or at least different parts of the house for the wedding celebration. Of course, today this tradition is not carried. Ms. Ala states, in the past these events would take place in three consecutive days. First day, *şerbet*; second day *henna*; and the last day, the wedding. Today, both the couples and the families need more time to get to know each other and to prepare for the wedding.

Importance of preserving the culture and obeying the norms is evident in traditions and rituals regarding marriage. When one breaks the norms, he or she is alienated; almost shunned. Ms. Ala provided an example in this regard with her son's story. Her son is living with a Mexican woman. The family does not approve of the choice, which led to severing of ties with their son.

When their son wanted to marry his Mexican girlfriend, the family refused to approve. The disagreement went so far that, his mother hid his papers and ID to

prevent his marriage. Since he's not an American citizen, yet; he needs his refugee papers in order to apply for a marriage license. Almost four years later, the couple is still unmarried, however, they live together and they have a three year old son. The family was so distraught with his choice that they left Arizona and moved to Washington state. They just recently returned to Phoenix. The mother recently started seeing her grandson, but the father has severed all ties completely.

*Ms. Ala: Now look at the child [her grandson], he is not Mexican, he is not Turkish. He can't speak Turkish. Everyone has their own culture, their own language and their own religion. We are very devout to our religion. When he did this, we had to leave and go far away.*

These strong convictions are derived from the need to preserve a culture, for which they endured incredible challenges for generations. Norms and values are very clear and diverting from them is not acceptable.

*Hospitality:*

Finally, one cannot talk about Meskhetian Turks without mentioning hospitality as a component of their culture. Islam teaches the importance of hospitality. Opening one's home to guests, hosting them with warmth and a smile, and offering them food, beverages and even shelter are considered almost spiritual requirements.

In Meskhetian Turkish society, this notion is very strong. I conducted interviews at different times of the day. Whether the interview was in the afternoon, in the evening, and on one occasion late at night; I was greeted with the same hospitality. The moment someone comes through the door, within minutes a

table is prepared with a rich variety of food and tea. Whatever the hosts have, they share with their guests. These offerings are always accompanied with warmth and friendliness. Even strangers are treated like long time friends, making guests feel comfortable and welcomed.

*Mr. Göksel: Meskhetians are very pure people. They never harm anyone; never will ill on anyone. Also, they are very hospitable. They are friendly, their homes are always open,*

Opening one's home to others and friendliness are significant in Meskhetian Turkish culture. Hospitality also helps maintain the community. People are connected to one another; they have a sense of community, which sustains them and their culture.

Thus far, I explained Meskhetian Turks' connection to their history. I explored the notion of preserving culture, which is a product of their history. Next, I will discuss sense of community; which, according to the interviews, is how Meskhetian Turks preserve their culture and identity.

#### Sense of Community:

*Ms. Fatima: I am proud of my people. They endured more than any other people. They endured more, but they didn't disappear. They changed so many places, they faced so many difficulties. They faced so many difficulties, but they lost neither their language nor their religion; and I am proud of my people. Because they kept pushing us from one place to another for a whole century.*

*NB: To what do you attribute the fact that your people didn't lose their language or religion? How did they manage to hold onto their culture?*

*Ms. Fatima: They are connected. People are connected to one another. Look at them now, they live here to be close to each other. Without neighbors and friends, it is very difficult. Look at Americans; mother is in one place, father is in another place; they are separated long ago. In our culture, separation is a shame. You have to live together. Once you marry, you have to be together till the end. Even if you don't like it, you have to carry on for your children. More than that, your siblings, relatives, friends; you need to hold onto them. If there is a wedding; you can't say it's too far, it's too expensive; you have to go. You go to them, so they will come to you. If someone even has a headache, you visit them, make sure they're alright. We visit each other constantly; if we're far, than we talk on the phone. Connection to one another is very important. Now we worry, in America what if we lose each other. When we first came here, my father worked very hard to keep people together as much as possible. We couldn't all be in the same place, but he pleaded, at least divide us to five states, not more. So people don't scatter all around, so they can still find each other. It wasn't possible then, but now people started standing on their own; they are gathering in four or five states.*

Fatima's words represent the pride in preserving essentials of culture among Meskhetian Turks. In the previous section, I discussed interviewees remarks about the importance of preserving the culture. Preservation, according to the interviewees, is a result of community. No matter where they were, Meskhetian Turks managed to create a community and build strong ties with each other. As Ms. Selvi explains: "*Meskhetians are strongly tied to each other. They believe in unity. How shall I say it? We give each other a hand, we stay together.*"

In the past, strong communities were required for safety, too. In Uzbekistan or in Russia, Meskhetian Turks had to live together first and foremost for survival. In the United States, they have freedom and security, which they lacked for decades. However, elimination of a threat and being scattered within the United States are also causes for concern regarding losing their culture. I will discuss these issues more in depth later on. Nonetheless, the interviewees referred to their situation in the United States with the intention of clarifying the importance of community for their culture and its preservation.

*Mr. Mustafa: We don't lose our culture, because we love living together; 10 families, 20 families; we love living in the same place [neighborhood].*

*NB: Meskhetian Turks are committed to each other.*

*Mr. Mustafa: We don't live by ourselves. For example, I wouldn't go, buy a house in Phoenix by myself, live there by myself. We bought our house here, because there were five or six families here. We didn't lose our culture, because we always lived tight. We always lived within our people, our culture. If we were to scatter all around, we would have lost our culture long ago. We would have lost our language, religion, everything. We continue that way here in America... In Phoenix, no one lives alone. At least five or six families live together [on the same street]. Here [on his street], it's the same: there are six or seven families. In the whole neighborhood, there are maybe 30 families. So we are at most a two-minute drive from each other.*

*NB: The whole community tries to be close to one another.*

*Mr. Mustafa: Yes, yes. If we scattered; we'd lose our religion, our language; we'd lose everything. Because, being alone is a gridlock; when you're in it, you can't see your traditions, your values. You go to work, come home; you're alone... Then you lose who you are.*

As Mustafa's remarks indicate there is a mutually influential bond between preservation and sense of community. No matter where they are, Meskhetian Turks build a community. They gather in close proximity to one another. Strong connections they feel toward their own culture and their own people are important characteristics of their culture. At the same time, communities they establish help preserve their culture. All interviewees articulated that establishing a community is vital for cultural preservation.

*Mr. Osman: Meskhetians... Our culture is such that we cannot live without other Turks. Other people, they can live by themselves. We cannot. We enjoy living together, I don't why.*

*NB: So you feel connected to your community.*

*Mr. Osman: We are very connected to each other. You have to be connected to your family, to your relatives and your people. In America, they scattered us around, but we're trying to get back together, trying to unify. The most important thing is to be in the same place.*

*NB: To be together.*

*Mr. Osman: To be together... We all have to get together. If we are all around, far away; we can't live. Even being in the same city is not enough. You*



*need people close; so when you leave your house, you can see your people around. When your neighbors are Turks, you can sustain your culture.*

The relationship between preservation and community is almost cyclical. They establish communities, because they want to preserve Meskhetian Turkish culture. Subsequently, creating a community is a cultural trait they preserve. Sense of community is so vital that some interviewees even claim, in order to be considered a Meskhetian Turk; one has to be a part of a Meskhetian Turkish community. The bonds one has with his or her community is a cultural identifier; and those who are apart from the community cannot fully be seen as Meskhetian Turks. For one to be a part of the community certain components, such as birth, history, language, religion and ethnicity, need to exist. However, none of these components determine whether a person is perceived as a Meskhetian Turk; in the end, being a part of the collective is the greatest identifier.

*Mr. Göksel: To be Meskhetian means to be within Meskhetians. A Meskhetian is not a Meskhetian if he isn't within the community, if he isn't a part of the collective.*

*NB: So, people have to be together, in a community.*

*Mr. Göksel: That's it. The most important thing is to be a part of the Meskhetian collective. Because one is only a Meskhetian within that collective, within that community. So, if he is a Meskhetian; he has to create that community, he has to be a part of that community. That community is what makes him a Meskhetian.*

Sense of community is also tied to the importance of family and raising children. Interviewees articulated that they rely on the community for not only the wellbeing of their children, but also for passing on the cultural traits to the new generations.

*Mr. Osman: The only way we can preserve our culture is to be together. Here, life is so different. You walk out the door, people speak English; so your children will speak English. If everyone is in one place, then children will go out and see Turks, they will play with Turks. They will learn the culture. They will not forget; even if their mothers and fathers couldn't teach them, they will learn from their neighbors. If we live apart, the children will learn other cultures and our culture will disappear.*

When Meskhetian Turks first gained refugee status and moved to Phoenix, the government placed them in a number of apartment complexes. In time, community members pursued education, gained employment and became more and more financially secure. Once a family possessed the means to sustain themselves, they bought houses and moved away from the apartments. Each new family buying a house chose a location close to other Meskhetian Turks, as such, a new community is being created.

*NB: So you moved into this neighborhood to be close to other Meskhetian Turks?*

*Mr. Göksel: Of course. If at first a few families move some place, others follow; so they can be together.*

There is only one reason for Meskhetian Turks to gather in the same location, to want to emerge a new community; that is to preserve who they are. As Mr. Osman explains: "*All we want is to be together, to preserve our community; so we don't lose our culture.*"

#### Answering Research Question I:

As this section exhibits, Meskhetian Turkish culture can be defined by three major themes: connection to history, preservation of culture and sense of community. Connection to history has produced three minor themes: Turkish heritage, not having a homeland, and ties to Meskheta and the past. Preservation of culture comprised four minor themes: religion, language, hospitality and family traditions; such as family relations, gender roles, raising children, and marriage. These three major themes and their sub-components explain the intricacies of Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity. Next, I will explore answers for the second research question.

#### **RQ 2: How do Meskhetian Turks define their relationship and/or connection with the Turkish communities living in the area?**

- What are certain Turkish symbols, habits, and cultural components they embrace?
- What is the significance of these cultural components for Meskhetian Turks?

As I discussed in the first research question, interviews demonstrated a connection between Meskhetian Turks and their Turkish heritage. This connection

was about history of Meskhetian Turks. In this section, I will explore their connection to the land and people of Turkey.

The research question focused on the connection between Meskhetian Turks and Turks in the United States. Yet, the answers also provided a connection between Meskhetian Turks and Turkey; beyond the people, a connection between Meskhetian Turks and the land itself. Thus, two major themes emerged regarding research question two: connection between Meskhetian Turks and Turkey, and relations between Meskhetian Turks and Turks in the United States. I will discuss the first theme through the remarks interviewees made regarding Turkey, Turkish nation and government; and the latter theme in three sections: the relationship Meskhetian Turks have with Turks in the United States, similarities they perceive between the two cultures, and differences they observe.

*Meskhetian Turks and Turkey:*

*The interview was over. We were sitting, having tea and just talking. The conversation turned to Turkey. Mr. Irmak got up, "I have something to show you" he said. He left the room for a minute or two and when he came back he handed me a photograph. It was black and white, taken years ago in Russia, yet, it wasn't worn. Obviously it was cared for. There were two men in the photo, sitting side by side at a restaurant table, arms around each other's shoulders, smiling widely to the camera. "This..." he said, "is the first Turk from Turkey I met. I was there with friends, we were so happy to meet a Turk... I felt like I had found my brother. I got tears in my eyes. We took this picture that day. I never forgot that day..."*

Mr. Irmak cherished the night, when he met someone from Turkey for the first time. He holds on to his keepsake of the night, the photograph, even decades later. He is not alone in his sentiments. An elderly Meskhetian Turkish man, whom I met during a visit to an interviewee's house said *"we'd see big trucks passing on the highway. Whenever I saw a truck with Turkish names on it, I would get goose bumps thinking it's on its way to Turkey."*

According to Ms. Selvi, Turkish artists frequently have concerts in Russia, and Meskhetian Turks would gather and make a point to attend each one. Whether it's watching performances, meeting Turks or something as simple and innocuous as seeing a Turkish name on a truck; the interviews produced powerful sentiments, which are examples of strong ties with Turkey. Perhaps, some of the most evident demonstrations of these ties are Turkish artifacts in Meskhetian Turkish homes, most significant of them being the Turkish Republic flag. In every Meskhetian Turkish home I visited, except for one, I encountered at least one Turkish flag. In two homes, besides the flag, there were artifacts containing the crescent moon and the star of the flag; such as a poster of Turkey, a calendar with pictures from Turkey, key chains, and knick-knacks.

Mr. Osman states, having the Turkish flag exhibited at home *"shows that we are Turkish. We celebrate, we love Turkey."* Ms. Fatima says *"surely I have a Turkish flag at home, and a big one. We hang it on the wall with pride."* One night, Mr. Işık was showing me pictures from Russia, Uzbekistan and even Meskheti. *"This is our friend's home, in Russia"* he said, there was a big Turkish flag behind the men in the picture. He pointed to the flag and explained *"Turkish*

*flag was never missing in our homes, no matter where we lived," furthermore, according to Ms. Ala "there are no Meskhetian Turkish homes without a Turkish flag."*

Flag is an artifact signifying a nation. The place of the Turkish flag in Meskhetian Turkish homes indicate the connection Meskhetian Turks feel toward Turkey. When I asked about this connection, the interviewees, except for one, claimed they feel they are a part of the Turkish nation, more specifically people of Turkey.

Consequently, the logo of their organization in the United States features the symbols of the Turkish flag, indicating the significance of their connection to Turkey for their cultural identity. Meskhetian Turks are still working toward gaining their rights in Meskheta. For this purpose, they established an organization called "Ahıska<sup>5</sup>-Meskhetian Turks Organization of America." While explaining the organization and its goals, Mr. Işık showed me the logo. It is of a man, chained on both feet (representing how Russia and Georgian chained them) with the word Ahıska surrounding him. In his hand, he's holding up a crescent moon and a star.

As discussed previously, the interviewees stated they see themselves as Turkish. For instance, Ms. Fatima explained that when asked in the United States, she tells people she is Turkish. According to her, being Turkish is who she is. All interviewees made similar comments, showing their connection to Turkey. When I asked them, if given the choice they would have preferred moving to Turkey,

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<sup>5</sup> Ahıska is the Turkish name for Meskheta

instead of the United States, all interviewees, except one, gave an affirmative answer.

Furthermore, many interviewees, especially older generation, articulated that they have plans about, or at least dream of, retiring in Turkey. Ms. Ala is still raising her children and working for a future for them. However, she states *"I think about moving to Antalya [southern coast of Turkey]. My uncle's son's been there, he praises it a lot."* Ms. Selvi says *"if we can't make it back to Meskheti, I hope we can make it to Turkey,"* and she adds *"if we want to preserve our culture, we should preserve our ties with Turkey."* Ms. Fatima claims *"I believe our people will all end up in Turkey one day."* Mr. Göksel's answer summarizes the younger generation's opinion *"we are raising our children, we are working for them now. Once the children are grown, and our work is done; Turkey is our destination."*

Although living in Turkey is a desire many share, only a few had a chance to visit it so far. Their aforementioned situation of not having a legal status and subsequently a passport, prevented a chance to visit Turkey before. Three interviewees, Mr. Işık, Ms. Selvi and Mr. Mustafa are exceptions to this situation.

Mr. Mustafa is one of the relatively lucky Meskhetian Turks. He was in a different part of Russia when Soviet Union collapsed. Therefore, he had a Russian passport. However, members of his family were in Krasnodar, where he later moved. He is the only interviewee, who had the opportunity to travel. He stated he spent 13 months in Turkey, travelling all around the country for one single reason *"I wanted to see as much of it as I could, so I could decide where my*

*family could live.*" Unfortunately, his wife did not have a status, hence, she couldn't leave and the family's only option was moving to United States.

Mr. Işık and Ms. Selvi recently obtained American passports, after which they both visited Turkey. Ms. Selvi has a daughter in Turkey. She married a Meskhetian Turk, who had the means to move to Turkey. The mother and daughter hadn't seen each other for nearly a decade. As soon as Ms. Selvi got her American passport, she visited her daughter and met her grandchildren for the first time.

Turkey is more than a land for Meskhetian Turks. Ms. Selvi's daughter, Ms. Ala's cousin, Ms. Fatima's sister are only some of the examples showing that many Meskhetian Turks have family members in Turkey. When interviewees refer to people in Turkey as "our people," the statement is quite literal. These connections contribute to the strong ties between Meskhetian Turks and Turkey.

Furthermore, Meskhetian Turks have expectations from Turkey. Mr. Işık spent some time in the capital, Ankara, working to move along political channels to help regain Meskhetian Turkish rights in Georgia. His visit to Ankara is a significant demonstration of these expectations. Turkey is perceived as almost a guardian, and when Turkish government fails to meet Meskhetian Turks' expectations; the result is disappointment, even resentment.

As mentioned before, all interviewees articulated a desire to move to Turkey at one point, except for one: Mr. Murat. His remarks about Turkey and his feelings about it exemplify the resentment as a result of Turkey's failure to intervene and aid Meskhetian Turks since 1944. Below is an excerpt from my



interview with Mr. Murat. His wife Ms. Şenalkod also offered her comments during this section.

*NB: Do you have a Turkish flag in your home?*

*Mr. Murat: No, I don't.*

*NB: I was curious, because at your daughter's wedding there were balloons with Turkish flag on them [referring to pictures of the wedding I was shown previously]*

*Ms. Şenalkod: There were balloons and Turkish flag at the wedding, but the others [their in-laws] did that. We never had a Turkish flag, here or in Russia.*

*Mr. Murat: I am angry with Turkey. That's why I don't have a Turkish flag.*

*NB: Why are you angry with Turkey?*

*Mr. Murat: When Fergana events took place, Turkey didn't even make a sound.*

*NB: They didn't do anything, that's why you're angry.*

*Mr. Murat: Yes, we didn't hear anything from them.*

*Ms. Şenalkod: We faced so many difficulties those years.*

*Mr. Murat: In Krasnodar they were tormenting us, Turkey remained silent.*

*NB: Turkey didn't advocate for you, they didn't protect you.*

*Mr. Murat: They didn't protect us at all. 29, maybe 30 families went to Turkey; then they closed the way. They didn't take in any one else. We couldn't*

*even go back to Meskheti, but Turkey didn't let us in. Later on, they let more people in, some managed to move.*

*NB: But, that wasn't enough support.*

*Mr. Murat: Yes, they didn't support us; and they didn't support us when we needed them. I think, Turkey needs Russian tourists, that's what I believe. It's all political.*

*NB: Hence, you're angry with Turkey. When you were coming to the United States, if Turkey also offered you status, would you choose to go to Turkey then?*

*Mr. Murat: I still wouldn't go.*

*NB: So you are that angry.*

*Mr. Murat: I am that angry.*

During interviews and our social meetings, other members of the Meskhetian Turkish community expressed their disappointment with Turkish government. Although, none were as strong as Mr. Murat's sentiments; Turkish government's failure to intervene and provide protection seems to create resentment. As Mr. Işık explains, *"Turkey keeps promising help, but never enough. The politics and economics get in the way. For the sake of economics, they forget politics; when they forget politics, they forget us."*

Nonetheless, Turkey is still perceived as almost a guardian or the ancestral land. It is described as *"land of our people," "place where we can hear ezan<sup>6</sup>,"* and ultimately *"home."*

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<sup>6</sup> Call to prayer from Mosques, which takes place 5 times a day.

### *Meskhetian Turks and Turks*

Previous section demonstrated the connection to Turkey Meskhetian Turks revealed during interviews. In this section, I will discuss the interviewees' perceptions of Turks and their relationship with the Turkish community in Phoenix. During the interviews, three minor themes or aspects emerged regarding Meskhetian Turks' connection to Turks. First, the community's relationship to Turks in Phoenix, second the similarities interviewees report between them and Turks and finally the differences they observe. Exploring these aspects separately helps build an understanding of them collectively.

#### Relationship to Turks in Phoenix:

As discussed earlier, majority of interviewees never had a chance to travel to Turkey and didn't have many opportunities to meet Turks in Uzbekistan or Russia. Hence, Turks in Phoenix are, for the most part, first Turks from Turkey interviewees met, or the very least, the first Turks, with whom they established a relationship. As a result, when talking about Turks or Turkish culture; the interviewees base their perception on the Turkish community they encounter in Phoenix.

Earlier in the study, I explained that there are two distinctly different Turkish communities in Phoenix. One group is more liberal, whereas the second group is more conservative or religious. The latter creates a community through a Turkish cultural center. The center provides a physical gathering space for community members. Religious holidays and special days are celebrated at the center. The community comes together for prayers, rituals and religious traditions.

There are also additional services offered, most significant of which, is a Saturday school for children, where they are taught Turkish language, history and religion.

Every interviewee stated they have social relations with Turks in Phoenix, and without exception, every interviewee clarified that Turks with whom they socialize are cultural center members; hence the religious Turkish community. Six interviewees have young children and all of these interviewees reported that their children attend the Saturday school at the center.

The relationship with Turks started with Meskhetian Turks' arrival at Phoenix. Both communities, religious and liberal, volunteered their assistance to Meskhetian Turks. U.S. government provided the refugees with housing and necessities. Still, without knowing the language and perhaps even more importantly, the culture; Meskhetian Turks needed a hand. Turkish communities helped them get settled, learn the environment and understand the way of life in the United States. Mr. Göksel refers to their first days in the United States and says *"we are thankful to Turks, they didn't leave us alone. They lent us a hand, helped us so much."*

In time, cultural center and its community became the Turks, with whom Meskhetian Turks socialize. First reason for this development is the liberal Turks' lack of unity and continued contact with even each other. The second reason is the active role the center takes in bringing people together and providing services. Ms. Selvi says *"they teach us Koran. They gather every week for Koran study. They always include us."* According to Ms. Ala, *"Fridays<sup>7</sup> men get together,*

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<sup>7</sup> Friday is the holy day for Muslims, community goes to Mosques and prays together.

*Saturday women gather and study Koran.*" As mentioned before, children attend the Saturday school, so they can study Turkish and religion.

Since, Meskhetian Turks obtained regular employment, adults are not attending the weekly gatherings as they once did. Mr. Mustafa explains this as *"with work and everything we have to do, we can't go to the meetings like before,"* however, he adds *"but we never miss Bayrams, we go for Ramadan and for special days."* As evident from his remarks, the relationship continues, especially to maintain traditions and celebrate religious holidays.

Interviewees, such as Ms. Fatima, Ms. Ala, Ms. Selvi and Ms. Nisa also indicated they have Turkish neighbors and they socialize with their Turkish neighbors daily. Socialization as neighbors entail strong relationships for Meskhetian Turks, as discussed in the section regarding sense of community. Having these relationships is an indication of strong socialization between Meskhetian Turks and Turks.

Another aspect of the relationship between Meskhetian Turks and Turks can be seen in employment and education choices. Male interviewees all reported that they either one time worked with or are still working with Turks or in Turkish businesses. Another important fact is that the children all attend a school with Turkish teachers. These schools are not Turkish schools. They are American schools, but with at least one or two Turkish teachers. The interviewees articulated that they feel their children are safer because *"Turkish teachers keep an eye on them, so we feel better, "* as Ms. Faiye explains.

Strong relationships and socialization with Turks present a significant connection between Meskhetian Turks and Turks. In order to understand this connection better, I asked the interviewees to share their perceptions of similarities and differences between their community and Turks. Next, I will discuss these elements separately.

Similarities between Meskhetian Turks and Turks:

*Mr. Göksel: Turk is Turk. What difference does it make? From Meskheti, from Turkey... Turk is Turk. We are the same people.*

*Ms. Ala: We're all Turks. Our religion, our language, our ways... they're all the same.*

These remarks exemplify how interviewees perceive Turks. There is shared history, shared heritage and shared culture between Meskhetian Turks and Turks, according to the interviewees. When asked about similarities or commonalities, the interviewees referred to religion and language as the most important unifiers. Talking about religion or language, the pronoun is always "our," which shows how these cultural components create a collective identity for the interviewees.

Similarly, cultural components such as traditions, understandings and even food are common between Meskhetian Turks and Turks, according to the interviewees. Mr. Işık explained "*but it's the same çeçil cheese, same tulum cheese*<sup>8</sup>. *From Fosof, from Ardahan*<sup>9</sup>... We [I] visited Turkey, we [I] saw... Even our food is the same."

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<sup>8</sup> Types of Turkish cheese

Common cultural norms, values and traditions are referred to as "our ways." *"Our ways are the same"* Ms. Selvi said, *"we have the same ways"* Ms. Ala claimed, *"norms, traditions are the same. They [Meskhetian Turks and Turks] are the same inside"* Mr. Göksel explained. Being the same inside is a phrase referencing a Turkish idiom. Being the same inside means having the same beliefs, values or ways of thinking. As Mr. Osman articulated *"where we come from is different. Otherwise, there are no differences in my eyes."*

These statements indicate a perceived common cultural understanding between the two communities. Ms. Selvi's words below show the connection between two groups. Just as Ms. Selvi, interviewees frequently refer to Turks as "our people," proving how they see the two communities as almost one.

*NB: So you believe Meskhetian Turks and Turks are the same.*

*Ms. Selvi: Of course they are. Our ways, our traditions are the identical. All we had to endure, happened because we are Turks. We lived under tyranny since the times of Nicolai, because we are Turks. Our people are Turks left in Russia from the times of the Ottoman.*

*NB: Does that mean you see Turks from Turkey as your people?*

*Ms. Selvi: Yes. I recently visited my daughter in Turkey. I feel proud that we are Turks. I feel proud that my daughter lives in Turkey, among our people.*

#### Differences between Meskhetian Turks and Turks:

Despite the strong statements underlining commonalities and even referring to Meskhetian Turks and Turks as one community through phrases such

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<sup>9</sup> Cities in Turkey

as "our people," the interviewees also indicate differences between Meskhetian Turks and Turks. Mostly, these differences are attributed to the fact that these communities had to separate through history and that Meskhetian Turks had to co-exist within three cultures distinctly different than their own: Georgian, Uzbek and Russian.

Differences interviewees reported are also the similarities they stated: language and religion. According to the interviewees, Meskhetian Turks' thrice relocation through their history resulted in certain influences from circumstances and cultures amid they existed. Consequently, the differences they perceive between Meskhetian Turks and Turks emerged.

In terms of language, the differences are two-fold. First of all, because of three different states and subsequently three different languages with which they lived, the interviewees claim their language has words mixed into it. Russian, Georgian and Uzbek words are a part of their daily vocabulary. Mr. Mustafa explained this difference: *"We mix in Russian words, how shall put it? In our language, we mix Russian, Uzbek, Middle Asian words."*

Second difference, in terms of language, is the Turkish vocabulary interviewees observe. As Mr. Göksel stated *"in time, words from Russian and Uzbek were added to our language. Similarly, Turks have words from Europe in their speech."* Interviewees pointed out the western influence on Turkish vocabulary. *"They use words like kuzen [cousin], merci, or pantalon [pants],"* or *"German words, French words, English words are mixed into their [Turks'] speech"* were some of the criticism interviewees offered.



After language, the most significant difference interviewees report is religion. While comparing themselves to Turks in Phoenix, with whom they socialize; interviewees articulated religious devotion and knowledge as a point of difference. *"They know the Koran," "they read more [study the Koran]"* and *"they are more devout Muslims"* were some of the sentiments. Interviewees also added they appreciate Turks' knowledge of Islam. *"We lived in a communist state, we couldn't learn religion as much as Turks"* said Ms. Selvi. *"Thankfully, Turks are teaching us"* stated Ms. Ala.

Consequently, they also disprove westernized and less devout Turks. *"Some have lost their way, women don't dress moderately [no head scarf, long sleeves or long skirts], they don't follow the religion"* said Ms. Selvi. While talking about the same issues and saying some Turks lost their cultural roots, Ms. Nisa turned to me *"look, you also don't dress traditionally,"* referring to my western attire.

At the same time, there is an appreciation for Turks' approach to females. *"The greatest difference"* Ms. Ala says, *"Turks educate their daughters. We couldn't send our daughters to school. Even when we could go, our parents said, it's too far, it's not safe, a girl doesn't study. Turks don't do that. They send their daughters to school. All Turkish women have jobs."* The Meskhetian Turkish attitude towards female education is changing in the United States, which will be discussed in the next section.

### Answering Research Question II:

Research question II focused on the Meskhetian Turks' connection to Turks in Phoenix. The interviews led to two major themes in this regard: Meskhetian Turks and Turkey, and Meskhetian Turks and Turks. First theme revealed a connection interviewees presented toward Turkey. Second theme produced three aspects: Meskhetian Turks' relationship with Turks in Phoenix, the similarities they perceive between the two communities and the differences they observe.

This theme demonstrated strong ties Meskhetian Turks have with Turks. Interviews concluded Meskhetian Turks see their community as a part of the larger Turkish community. They emphasize similarities and commonalities. Interviewees also reported differences, however, for the most part, they attributed these differences to historical circumstances and their repeated relocation.

### **RQ 3: How do Meskhetian Turks define the American culture and their place in the American society?**

- How do Meskhetian Turks perceive the American culture?
- What kind of cultural differences do Meskhetian Turks report when comparing their culture with American culture?
- How do they perceive their place in American society?
- How do they cope with cultural differences between what they define as Meskhetian culture and perceive as American culture?
- What are their biggest concerns regarding preserving their Meskhetian Turkish identity as refugees in the United States?

The final research question was designed to understand Meskhetian Turks' adaptation in the United States. Two major themes in this regard are, Meskhetian Turkish adaptation and perceptions of American society. The first theme will be discussed in various aspects regarding the changes Meskhetian Turks experience in their lives. These changes comprise a range from everyday life to outlook on the future. Second theme, perceptions of American society will be discussed in two sections: positive perceptions or simple differences and negative perceptions.

*Adaptation in the United States:*

The first theme, adaptation, produced seven different aspects or minor themes. First aspect is the interviewees' perceptions of their place within the American society. Second aspect is language barrier, as it impacts their lives in the United States and adaptation process immensely. These aspects or minor themes are followed by sections on changes to everyday lives, impact of being in the United States on religion, feeling secure in the United States, hope for future and fear of losing culture or identity.

Meskhetian Turks' Place in the American Society:

*Ms. Nisa: Most importantly, here [in the United States] they don't call us Turks. In Russia, they called us Turks.*

*NB: Here they don't call you Turks.*

*Ms. Nisa: They [Americans] don't.*

*NB: What do they call you?*

*Ms. Nisa: People, you know... normal people*

Without an exception, every interviewee articulated they feel accepted and respected in the United States. Although they face challenges, such as language barrier; and they may feel distanced from US society because of cultural differences; they still feel a part of it because they feel secure and not discriminated against.

When talking about the lack of opportunities for education and employment, or insecurities and injustice they faced in Russia; the interviewees frequently compared their current situation in the United States to their previous conditions in Russia. "*There*" they endured segregation, oppression; whereas "*here*" there is acceptance.

Ms. Nisa's words are very significant. "*In Russia they called us Turks*" is a statement signifying labeling and discrimination they faced. Being Turks was not a simple ethnic identifier, but a label used to differentiate their ethnicity from Russians. Furthermore, her words about how in the United States, they are simply "*people... normal people*" show the lengths of inequality Meskhetian Turks faced in Russia. On the contrary, within the American society, according to the interviewees, they feel equality and safety.

#### Language Barrier:

Language barrier is an important challenge for Meskhetian Turks in the United States. Certain perceptions regarding Americans, such as lack of community; is a direct result of this barrier. These perceptions will be addressed later in the study. In this section, I will discuss the consequences of this barrier on the Meskhetian Turks' adaptation.

Every refugee attended classes provided by the American government to learn English. The younger generation's language skills are more advanced than the older generation, simply because they have to rely on their abilities at work or at school. Older generation, however, are more secluded and isolated within their families and their community. Nonetheless, both groups recognize the need to improve their language skills for better communication with Americans around them; their neighbors, co-workers, and society members.

When I asked the interviewees to explain their perceptions of the American society and their relation to Americans around them at work or in their neighborhoods, answers indicated the importance of language and the challenges limited language skills present in their adaptation. Mr. Irmak's words, "*we don't know the language, we can't talk to them [Americans] comfortably. We can't joke with them* " shows the communication challenge language presents.

The interviews revealed certain negative perceptions Meskhetian Turks observe about the American society; such as lack of a sense of community, or family values foreign to their understanding. While talking about their perceived negative notions regarding the American culture; the interviewees also acknowledged that their understanding is limited because of a language barrier.

*"If we could talk to them like we talk to each other, maybe we'd see things differently"* Mr. Osman said. His words are an example to the fact that Meskhetian Turks see language barrier as one of the reasons for not being able to get to know Americans, or interact with them like they do within their community.

## Life in the United States:

*Working on the fields was the only way to survive in Russia. They would rent sections of fields from Russians, without any paper trail; grow whatever they could; and sell them in farmer's markets. Fatima would accompany her family to the markets every day. When she was 10, Fatima decided she wanted to grow blueberries on the farm land her family rented. Her mother didn't see any harm in letting her grow this fruit no one else had, no one else sold, hence, in her mind, no one else wanted.*

*This was the precise reason for Fatima's desire to grow them; because no one else had them. The first time she brought blueberries to the market, she sold out within a couple of hours. When she became an adult, she was the first to think of buying a cell phone. She would go to the market ahead of her family and friends, look around, see what produce was in abundance and what was scarce. "if there wasn't enough cucumbers, I'd call and say bring cucumbers, or strawberries."*

Fatima always had a sharp sense of business. More importantly, she always had great talent for drawing and design. *"I had stacks of notebooks with clothing designs I drew"* she says. She wanted to go to school, but it wasn't possible. One day she got so frustrated, so angry that she burned all her notebooks; her efforts seemed futile to her.

She's been in the United States for 5 years now. She finished her training and works as a phlebotomist at a hospital. She also works as a seamstress whenever she can. She is married, has young children, and takes care of her

family. Despite all these, she is taking classes at Phoenix College for a fashion design degree; because, finally, she can. She can get a degree, she can work in any job she wants and she can turn her dreams into reality.

Life in America provided the greatest difference for females. Education is definitely the most significant difference. As mentioned before, younger Meskhetian Turks are pursuing education or training in the United States. Ms. Nisa, who is an older woman, talked about how proud she is that both her adult daughters are working and pursuing degrees in the United States. Her daughters live in different states, because they are married. Yet, they are pursuing education, simply because it is finally an option for them. Ms. Ala, who appreciates the education Turkish women get, also stated *"it's changing for us now. Here [in the United States], we can send our daughters to school, too. Now our girls are being educated, like Turks."*

Female interviewees also point out that everyday life is easier for them. *"There [in Russia] we [women] didn't work, but we had more to do. We'd get up work in the fields. You had to work in the summer, so you can have potatoes in the field. If you want to cook, you have to go to the field, get your potatoes, then you cook them. You have to work on the fields, then you have to do the housework. We'd work nonstop. Here [in the United States] we have dishwashers [and such], life is easier."* Even though, Meskhetian Turkish women work outside the home and still carry the responsibility of housework, according to the interviewees, life is still easier in the United States. Responsibilities and labor they have to shoulder are more manageable.

The situation is similar with male Meskhetian Turks. Education opportunities were limited in Russia. Even those, who got degrees before 1991, before they lost citizenship rights, were denied access to employment. According to Ms. Ala *"even those who had papers [citizenship] couldn't get work. They said; you're Turks, and didn't give them work. Some had diplomas [degrees], but couldn't work in their areas. We all had to work on the fields. Until we got here [United States]. Until here, we all had to work on the fields."* Mr. Işık is an example to this fact. He has a degree in water and civil engineering, however, after 1991 he lost citizenship and was denied access to any employment in his area.

Ms. Faiye summarizes the change in their lives and betterment of their situation: *"for men everything is easy here; they go to work, come home. For women, the housework is not difficult here. They go to work, come home and housework is easy. After seeing Russia, this is very easy."* The interviews reveal Meskhetian Turks' lives are more comfortable, easier to manage and has many more opportunities compared to their previous conditions. As a result, the interviewees expressed their gratitude and appreciation of their lives in the United States.

#### Religion:

Changes to Meskhetian Turkish lives are not limited to education and employment opportunities. Their lives have also changed in terms of their religion and the ability to practice their beliefs. As previous sections demonstrate, religion is a crucial part of Meskhetian Turkish culture and their religious identity is a



significant cultural identifier. From Soviet Union to Russia, they endured discrimination because of their religious affiliations. One of the most influential consequences of communist regime in the Soviet Union is alienation of religion. As discussed in previous sections, interviewees frequently referred to oppression and segregation they endured in Russia in terms of religion. Their ability to practice religion, perform rituals and fulfill traditions were hindered by a system denying religious freedom.

*"In Russia, people repeat Marx's words: religion is the opium for the masses. They use these words to destroy religion" Mr. Işık said. He continued talking about how religion, and specifically Islam, was oppressed, even ridiculed in Russia. He added "Here [in the United States] people respect religion. They don't force people, they don't oppress people. Everyone is free to believe in their own religion. In Russia, forget support for Islam; they didn't even permit us to perform prayers twice a year for Bayrams. People would pray on the streets, in mud, in snow. In America, they respect our religion."*

Consequently, the interviewees articulated they feel their religion is respected and they have religious freedom in the United States. Ms. Faiye said *"Here, you can be proud of being a Muslim. In Russia, you can't even say you're a Muslim. Because they distance themselves from you. Here, we are free to say it. In Russia, when they see you with a headscarf, they start whispering and talking behind you."*

Faiye's words show that beyond political regulations, Meskhetian Turks also experienced religious discrimination within Russian society. When they

compare their previous experiences to their lives in the United States, the interviewees state they see acceptance and tolerance for their religion. Ms. Ala said, *"In Russia or in Uzbekistan, we couldn't even gather and read Koran together."<sup>10</sup> We couldn't even learn our religion as well as we wanted."* Whereas in the United States, as Mr. Göksel explained, *"you can wear a headscarf if your religious beliefs require it. You're told, it's OK to cover your hair, if you want. No one tells you, you can't."*

### Feeling secure

Being seen as "people," freedom, equality, and liberty in the United States result in a sense of security for Meskhetian Turks. They may not feel completely included, which they attribute to language barriers and different understanding of social interactions; such as neighbors and sense of community. However, the interviewees strongly stress that they do not feel discriminated against or alienated in any way. Oppression they endured in Russia often paired with violence towards the group. Hence, one of the most important positive changes in their lives is feeling secure and trusting in the system in the United States.

Ms. Selvi explained the notion of security she feels in the United States with another comparison to the life she lived before: *"[in Uzbekistan] they bombed homes close to us. They slaughtered my husband's brother's son. They burned his uncle's grandson.... [in Russia] government refused to give us papers. The police would come to our homes, knowing we didn't have papers. They'd ask for money, if you can't give money, then they take your life. They'd come, take*

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<sup>10</sup> Ritualistically, Muslims gather and read prayers from Koran as a community on special occasions.

*anything we had; money, flour [food], rugs... etc. One night, they came and put a knife on my youngest daughter's neck; pay or we'll cut her throat, they said."* The interviews were full of horror stories such as these. Interviewees told these stories as a comparison to their lives in the United States. Coming from a place, where police threatens to harm one's children, interviewees appreciate the system in the United States and more importantly, they trust it.

Mr. Göksel observed *"in America, this is the system. It doesn't matter who you are or where you came from. You work five days a week, eight hours a day; then you're off two days. You get paid fairly, you're treated fairly. What you make, where you spend your money; it's all clear and honest. The system is simple, work and don't steal, be honest."* The interviewees trust laws and regulations, what they call "the system" in the United States. They define this system as fair.

As Mr. Mustafa explained *"at first we were shocked by how they [Americans] treated us. Their attitudes are excellent. We never saw treatment like this before. It doesn't matter who you are, you are treated fairly and with respect. If you commit a crime, then you pay for it. But nothing is pinned on you, or you are not accused of any crime that is committed; just because you're Turkish. That's what we saw in Russia. They used to blame us for everything. Here you can trust the police, the government and the people."*

In addition to trusting the system, the interviewees also observe American society as law abiding and dignified; more than the system, the individuals are fair and honest, according to the interviewees. *"There is order here"* said Mr. Işık, *"people obey the law. There is no bribery. In Russia, you can't do anything unless*

*you bribe people. Here, there is law." Ms. Selvi agreed with this perception: "you go to the market, everything's open on the shelves because people don't steal. There is security in the markets, but they help people. They helped us put our bags in the car. In Russia we never saw police helping a person, at least they never helped us."*

### Hope for future

*NB: What changed for you in the United States?*

*Ms. Faiye: My desires changed. What I want, what I dream has changed...*

Being in the United States has given Meskhetian Turks security, education, employment and many other opportunities. More important than that, being in the United States has given them something they didn't have for a very long time: hope for future. They now, have the ability to dream, to desire, and to hope.

*"We can send our children to school" Ms. Fatima expressed. "In Russia, there were days when we couldn't even find bread. Here, if you work, you can do anything." Ms. Faiye said. Mr. Göksel concurred "in Russia we worked and worked, for fifteen years we had nothing. Here in five years, I have a house. You can do anything here, if you work for it."*

More than individuals creating a life for themselves and their children's future; there is also hope for the future of Meskhetian Turks as a community. Mr. Işık indicated being in the United States gives Meskhetian Turks a voice, which they didn't have before. *"Being American citizens help us continue our fight for our rights. We were exiled from Georgia, one. We were exiled from Uzbekistan,*

*two. We were forced out from Russia, three. We have to continue fighting for our rights. In America, we can do that."* Being in the United States gives them a hope for future; yet, as Mr. Işık's words show, looking forward doesn't mean forgetting about the past. Hope for future also includes a hope to right the wrongs they endured for generations.

Fear of losing culture and identity:

*Ms. Selvi: If children change, it would impact the culture. In a glass, if you put water, sugar and oil; water and oil don't mix, they stay the same. But sugar melts, it disappears. If we're not careful, we'll melt.*

All the changes and challenges of a new life in the United States have a common consequence for the interviewees: fear of losing their cultural identity. In the previous sections, I discussed the importance of identity and the preservation of culture for the group. While talking about their future in the United States, the interviewees referred to the importance of preservation and a fear of losing their identity as Meskhetian Turks; especially a fear for younger generations. *"I fear youngsters may change"* Ms. Faiye said, *"already, they don't want to force themselves. If something's difficult, they ask why should I trouble myself."*

Interviewees suggested there is a threat of losing their cultural identity in the United States. This fear is not based on differences they observe between Meskhetian Turkish culture and the American society; but the comforts and liberties they now enjoy. Interviewees explained Meskhetian Turks managed to preserve their culture in the face of everything they endured. Furthermore, as Mr. Osman suggested, Meskhetian Turks preserved their culture, not despite the

oppression, but as a result of it. *"Here everything is easy, comfortable. Nobody pressures you to change."*

The lack of pressure, as Mr. Osman calls it, is a cause for concern because new generations may not have a reason to preserve their identity. *"No pressure... culture is lost easier with comfort."* He explained. Mr. Mustafa claimed *"this government gives people freedom. That freedom draws in people. In Russia, there was a lot of force, a lot of pressure. In the face of that pressure, we made a greater effort to preserve our religion, our culture. Here, there is freedom. With freedom, there is danger of losing culture, traditions and everything."*

Solution to this fear, according to the interviewees, is to unite. *"We need our community. We need to stay together."* Ms. Ala said. *"When we live together, people go to each other's homes, they stay together. We all celebrate together, laugh together; there is no separation. If we stay together, we stay as who we are."*

#### *Perceptions of American Society*

Previous section focused on various aspects of Meskhetian Turkish adaptation in the United States. Their adaptation to the American society is directly connected to their perceptions of the American culture. Thus, in this section, I will discuss interviewees' perceptions of the American society. Naturally, interviewees evaluate what they consider to be the American culture, through their own cultural understandings and values. There are two parts in this section. First, I will discuss Meskhetian Turks' positive observations, which include neutral perceptions or simple differences they observe; second I will

explore the negative attributions interviewees make about the perceived American culture.

Positive Observations, Simple Differences:

I asked interviewees to identify differences they observe between Meskhetian Turks and American culture. First responses to the question were always positive. In terms of differences, interviewees revealed two areas: outlook or lifestyle and religion. Interviewees defined these areas as simply being different, without any negative attributions to the differences. Tying these two areas together is the most significant positive observation they have regarding Americans, which is tolerance.

*"People live easier here"* Ms. Faiye said. Interviewees made statements such as *"life is easier,"* or *"people are used to comfort"* in this regard. Comfort or ease is not perceived as negative, however, Meskhetian Turks confess they believe they had to become strong and hardworking as a result of circumstances. They are not condemning Americans for not living as difficult lives, but they are indicating that outlook on life is different as a consequence.

Religion is perhaps the most significant difference for Meskhetian Turks. *"First of all, we are Muslims. Americans are not"* as Mr. Irmak said. In every interview, this difference was underlined. Mr. Mustafa's words *"their ways are different than ours, because we are Muslims"* are representative of general sentiments on this issue. However, it is important to note that, once again, this is seen as a difference, not a negative attribution. *"Their ways are different"* is a statement pointing to traditions and rituals. Since these components differ in each

religion, Meskhetian Turks don't have any expectations of similarity with Americans in this regard; because they acknowledge a difference of religious beliefs with the general American public.

Differences, especially religion, create the most significant positive attribution: tolerance. Mr. Mustafa explained his view of Americans as *"they respect people, this is humanity. They don't look what your color is, where you come from. They only look at you as a human being. If you're a decent person, they respect you. They respect everyone. I've never experienced this before."* All interviewees strongly suggested they are seen as people by Americans, without any prejudices or presumptions. Ms. Selvi's words *"they treat everyone as human beings"* and Mr. Osman's impressions *"we are foreigners, but they don't treat us adverse. They see us as people"* are examples to positive experiences interviewees shared.

Furthermore, interviewees describe Americans as *"friendly"* and *"helpful."* Even with language barriers, the experiences interviewees shared were about people making an effort to understand and help them. *"We didn't know the language, but people helped us everywhere"* Ms. Selvi said. *"When you ask directions, people stop and help you"* Ms. Nisa contributed. *"Whatever you need, whenever you need it; people try to help you"* Mr. Mustafa added. *"They're always ready to lend a hand"* as Mr. Göksel said.

General attitudes Meskhetian Turks encounter are also examples of positive observations, according to interviewees. Frequently, interviewees talked about people smiling to one another in the American society. Comparing



American attitudes to their previous experiences with Russians; Meskhetian Turks perceive Americans to be generally friendly and kind. *"People smile at you here"* Mr. Göksel articulated, *"if you smile at someone in Russia, people would think you're insane. Here, being friendly is normal,"* agreeing with these sentiments, Mr. Mustafa indicated *"in Russia a stranger smiling would make people think he is mentally ill. In America, people are kind, genial and warm."*

#### Negative Attributions:

Every interviewee was reluctant to talk about negative perceptions they have of American people. Nonetheless, questions such as "what should be different" or "what can be improved" led to three components: community, family and healthcare.

As discussed previously, sense of community is a vital component of Meskhetian Turkish culture. One of the most significant criticism interviewees had of American society is interviewees' perception of a lack of community in the way they understand the concept. *"Neighbors don't visit each other"* Ms. Selvi proposed, similarly Mr. Irmak said *"neighbors don't even know each other here."*

Perhaps the most momentous example is Mr. Işık's experience with his neighbor. He knocked on his neighbor's door to ask him a question, and the neighbor answered holding a shotgun. Mr. Işık explains the difference of community as *"our people cannot live without each other. We need to be close to one another, visit daily and share everyday lives. That doesn't exist in the American way"*

Family is another point of criticism interviewees offered regarding American society. First and foremost, raising children is an issue for Meskhetian Turks. *"They give too much freedom to children"* or *"they let children do whatever they want"* were the most frequent sentences uttered during the interviews. "Children can yell at their parents" and "children don't respect their elderly" were equally common phrases. "We teach our children to be respectful, to listen to their elderly" Ms. Faiye said. However, "in America, you can't pull the child's ears; but when he's 18, you tell him he's a grown up and let him go" as Mr. Işık suggested.

Disrespect for elders is a crucial point. Interviewees criticized American parents for not teaching children to respect their parents, subsequently, they disapprove the treatment of elderly in the American society.

As mentioned previously, elderly are revered in the Meskhetian Turkish culture. They are the heads of the family and are involved with all decisions. It's the duty of adult children to take care of the elderly. Coming from this perspective, Meskhetian Turks see the independently living elderly or those who live in senior citizen communities and homes as being neglected. *"I look at the old people here, and it breaks my heart"* Ms. Şenalkod said, *"I can't believe people leave their parents alone."* The idea that a family stays together means family members live together. The physical separation of children and elderly is perceived as disintegration of family, according to the interviewees.

Finally, interviewees also criticize healthcare system in the United States. Their objections to the system are mainly based on a comparison to the Russian

system, to which they are accustomed. Remainder of the communist regime is a free or minimally expensed healthcare system in Russia. The expense of healthcare in the United States is a major difference for Meskhetian Turks. As a result, there is a mistrust to American healthcare. "Each time you go, the doctor charges you hundreds of dollars" Mr. Işık professed, "they never check you all over, they look at one thing, then tell you to come back for another; because each time you go, they charge you" Mr. Irmak observed. Nonetheless, the interviewees added the treatment they get from healthcare professionals are always very helpful, kind and considerate. Hence, their negative perceptions are not of people, but the system itself.

#### Answering Research Question III:

Research question III explored perceptions of Meskhetian Turks in regards to their lives in the United States and the American society. Two major themes emerged in this regard: Meskhetian Turkish adaptation and perceptions of American society. The first theme shows that despite challenges, such as language barrier, Meskhetian Turks feel accepted and respected within the American society. Differences interviews revealed are perceived positively for the most part. Most significantly, living in the United States provide Meskhetian Turks with opportunities they lacked before. Among these opportunities education and employment are the most noteworthy. As a result, there is a strong hope for future for the first time in generations. However, these changes and even opportunities also create a fear of losing their cultural identity.

The second theme, perceptions of American society, revealed Meskhetian Turks observe cultural differences, such as lifestyle and religion. Yet, these differences are not considered in a negative way; they are simply differences. Furthermore, interviewees insisted they feel respected despite these differences, which creates a very positive perception of American society.

The negative attributions or observations interviewees stated are more revealing about the Meskhetian Turkish culture. As mentioned before, community and family are among the most vital cultural components of Meskhetian Turks. Hence, differences they observe between Meskhetian Turks and American culture, are perceived negatively. The coping strategy for these differences lies within the Meskhetian Turkish culture itself. The answer to adaptation to United States and managing differences is community.

## Chapter 5

### INTERPRETATION: MAKING SENSE OF THE ANSWERS

In the previous chapter, I examined answers to questions raised in the study. This chapter is a discussion of my interpretation of these answers, and the themes, which emerged as a result. Although, this chapter is the interpretation, I have to note that lines are blurry. After all, themes emerged as a result of my interpretation of the answers to interview questions. Furthermore, the questions themselves are representations of my interpretation of previous research. Hence, my interpretation is interwoven throughout the study. Furthermore, one can also argue interviewees' perceptions are present in this chapter, since my interpretation is a direct reflection on their comments.

There is a lexical choice in the study, which I'm sure has captured the reader's attention. While describing Meskhetian Turks who took part in the study, the terminology shifted between Chapter III and IV. I used the word participant, specifically in Chapter III, while explaining the research methodology. The word participant is an academic choice. As I was defining the methods, with which I conducted the study, it was appropriate to use the word participant. It is, after all, the proper vernacular in the academic construct. However, in Chapter IV, while exploring interviews and discovering themes emerging from answers to the interviews; the word participant proved overly mechanical.

The word interviewee comprises storytelling and experience sharing nature of the interview. Interviewee is the narrator. As the study is a collection of narratives, it was more appropriate to use the word interviewee from there on.

This study is a collaboration of the interviewees' perceptions and my interpretation. Each person who shared his or her story and understanding with me became a collaborator of the study. Hence, their voice is present in my interpretation, as much as my perspective was present while their stories emerged through our conversations.

Nonetheless, to my best abilities I explained interviewees' perspectives in the previous chapter; in this chapter I will demonstrate my understanding of Meskhetian Turkish culture by making sense of these answers through theoretical foundations I argued previously. First, I will present my interpretations regarding each research question separately. Then, I will explore the connection between all three aspects of Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity represented in each research question.

The main thread of the chapter is “connections.” Each research question illuminated an important aspect of Meskhetian Turkish culture. These aspects are: how Meskhetian Turks define their own culture, how they define their connection to Turks/Turkey, and how they perceive the American culture and their place in it.

Each aspect comprised various themes, which helped explain the concept. However, neither these themes nor the aspects they explain are separate segments or pieces of Meskhetian Turkish identity; they are inter-connected and mutually influential to one another. The themes connect to one another and explain respective aspects; then all three aspects interlock and their connection reveals the cultural identity of Meskhetian Turks.

### **RQ 1: How do Meskhetian Turks define themselves?**

- What are cultural determinants of being a Meskhetian Turk?
- To what extent is their cultural identity tied to their history of forced migration?

The purpose of this research question was to discover how Meskhetian Turks define their own culture and cultural traits. As discussed earlier, this research question produced three major themes: history, preservation of culture, and sense of community. In this section, I will explore these themes in terms of theoretical claims made in previous chapters.

The themes regarding Meskhetian Turkish identity are all inter-connected. Connection to history created a need to preserve Meskhetian Turkish culture; preservation of culture resulted in the importance of community; and sense of community continues to reinforce preservation of culture and connection to the past. When combined, all three themes create Meskhetian Turkish identity.

Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2007) argued the significance of history for cultural identity establishment. Here, it is important to note that history is not necessarily the events that took place or historical facts which shaped a cultural group's circumstances. Surely, the past shapes the present by the events which create a path for any cultural group. However, as Samovar et al. (2007) suggested, what truly impacts a culture in terms of history is not particular events, but the interpretation of the past by the members of that culture.

Romanucci-Ross (2006) said interpretation of the past is a unifier for cultures. This notion is evident in the interviews I conducted. History is more than

certain events that took place. Even the forced relocations by themselves are insignificant when compared to how, as a collective, the group interprets these events. Being wronged, facing injustice, and oppression were sentiments attached to historical events. For instance, Meskheti is not just a region, where Meskhetian Turks resided one or two generations ago; but a homeland that was taken away from them.

Connection to the past and to Meskheti demonstrate injustice of the past, which is at the core of the group's historical interpretation. Teaching children about the past and passing on this particular understanding of history is proof that history helps construct "concrete practices of the present" (Martinez, 2000, p. 65).

Most importantly, interpretation of history is what creates Meskhetian Turkish identity. As interviewees explained, preserving their cultural identity was the most significant resistance strategy against the injustices the group faced. Interviews presented various aspects of Meskhetian Turkish identity. Combined, these aspects create an ethnic identity, which is the Meskhetian Turkish culture.

It should be clarified that Meskhetian Turkish identity is an ethnic identity. Being Meskhetian Turkish is not associated with a particular nation, race or any other cultural groups by themselves. This study shows Meskhetian Turks' identity perceptions strongly support theories of ethnic identity establishment and preservation.

Ethnicity is a symbolic representation of culture distinguishing a group by perceived "origin and continuity" (De Vos, 2006, p. 11). Ethnic identities, as literature suggests, are formed and strengthened under threat (Fong, 2004;



Volkan, 1999). The need to define an ethnic group emerges when there is a threat to the group because of their cultural identifiers; such as religion, language or cultural practices. None of these components create an ethnicity by itself, yet, once the group is threatened, discriminated, or oppressed; various aspects of culture interlock and create an ethnic identity (De Vos, 2006; Fong, 2004; Volkan, 1999).

Identities emerge or strengthen under threat because threats to identity force people to define themselves. When one's own existence or way of life is in danger as a result of who they are; their identities are defined. Meskhetian Turkish identity, according to Aydingün (2002) emerged as a result of the first relocation in 1944.

The oldest interviewee of this study was born in 1948, hence, interviewees' reality represented an ethnic identity that was already formed. It's not possible to presume whether a distinct Meskhetian Turkish identity existed, or to what degree it existed, before 1944. However, it is evident in the interviews that importance of ethnic identity preservation, as well as definition of it, is a direct result of threats to the group's cultural composition.

The study revealed connection to a Turkish heritage, not having a homeland, and ties to Meskheta and the past as identifiers of Meskhetian Turkish culture in terms of their history. All these themes or aspects point to importance of the past for Meskhetian Turks in the present. If Meskhetian Turkish ethnicity emerged, as literature suggests, as a result of the first relocation; then history is significant because it created an identity for the group.

Furthermore, continued threat to this identity reinforced the importance of these aspects. Connection to a Turkish heritage is important, because it is the initial reason for their relocation and the first injustice the group endured. One can argue that injustice of the first relocation increases the importance of Meskheta. The land itself carries a great meaning for Meskhetian Turks. Additionally, the fact that Meskheta is unreachable strengthens the importance of not having a homeland. As a result, these aspects intertwine and create a connection between Meskhetian Turks today and their past.

Historical events interviewees referenced, stories of oppression and discrimination they shared, and experiences they deemed unjust all connect to the remarks about the need to preserve who they are. Hence, connection to history, or interpretation of it, created the desire for preservation of culture for Meskhetian Turks.

As discussed in the previous section, interviewees explained they felt a great need to preserve their culture in Russia, because it was being threatened and they were being pressured to change. Thus, Volkan's (1999) claims of ethnic identity being strengthened under threat and Steinberg's (2001) comments on maintaining the emerged identity through generations are evident in interviewees' remarks.

As Mr. Mustafa's words discussed in previous chapter reveal: "*In Russia, there was a lot of force, a lot of pressure. In the face of that pressure, we made a greater effort to preserve our religion, our culture.*" Supporting this notion are the comments interviewees made regarding the importance of teaching children about

the past and about their culture. Teaching children about Meskheta and historical events is a way of teaching them the need to preserve their culture. Connection to past and everything the group faced created the need to define who they are and maintain their identity, which manifests itself as preservation of culture.

General comments regarding preservation of culture demonstrate the idea of cultural preservation as an identity characteristic for Meskhetian Turks. The interviewees stressed the importance of preservation, as literature predicted (Volkan, 1999; Fong, 2004). Furthermore, the components of culture, which is deemed vital to preserve, are also in compliance with the literature. Religion, language (Alcoff, 2006; Fong, 2004; Samovar et al., 2007), rituals, and traditions (Fong, 2004; Kim, 1988) are the most significant components.

Initial connection between history and cultural preservation is evident in the group's name: Meskhetian Turks. Both words are more than descriptive names; they are indicators of an ethnic background. Both the original homeland of Meskheta and the ethnic roots of being Turkish are represented in the group's name.

Literature sometimes refers to the group as simply "Meskhetians" (Trier & Khanzih, 2007; Yunusov, 2007; Sumbadze, 2007; Pentikainen & Trier, 2004). The same shortened name is also used among Turks while referring to Meskhetian Turks. However, when I used the term during my first interview, the interviewee corrected me and explained that referring to the group as simply Meskhetians or Turks is an incomplete and erroneous description of the group. Similarly, the

organization established in the United States is named "Ahıska<sup>11</sup>-Meskhetian Turks Organization of America," acknowledging not only the roots but also the language of the group. Thus, it is clear that starting with the name, connection to the past guides the present and results in preservation.

When talking about preservation, the interviewees pointed religion and language to be the most important components, which needed to be preserved and whose preservation is a point of pride for the group. *"Never forgot our ways," "we preserved our language, our religion,"* and *"we kept our culture, our language"* are among the statements interviewees made. Language and religion, particularly, accompanied the word culture, as a way to explain it. These terms seemed almost interchangeable with the word culture, as they are the essentials of culture, according to the interviewees.

The view of religion is tied back to the notion of identity preservation under threat (Fong, 2004; Volkan, 1999). As explained in the previous chapter, interviewees talked in length about the oppression and discrimination they faced regarding their religious beliefs and practices. They were prevented from practicing openly and faced great pressure to alter their beliefs. According to interviewees, these threats to their religious identity resulted in strong convictions about preserving their religion.

Samovar et al. (2007) recognize religion as perhaps the most significant cultural unifier. Interviews affirm this claim strongly. Religion, according to interviewees, is a vital cultural identifier for Meskhetian Turks. As Mr. Murat

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<sup>11</sup> Ahıska is the Turkish name for Meskheti

said, Meskhetian Turks *"come together because we all believe in Allah."*

Preservation of their religious beliefs and practices is a point of pride. The more their religion was attacked, the more the group worked to preserve it (Aydingün, 2007; Yunusov, 2007; Trier and Khanzhin, 2007).

Similarly, language is a unifier for Meskhetian Turks, aiding in their survival as a cultural group (Orbe & Harris, 2001). Here, the study once again reinforces literature and demonstrates the significance of language. Russian and Uzbek are two languages common to all interviewees. The group lived in Uzbekistan and Russia, and as a result every member is fluent in these languages. However, they still define and practice Turkish as their first language.

Preservation of language is another point of pride for the Meskhetian Turks, according to the interviewees. Despite three relocations and three different dominating languages (Georgian, Uzbek, and Russian) the group managed to preserve their own language. Interviewees explain this fact as another way of preserving their culture and their cultural identity.

As discussed in the previous chapter, preservation of religion and language is strongly connected to family and traditions regarding family. This connection results from the need to preserve by passing the cultural components onto the next generations. Cultures communicate their identities through traditions and values they hold dear (Fong, 2004). Furthermore, the need to teach new generations about cultural components is the most fundamental definition of culture as "learned patterns of perception, values, and behaviors" (Martin & Nakayama, 2008, p. 27).

Family relations demonstrate the significance of preservation. Children are at the core of each family. Meskhetian Turks, as literature predicted, strongly believe in teaching them about history, religion, language, values and traditions. Each interview conversation regarding culture and its preservation led to the need to teach children about these concepts.

History, language, religion, and overall way of life collectively create a Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity. Preservation of this identity has been a struggle for Meskhetian Turks, because they faced pressure and oppression as a result it. Yet, they maintained their identity; and they strongly believe the survival of it depends on their ability to raise their children "right," meaning teaching them not only these values but also the importance of preserving them.

Representation of all these cultural components and the need to preserve culture results in a strong sense of community. This notion comes from the need to preserve culture and aforementioned cultural components. Establishment of a sense of community can be attributed to the same reasons for ethnicity establishment (De Vos, 2006; Fong, 2004; Volkan, 1999); people come together and identities emerge under threat. Perhaps, sense of community surfaced as a result of threat to Meskhetian Turkish identity and a very real threat to their physical safety. However, today being a part of that community is an important component of their identity.

As discussed in the previous chapter, interviewees attribute the preservation of culture to their strong sense of community. These two aspects are immensely inter-connected. Cultural components and values are reinforced and

maintained through a close-knit community, which preserves the identity of Meskhetian Turks. Subsequently, being a part of that community and sustaining strong ties with one another becomes a vital cultural characteristic. As interviewees explained, being a member of the community or a part of the collective is one of the stronger identifiers of being a Meskhetian Turk. To repeat Mr. Göksel's remarks: *"To be Meskhetian means to be within Meskhetians. A Meskhetian is not a Meskhetian if he isn't within the community, if he isn't a part of the collective."*

Connection between sense of community and preservation of culture can also be seen at the components of culture, which deemed important to preserve. As discussed earlier, Meskhetian Turks depend on the community for preservation of cultural components, such as religion, language and family traditions. Community reinforces values and traditions. One cultural component, hospitality, is a clear indication of community.

Hospitality is vital for Meskhetian Turks, as explained in the previous chapter. A strong component of the culture is to welcome people. Homes are open to one another, and community members share everything with each other. In Meskhetian Turkish cultural context, hospitality is more than good manners. Guests are treated like family, because community is perceived as the extended family.

People depend on the community for continuity of culture; not only for themselves, but also for their children. Thus, one can argue that community is a

component of Meskhetian Turkish culture, but also it shapes and even creates other components, such as hospitality.

As apparent in this section, all three aspects; history, preservation of culture, and sense of community are intertwined. They all influence one another, shape and even establish each other. Exploring each component is not enough to understand Meskhetian Turkish culture. One has to see how these components are connected to comprehend the complexity of their identity.

**RQ 2: How do Meskhetian Turks define their relationship and/or connection with the Turkish communities living in the area?**

- What are certain Turkish symbols, habits, and cultural components they embrace?
- What is the significance of these cultural components for Meskhetian Turks?

Purpose of research question two was to understand the relationship between Meskhetian Turks and Turks living in the United States. Literature suggested strong ties between Turks and Meskhetian Turks in various contexts; such as in Turkey and in Azerbaijan. However, these studies could not provide a foundation for similar relationships within the context of United States. The only research concerning Meskhetian Turks in U.S. was Koriouchkina and Swerdlow's (2007) study as a part of the collective works guided by Trier and Khanzihn (2007), whose results regarding Meskhetian Turks' socialization are contradicted in this study.



Furthermore, this study provided an additional aspect of Meskhetian Turkish and Turkish relationships: the connection between Meskhetian Turks and Turkey; more than a connection to people, a tie to the land itself. In this section, I will discuss the answers to research question two through the arguments previous research provided; reinforcing some and contradicting others.

Cultural kinship between Meskhetian Turks and Turks is evident in literature. Scholars reveal that cultural commonalities and similarities, such as language, traditions, and perceived historical ties demonstrate a link between two cultures. This link is more than cultural likeness, but a deep connection between the two groups, which creates the notion of kin (Aydingün, 2007; Hoover, Kuznetsov, & Swerdlow, 2006; Izzetoglu, 1997; Mert, 2004; Sezgin & Agacan, 2003; Veyseloglu, 1999; Yunusov, 2007).

Meskhetian Turks' connection to Turkey is observed and discussed in the literature within the context of this kinship. It is seen as an extension of this kinship between people. Literature steers toward the idea that commonalities and similarities between Meskhetian Turks and Turks result in an indirect connection between Meskhetian Turks and Turkey. The connection is indirect, because it is not a result of social relationships; but it emerges from the kinship felt.

Scholars, such as Aydingün (2007) and Yunusov (2007) suggested Turkey is the desired destination for many Meskhetian Turks. The authors attribute this desire to two facts: one is that many Meskhetian Turks are losing hope of ever returning to Meskheti, in which case Turkey provides an alternative home; and

two, Turkey is perceived as an alternative home because of the kinship Meskhetian Turks feel toward Turkish people.

This study supports previous research in this regard, however, it also reveals that there is a connection to Turkey beyond the kinship of people. There is a connection to the physical land. Literature reveals tangible and intangible symbols are representations of cultural identities (Carbaugh, 1990; Fong, 2004; Kim, 1988; Samovar et al., 2007). The tangible representation of Meskhetian Turks' connection to Turkey is evident in the artifacts, such as the Turkish flag. As discussed before, a flag is significant as it represents a country, and a nation; not the people of the nation but the structured reality of a land. The intangible representation lies within the sentiments expressed in the interviews, such as tearing up with the mere sight of a Turkish truck or the excitement that meeting someone from Turkey carries.

As literature suggested (Aydingün, 2007; Mert, 2004; Sezgin & Agacan, 2003), the interviewees emphasized they feel connected to Turkey. Aydingün (2007) stated many Meskhetian Turks dreamt of moving to Turkey one day. This research reinstates this claim. All interviewees but one professed the desire to move to Turkey one day, perhaps for retirement. Furthermore, as Carbaugh, (1990) articulated, artifacts carry unique meaning for each culture; and utilization of them point to a connection between cultures. This study revealed, artifacts such as the flag, posters, or knick-knacks representing Turkey ornate Meskhetian Turkish homes.

There is a connection between Meskhetian Turks and Turkey, apart from a connection between people. Perhaps, the most significant representation of this connection is found in the most unlikely interview.

One interview and one interviewee was unique regarding his remarks about Turkey and perhaps his remarks surprisingly provide the strongest proof for the connection to Turkey. The interviewee was Mr. Murat, the gentleman who stated he never had a Turkish flag in his home. He said this was a mindful choice on his part. He never had a Turkish flag, not because he didn't feel a need for it, or because it was irrelevant. He never had a Turkish flag, because he was angry; and his anger led him to purposefully choose not to have a flag. The action itself communicates a strong message.

Although others were not as adamant in their anger; many talked about the disappointment and resentment they felt toward the Turkish government. This anger speaks volumes. Anger comes from disappointment, which comes from expectations from Turkey. They didn't have expectations from the US or any other country but specifically from Turkey and the Turkish government; which indicates they feel connected to Turkey.

They expected and wanted help, protection, and, at the very least, acknowledgement of their situation from the Turkish government. They had these expectations, because they felt it was, and still is, the responsibility of the Turkish government to help them. They see themselves as a part of Turkish government's responsibility, which is a clear demonstration of their feelings of connection to Turkey.

Mr. Murat is the strongest example with his anger, because his anger points to this expectation. He chose not to have a Turkish flag as a reaction to Turkey's failure to intervene and help. It's not that he didn't think of obtaining one because that flag doesn't carry a meaning for him. He didn't say there wasn't any reason to have a Turkish flag in his home. He said he purposefully decided not to have a Turkish flag as a representation of his anger. That anger is the demonstration of his connection to Turkey.

Meskhetian Turks' connection to Turkey and their connection to Turks are two distinctly separate aspects, yet they are intertwined. It is impossible to make assumptions about a causal relationship between the two. Perhaps the ethnic Turkish heritage and historical roots in Turkey establishes a felt connection to the people of Turkey; or the cultural commonalities and similarities with Turks lead to a connection to the land. An assumption either way is impossible, yet, it is clear that these aspects influence one another.

Regarding the connection between Meskhetian Turks and Turks in Phoenix, three themes emerged through the interviews: relationship between Meskhetian Turks and Turks, similarities Meskhetian Turks perceive between their community and Turks and the differences they observe. Once again, these themes are inter-related aspects of the connection between the two groups. Naturally, relationship and socialization between Meskhetian Turks and Turks provide the basis for their perceptions; and as expected, in return their perceptions shape their socialization.

Aydingün (2007) stated strong relationships between Meskhetian Turks and Turks. The author declared Meskhetian Turks socialize with their Turkish neighbors, have Turkish friends and overall are well-adapted to their surroundings. As discussed before, according to Aydingün, Meskhetian Turks “feel at home” (Aydingün, 2007, p. 366) as a result of their socialization with Turks in Turkey. However, her research focused on Meskhetian Turks in Turkey, and her convictions, though guiding the research question, could not be assumptions for Meskhetian Turks and Turks in United States.

The only research regarding Meskhetian Turks in the United States acknowledged that Meskhetian Turks saw themselves as a part of the Turkish community in the States (Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007). However, the authors also claimed Meskhetian Turks mostly socialized with Russian speaking communities.

According to Koriouchkina & Swerdlow (2007) common language created a bond between these communities. This study, however, contradicts these findings. When asked, every interviewee, without exceptions, stated only contact they have with someone speaking Russian is when they need official documents to be translated into English. However, they all socialize with the Turkish community regularly.

The contradiction of this study with previous research is interesting. There is a difference of location between the studies. Perhaps a larger Russian speaking population in the previous research site is a reason for this difference. We also have to take into account researcher background. Previous researchers'

background may have led them to focus on relationships between Meskhetian Turks and Russian speaking communities, whereas as a Turk, I focused on the relationship between Meskhetian Turks and Turks. However, as mentioned before the interviewees stated clearly that they do not socialize with Russian speaking communities in Phoenix. Hence, we can conclude that language by itself was not enough to create a bond between Meskhetian Turks and Russian speaking communities.

Subsequently, the connection between Meskhetian Turks and Turks reach beyond a common language. Interviews revealed there are strong social ties between Meskhetian Turks and Turks living in the area. Their relationship started when Meskhetian Turks moved to the United States and continues today. People from both groups socialize with each other regularly and Meskhetian Turks, for all intents and purposes, see Turks as a part of their community.

Perceived commonalities and similarities between the groups help reinforce socialization between them. As Hecht, Collier & Ribeau (2003) stated, cultural identities are shaped and reinforced through social interactions. Commonalities, such as religion and language, and similarities, such as traditions and values are shaped and reinforced through the social relations between Meskhetian Turks and Turks.

Consequently, there are certain differences Meskhetian Turks observe between their culture and Turks. These differences, according to the interviewees reside within the commonalities. Hence, although religion and language are

unifiers for the two group; they also present observed differences between the two.

Here, it is crucial to restate the fact that Meskhetian Turks socialize with the religious Turkish group in the area. As mentioned before, there are two distinct Turkish communities in Phoenix. One community has ties to a cultural center, which has strong religious affiliations. The other group, with which Meskhetian Turks are not as familiar, is a secular group of Turks, who are not as organized and lack a physical center to bring people together.

To outside eyes, the difference may seem about religious convictions. However, the reality is much more complex than that. Explaining it thoroughly can take another dissertation all together. Briefly, the difference comes from political views regarding religion's role in the government. One group emphasizes religion as a political influence, whereas the other believes in a complete separation of religion and government. Hence, one group is very devout and obvious about religion, and traditions to follow it; whereas the other group sees religion as completely internal and personal, which limits the visibility of religion in their social interaction.

Understanding this difference is crucial, because Meskhetian Turkish perceptions of Turks and their observations of Turkish beliefs and cultural understanding are based on the religious group. Aydingün (2007) talked about Meskhetian Turkish perceptions of Turks in Turkey in regards to religion. As mentioned before, the author stated Meskhetian Turks' astonishment in the variety of perceptions about religion in Turkey.

Meskhethian Turks in this study interpret religious variation differently. Their perception is based on the two groups in Phoenix and most only socialize with the religious group. Hence, when they talk about religious differences, the interviewees mentioned their admiration of Turks' religious convictions and devotion. They interpret the Turban as devotion, whereas in reality Turban<sup>12</sup> is a political symbol.

Turban is different than an ordinary head scarf, which is an indication of modesty and conservative religious beliefs. Turban is a statement supporting a religious government. Meskhethian Turks are not aware of the political strings attached to the separation of two Turkish groups in Phoenix. They appreciate religious devotion and aspire to the same.

Besides religion, the study uncovered language as another difference Meskhethian Turks observe. At first, it seems pretty obvious that people from different regions would have different language choices. However, the difference interviewees mentioned was more than dialect. Western words commonly used in Turkish vernacular, such as *merci*, and *pardon* seem to have captured the interviewees' attention.

Observed differences in language and religion present a contradiction. On one hand, interviewees talked about their appreciation of religious devotion, which they interpret as preservation of religious traditions. On the other hand, they criticize Turks for using foreign words, which they see as polluting the language and being influenced by Europe. Hence, on one hand, interviewees

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<sup>12</sup> Turban is the Turkish name for a particular headscarf. It differs from its Middle Eastern and Asian counterparts by combining a head band covering all hair and a scarf worn over it.



perceive Turks to have succeeded in preservation and on the other hand, they observe an alienation of language.

Thus, this research question once again presents a web of connections. Meskhetian Turkish perceptions of Turkey and Turks are inter-twined. According to the interviewees, they felt a connection to Turkey long before their move to U.S. and socializing with Turks. However, this socialization only strengthens the connection they feel to the country.

A connection to land created a connection to people; and now connection to people reinforces the connection to the land. Consequently, the group's relationship to Turks and their perception of similarities and differences interlock. Their strong relationship with Turks were established because of commonalities, which in return helps reinforce the relationship.

**RQ 3: How do Meskhetian Turks define the American culture and their place in the American society?**

- How do Meskhetian Turks perceive the American culture?
- What kind of cultural differences do Meskhetian Turks report when comparing their culture with American culture?
- How do they perceive their place in American society?
- How do they cope with cultural differences between what they define as Meskhetian Turkish culture and perceive as American culture?
- What are their biggest concerns regarding preserving their Meskhetian Turkish identity as refugees in the United States?

Research question three presented two themes: adaptation to the American culture and perceptions of American society. In this section, I will talk about these themes and aspects they comprise in terms of previous research regarding each.

Adaptation is a complex process (Berry, 2006; Kim, 2001). Our understanding of cultural adaptation moved from a melting pot theory to a society embracing diverse cultural characteristics, similar to a mosaic consisting of individual pieces coming together to create a picture (Broome, 1996).

Introduction of a new cultural group into the mix requires careful placement within the host society; preserving the individuality of the group, while making sure they fit in (Kim, 2007).

Meskhetian Turks, according to the interviews, are very mindful of this fact. Their lives have changed immensely in the United States. These changes, for the most part, are overwhelmingly positive. Looking at the themes emerged in regards to Meskhetian Turkish adaptation, the positive outcome is clear.

Koriouchkina and Swerdlow (2007) talked about the difference Meskhetian Turks observe in terms of their place within the larger society in the United States compared to their place in Russian society.

The authors, as mentioned before, reported examples of realization on this matter, such as checking the box for Caucasian instead of Black for their race. They realize race is perceived differently in the United States, at least in the eyes of the law, where race is a descriptive statement. Being considered Black in Russia was a way of determining their social class, not their race.

This study supports Koriouchkina and Swerdlow's (2007) claims on this matter. Interviewees stated they feel respected and accepted within the American society. Despite the recent erroneous associations of Islam and terrorism, none of the interviewees reported any negative experience or interaction. On the contrary, their newly gained freedom regarding religious practices and usage of language provides a very positive perspective regarding acceptance of diversity in the United States.

Subsequently, Koriouchkina and Swerdlow (2007) also stated Meskhetian Turks are aware of their social standing, in other words lack of power. The authors arrived to this conclusion through narratives, such as Meskhetian Turks joking that "*In Russia, we used to be Meskhetian Turks. Now we move to the States and we'll become Mexican Turks*" (p. 423). This study did not have any findings in this regard, hence did not support previous research.

Although, interviewees were asked directly about any social inequalities they observed regarding their religion or ethnicity, the answer was always "*no.*" Interviewees focused on the positive when comparing their situation in Russia to their circumstances in the United States. They talked about labeling in Russia, specifically being called *Turks*, not as a descriptive term, but as a marker of segregation. Ms. Nisa's remarks about being "*normal people*" in the United States are significant. These remarks point that there are no observed injustices that they talked about.

However, we have to take into account location of the two studies, once again. Racial and ethnic dynamics are very different in the American Northwest,

where the Koriouchkina and Swerdlow (2007) research took place. There are many minority groups, none of which is overwhelmingly larger than others. This situation is different compared to the dynamics in the American Southwest, where being a member of a large minority group, such as Mexican-Americans, carries another significance.

Hence, it is not surprising that interviewees' experiences are unlike the observations of Meskhetian Turks in the Northwest. Meskhetian Turks involved in this study see their place in the American society as respected and accepted individuals. However, whether they feel a part of the American society is another question.

Adaptation requires immigrant or refugee groups to become a part of the host culture (Kim, 2007). In many aspects of Meskhetian Turkish everyday life, they are within the American society. Members of the community attend educational institutions and have employment, which are both indicators of adaptation into the new social circumstances. Changes in everyday life reported by interviewees pointed to regular interaction between members of Meskhetian Turkish community and of American society.

Meskhetian Turkish perceptions of American culture are based on their observations as well as their interactions with American society members. Here, once again connectivity is the key. Adaptation and perceptions are two interconnected aspects of Meskhetian Turkish experience in the United States. For instance, changes in everyday lives of Meskhetian Turks help shape their positive perceptions toward American society; similarly, language barrier prevents

Meskhethian Turks from understanding American cultural norms, which lead to negative perceptions.

As Koriouchkina and Swerdlow (2007) stated, a language barrier is the initial challenge for Meskhethian Turks in the United States. This challenge limits Meskhethian Turks' interaction with Americans, which also limits their understanding of cultural complexities in the United States.

Meskhethian Turks' positive perceptions of the general American culture, as discussed in the previous chapter, are tolerance, friendliness, and respect for others. These perceptions are derived from Meskhethian Turks' circumstances in the United States. Freedom to express their cultural identities, practice their religion and continue their traditions lead to these positive observations. Though the interviewees acknowledged differences of religion and general outlook on life; they respect these differences, because they feel respected in return.

Immigration entails a new nationality for the newcomer (Waters, 1990). Perceptions regarding the host culture determine the success of adaptation, because adaptation requires not only understanding the new cultural context, but internalizing parts of it (Kim, 1988). More importantly, it is vital to acknowledge that adaptation is a process.

Meskhethian Turkish adaptation to United States is an on-going process, where perceptions regarding the host culture establish a route for this process. Positive perceptions lead to feelings of security and hope for future, which the interviewees never had in their lifetimes. Hence, one can conclude that these positive circumstances aid in the group's adaptation.

Consequently, since adaptation requires a level of internalization, it is crucial to understand the negative perceptions. However, these perceptions need to be explored in relation to previously discussed aspects of the culture, most significantly the self-definition of cultural identity. Therefore, in the next section I will discuss the connection between all three aspects; Meskhetian Turkish culture, ties to Turks and Turkey, and adaptation to American culture.

### **Connection between Three Research Questions:**

Identities are complex, multi-faceted and fluid. A person has multitude of identities; racial, ethnic, national, religious, sexual, socio/economical and so on. A person is never one of these identities; all these components come together and create a person. These identities are fluid; they are fluid, because they are constantly changing; they are fluid, because their prominence is also constantly shifting. Although a person is comprised of multitude of identities, one or more identities take priority in people's lives. The priority or prominence of an identity depends on the social context or the circumstances. In everyday life a person's most eminent identity might be his or her gender, religion, sexuality, or even socio/economical status.

However, once that person finds himself in a different context, such as travelling to a different country, another identity, such as nationality or ethnicity may be more pronounced. In many situations, most eminent commonalities as well as most significant differences indicate a person's most prominent identity in a particular context. While attending a service at his church, a man's religious identity would be most significant. On the other hand, being in a different country

or cultural setting, where the majority has a significantly different common identity than one's own, the identity signifying the difference would take precedence over others. For instance, a white person travelling to Kenya might find that their racial identity becomes more significant than their national or religious identities.

So, what does this mean for Meskhetian Turks? Being within the larger American society, their ethnic identity is significant because of the perceived differences between Meskhetian Turkish ethnic identity and their perception of the American society. Concurrently, commonalities each Meskhetian Turk has with others in their ethnic group, as well as similarities with groups such as Turks, become more important; as these commonalities act as unifiers, bringing people together. As a result, their unique ethnic identity is the most eminent for Meskhetian Turks living as refugees in Phoenix.

Thus, understanding Meskhetian Turkish identity depends on a comprehension of the connection between the three components examined in the study. Self-definition of Meskhetian Turkish culture is intertwined with their ties to Turks and Turkey. Concurrently, the same self-definition is the foundation of their perceptions of the American culture. Subsequently, their relation to Turks directly influences their adaptation to the American society. The complex intricacies of this connectivity is the key to understanding Meskhetian Turks and their adaptation process. Therefore, these connections need to be explored further.

Connection between two aspects, self-definition of culture and ties to Turks and Turkey, is the most obvious. As discussed before, Meskhetian Turkish

cultural identity comprises a tie to their Turkish heritage. This tie is apart from a connection to people or the land; it is a connection to their cultural past and ethnic heritage.

Naturally, this connection also manifests itself in the link between Meskhetian Turks and both the land and people of Turkey. Sense of community is vital for Meskhetian Turkish culture, as explained before. The relations they have with Turks in the area is an expression of this cultural characteristic. Importance of community aids in creating strong ties with Turks. Hence, the relationship between two communities is a direct result of Meskhetian Turks' cultural identity.

In addition to ethnic heritage, the cultural characteristic of not having a homeland may reinforce the connection Meskhetian Turks feel toward Turkey. In the absence of a physical, tangible homeland Turkey is, in many ways, the surrogate home. As literature suggested (Aydingün, 2007; Yunusov, 2007), all interviewees, except one, professed a desire to move to Turkey one day. Naturally, this notion may eventually change the longer the group is in the United States and the more they adapt to the culture.

Finally, cultural commonalities, such as language and religion; as well as similarities, such as traditions, attitude toward family, and hospitality create a bond between the two communities. Hence, Meskhetian Turks' cultural self-definition establish and fortify their connection to Turkey and Turks; while their relation to Turks reinforce their defined cultural identity.

Connection between Meskhetian Turks' cultural self-definition and perceptions regarding their relationship to Turks is evident in their interaction and



socialization with them. Idea of kinship formed as a result of perceived commonalities, such as ethnic roots, language and religion before the group moved to United States and once in the United States all interviewees formed relationships with Turks.

Previously, as the interviews point, there was an idea of kinship; which was evident in certain sentiments, such as expressed feelings of happiness when meeting Turks, attending concerts of Turkish musicians or something as simple as getting emotional at the sight of a Turkish company's truck. Certain artifacts, such as the Turkish flag or images of Turkey are also indicators of a connections. Yet, none of these were enough to predict whether Meskhetian Turks would perceive Turks in Phoenix as a part of their collective or larger community.

Nonetheless, interviews exhibit that shared experiences and social interactions in the United States helped create a community comprising Turks and Meskhetian Turks. Kinship between the two groups moved from being ideal or assumed to practical or lived. A notion of togetherness, support and connection seems to have emerged between the two groups.

Meskhetian Turks' own cultural identity is emphasized and reinforced through socialization with Turks. More than that, sending children to Turkish schools to learn about history, language, and religion is an indication of perception, which shows Turks are seen as a part of the larger community, on whom individuals lean and rely to help raise the children; hence, help preserve their culture.

Most aspects of Meskhetian Turkish culture revolves around the idea of preservation. Children are at the center of culture, because they are seen as the ones to carry it; and teaching them about the past and cultural components is vital. Language and religion are components that need to be preserved. Sense of community and preservation are intertwined.

The ties Meskhetian Turks have with Turks and the Turkish identity is entangled within the connection between preservation and community as well. Sending their children to schools, where there are Turkish teachers; having kids attend the Saturday school at the Turkish cultural center, where they learn about religion, Turkish language and history; celebrating religious holidays with Turks; and general socialization with them all indicate preservation of culture and sense of community in the United States.

Interaction and relations with Turks give Meskhetian Turks a social environment bigger than their own community, which helps in their adaptation, because most Turks, with whom Meskhetian Turks socialize, have been here longer, and understand American culture better. Turks help Meskhetian Turks adapt to the culture and understand it better. However, this also hinders their adaptation, because the need to socialize with non-Turkish speakers is minimized as a result.

In terms of their adaptation in the United States, there is a profound fear of losing their culture, which comes from the significance of preservation. Importance of preservation and fear of possibility that new generations will not hold onto their cultural identity are intertwined. The responsibility of preserving

the culture lays on the shoulders of the community as well as on the family. Ties Meskhetian Turks have with Turks in the area is an aid in preservation.

Socialization with a larger community and seeking Turkish communities help in teaching children about cultural components are evidence of this fact.

Similarly, the same cultural self-definition is the foundation for Meskhetian Turks' positive and negative perceptions of the American society, as well as their adaptation to it. Circumstances Meskhetian Turks faced since 1944 shaped their culture immensely. As argued before, the first relocation may very well be the initial emergence of a unique ethnic identity for the group; though this study cannot support that argument as the interviewees were all born after 1944. However, the immense significance of preservation of culture is evidence that these events influence the culture strongly.

Hence, the study may not be able to illuminate whether Meskhetian Turkish identity emerged as a result of discrimination and segregation; but it clearly demonstrates the influence of these circumstances in shaping that identity. As a result, Meskhetian Turks evaluate their circumstances in the United States and the American people in comparison to their previous conditions. The aspects of adaptation emerge as a result of this comparison, such as seeing their place in the American society as being respected and accepted, hope for future they never had before, and feeling secure.

The positive perceptions and improvement of life in the United States is connected to what is deemed vital for Meskhetian Turkish culture in many aspects. Liberty, freedom, and respect for their culture is giving them a sense of

security and hope for future in the United States. Two of the most crucial aspects of Meskhetian Turkish culture are preservation of culture and sense of community. They feel they have freedom to live within their cultural norms in the US; which presents the connection between how they define themselves, their culture, and how they see US culture and their place in it.

Consequently, comparison of circumstances, improvement of everyday life, feeling secure, hope for future, and significance of preservation, in turn, influence their cultural identity. For instance, ties to Meskheta and the past are important components of Meskhetian Turkish culture. Yet, their new life in the United States present a generational difference in this regard.

As discussed previously, all interviewees talked about Meskheta and their ties to the land and the past. There is a very strong connection to the land itself and the idea of the lost homeland. However, one question "given the chance, would you like to move to Meskheta?" demonstrated a generational difference, which is a direct result of their new circumstances in the United States.

The older generation are the first children of relocation. They grew up listening to the stories of home and homeland, and descriptions of a physical home, neighborhood, and village. They grew up with the concept of a tangible, real home. They learned about Meskheta as the first home; the idea that home is Meskheta and the current residency of the time is temporary. Even though they weren't born in Meskheta, their parents and even older siblings were born there; hence, to them the word home means Meskheta.

As a result, this generation as accepted and internalized Meskheta as home. When asked the question, they all answered they would go back "if we were given back our homes and our rights." This is the generation, who grew up with the idea that once the exile is over, they were going back home.

The younger generation, on the other hand, has a different attitude. This generation acknowledges a tie to Meskheta but is hesitant about wanting to move back there. This hesitance is accompanied with the change in circumstances in the United States. Younger generation, as discussed before, is defined by their social status, not age. Those, who have young children and are still working to build a future are considered to be the younger generation.

This generation, for the most part, were born twice removed from Meskheta, and had to relocate two more times since. For the first time, they are in a position to pursue education, gain employment, feel secure and build a home and a future for their children. Hence, they compare their current situation in the United States and are more realistic, rather than sentimental about the possibility of moving to Meskheta. As Ms. Fatima said "*they would have to provide us with the life we are building here. I couldn't go back to build a life from scratch. I have to give my children more than that.*" Hence, adaptation to United States seem to influence younger generation's perceptions of their ties to Meskheta.

Finally, Meskhetaian Turks' negative observations about the American culture provide the connection between self-definition and evaluation of the other. Exploration of this connection helps us understand Meskhetaian Turkish adaptation process.

Negative perceptions regarding Americans come from cultural differences and lack of fully understanding the culture. The two areas where Meskhetian Turks criticize American society are sense of community and family. Differences between two cultures stem from two different value orientations. U.S. culture is a future-oriented society, which holds independence and privacy in high esteem. Meskhetian Turkish value system is ultimately different, which leads to the negative perceptions.

Cultural differences, language barrier and religious differences in U.S. result in distance between Meskhetian Turks and American society. Perhaps that's why they feel Americans lack a sense of community or are not neighborly in the sense they understand these concepts.

Meskhetian Turks interpret independence and privacy as lack of community and lack of family togetherness. In the American society, typically young adults leave home and build a life of their own. For this culture, a grown child gaining his or her independence is appreciated, celebrated, and encouraged. Similarly, elderly people living alone or living in senior citizen communities/centers are perceived as active and independent. Meskhetian Turkish understanding of family is different.

As explained before, family togetherness is vital. A child, even as an adult, building a life separate than his parents is perceived as the family letting the children go and not fulfilling their duty of guiding them through life. Consequently, elderly living on their own is a hurtful idea for Meskhetian Turks. More than one interviewee stated that seeing elderly alone or in senior facilities

*"breaks my heart,"* because Meskhetian Turks do not interpret this as independence, but as family not fulfilling their duties of taking care of their elderly.

Likewise, Meskhetian Turks' interpretation of a lack of community within the general American society comes from a different understanding. In the American culture, privacy is highly valued, hence, sense of community is not as visible. Meskhetian Turks have a very strong sense of community, which is also very visible. People are in each other's homes and lives fully. Regular and unplanned visits to each other's homes and everyone being a part of each other's life is how community is perceived and realized within Meskhetian Turkish culture. As a result, they interpret the sense of privacy in the American culture as a lack of community.

Inadequate understanding of a culture leads to misinterpretation of cultural components. Community and family are two areas Meskhetian Turks interpret as in need of improvement within the American society. On the other hand, certain understandings in Meskhetian Turkish culture can also be misinterpreted from a Western perspective. The greatest example is the gender roles within Meskhetian Turkish culture.

Meskhetian Turkish culture is a paternal society; men are the bread winners, and women are primarily home makers. Gender roles and expectations may seem unequal compared to general understanding of gender roles in the American society. I use the phrase general understanding, because American society also comprises communities and families where the family structure is

similar to the Meskhetian Turkish understanding. This family structure, which can be named traditional family structure, is more common and more expected within the Meskhetian Turkish culture.

Gender roles are strongly defined. These expectations may seem unjust. However, when one gains a better understanding, it is apparent that it is not an inequality of gender roles but more of a division of labor. There is a reason for everything. For generations, Meskhetian Turkish women did not have much of an opportunity to work outside the home for safety reasons and fear of security. For most, working in the home or the farmland were the only options. So the gender roles employed today do not stem from an understanding that a woman's place is home, but more of a habitual division of labor that grew from circumstances.

Historically, this is true for many societies. However, most societies had a chance to alter because circumstances changed decades ago. Meskhetian Turks only recently, when they moved to United States, gained that opportunity. Right now, it is a luxury for a Meskhetian Turkish woman to stay at home, as they are working hard building a future. Therefore, for a woman to have the choice to stay at home is an indication of the woman's comfort. If she can stay at home, it means she does not have the burden of working both outside and inside the home.

From a more general American perspective, rigid gender roles dictate that the responsibility of home and children fall onto the woman regardless of her work outside the home. Meskhetian Turkish women, on the other hand, perceive a woman staying at home as happy and comfortable.



The most crucial point here is that, this is a difference of perspective; not oppression. Women are not prohibited to work outside the home, nor are they ostracized for doing so. The idea is not that a woman has to stay at home, it is an understanding that women are safer at home. They carry the burden of home, they shouldn't carry the burden of earning a living, too. That burden falls onto the men. These gender roles are unjust from the Western perspective, yet, it is important to understand that these expectations are not designed to oppress women.

Furthermore, another difference between American society and Meskhetian Turkish culture lies with the focus of identity. Kluckhohn (1953) said "Americans, more than most people of the world, place emphasis upon the future- a future which we anticipate to be 'bigger and better' " (p. 349). According to Dundes (1969), future-orientation of American society is evident from songs to greetings to simple everyday idioms, such as "thinking ahead" (p.59) or "something to look forward to." (p.57).

The U.S. is a future oriented culture. This doesn't mean history is irrelevant, but as a culture people are looking forward. On the other hand, many cultures such as Turkish culture are more past-history oriented (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). The past is immensely important for the present. The strenuous Greek-Turkish relationships is an example to that. Both cultures, who take pride in their history, also hold onto the past to the point of exhausting the present.

The significance of Meskhetian Turkish history indicates the importance of the past for the group's identity. Partially, the circumstances lead to this fact. They are still trying to regain their rights, because the injustice is still in effect.

Being history oriented reinforces the strong need for preservation and sense of community. Since general American culture is future-oriented, Meskhetian Turks interpret this difference as insignificance of tradition and community.

As Kim (1988) stated, immigration requires adaptation, which is a process. The success of this process demands a mutual understanding between immigrants and their new host culture. People see the world through their own cultural perspective. However, in order to understand those we deem different, we need to learn to see the view from the other side. Negative perceptions of Meskhetian Turks regarding the American culture are also the reasons why, though respect and appreciate them, Meskhetian Turks are distant from the American society. Only through better understanding their adaptation process can have an increased success.

## Chapter 6

### FINAL WORD: DISCUSSION

Everything started with a chain of chance meetings. By chance, my mother met a woman in a patisserie in Istanbul. By chance, the woman lived in Arizona and she was working with groups promoting intercultural understanding. As a result, I met her and got involved with a conference. By chance, Meskhetian Turkish women were hired to make lunch for this conference. While they were there, I was asked to take their photographs; simply because, by chance, my camera was out in my hand.

That was the first time I heard the name "Ahiska." The very next night, I escorted a Turkish author attending the conference to a dinner at a Turkish family's house; because, by chance, I was the one free to do so. By chance, the leader of Meskhetian Turks and his wife were also invited. By chance, I learned who they were, where they came from, and their story. "People don't even know who we are" said their leader; hearing those words, my dissertation topic was clear. A chain of chance meetings led to this dissertation. However, the decision to write it was made in an instant.

In this final section, the final word, first I return to the beginning, put everything in perspective making sense of it all. This study's conclusions contribute to cultural identity literature, specifically to literature on complexity of a community's culture and to our understanding of refugee adaptation. Hence, I start with a discussion of these contributions. Second, I talk about challenges in

the study. These challenges are accompanied by my self-reflection as the researcher. Finally, I offer thoughts about directions future studies can take.

### *Implications*

This research centered around the concept of connectivity. In the beginning there were three research questions, which as the researcher I envisioned as three aspects of Meskhetian Turkish culture. As themes emerged through narratives, what I deemed as separate aspects became more and more intertwined. Finally, the connection between them was clear. All these themes are inter-connected and mutually influential with one another. For instance, interpretation of history shapes, perhaps even creates, relationships with Turks; concurrently, it conditions perceptions and attitudes toward Americans. The intricate web of influences are not limited to this example. All these themes are interwoven and together they shine a light on Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity, which is their past and present; as well as their adaptation, which is their future.

First and foremost, this study supports and contributes to the dialectical approach of intercultural communication put forth by Martin and Nakayama (1999). As the authors claim

"A dialectical perspective also emphasizes the relational, rather than individual aspects and persons. In intercultural communication research, the dialectical perspective emphasizes the relationship between aspects of intercultural communication, and the importance of viewing these holistically and not in isolation." (p. 14)

Culture is a living, evolving, and constantly changing entity. We cannot try to understand this entity through limited aspect of it. Scholars explained cultures and how they are structured through different perspectives. There are several theories examining cultures from different value orientations (Alberts, Martin & Nakayama, 2010) answering questions such as, is the culture individualistic or collectivistic, how is human nature perceived, what is the relationship between humans and nature, or even the non-western perspective of does the culture present a short-term or a long-term value orientation, otherwise known as virtue vs. truth orientation. These perspectives all try to explain the intricacies of a culture's identity. As Martin and Nakayama (1999) explain, a comprehensive look at any culture cannot present an "either, or" approach. Rather, a dialectic approach, where we try to understand the culture as "both, and," gives us a more through perspective.

This research contributes to the dialectic approach, and perhaps even provides a perspective where a thorough understanding of any culture can be found at the connections drawn from various aspects of the culture. The dialectic perspective tells us that a culture and identity of its members are not, for instance, individualistic or collectivistic. Both the culture and the members are both individualistic and collectivistic in different aspects.

The dialectic perspective teaches us to have a more comprehensive look at cultures to fully understand them. We cannot examine cultures through any value orientations by themselves. Exploring the connections of identity; how the culture is connected to its past, its future, and other social groups; can give us a deeper

understanding of the culture's identity. As Martin and Nakayama (1999) stated " these dialectics are not discrete, but always operate in relation to each other (p.18). Hence, it is not enough to draw the connections between the culture and these components. We also need to understand the connection between these elements themselves.

This study is an example of this notion. In order to understand the Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity, I examined the connections Meskhetian Turks have to themselves, to their kin, and to what they perceive as the other. Equally important, I explore not only how Meskhetian Turks are connected to these components, but also how these components are connected to each other. This intricate and intertwined connections of components help us understand the identity of the culture.

The study also contributes to ethnic identity literature. The literature argues that threats to any group strengthens, even creates, an ethnic identity (De Vos, 2006; Fong, 2004; Volkan, 1999). The study demonstrates that threats to the group's identity, as well as their very existence, clearly shapes their culture. Vital components of Meskhetian Turkish identity, such as preservation of culture and sense of community, are representations of this fact.

Furthermore, this study shows that the group's adaptation to their new cultural environment in the United States is directly influenced as a result. Contradicting components of their adaptation, such as feeling secure (disappearance of an eminent threat) and fear of losing culture (without a threat to preserve it) confirm this influence.

These implications are not limited to Meskhetian Turks. While exploring cultures, their identity, and changes they endure over time; we, as researchers, need to have a more complete understanding. Cultures are composed of various aspects, which shine a light on a culture's past and future. Understanding these aspects thoroughly is crucial. Furthermore, we need to see the connection between them. Different pieces of a culture's identity are all connected to one another. We can only understand a culture, when we can make sense of these connections. Interpretation of the past and visions of future come together and create the present. As this study exemplifies, approaching culture as a web of connections help us understand the identity of that culture more thoroughly.

Finally, the study furthers the understanding of past/history and present/future connection regarding cultural identity (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Martin and Nakayama (1999) explain that we need to consider the relationship between a culture's perception of past/history and present/connection. Pairing this concept with theories of American culture's future orientation (Kluckhohn, 1953; Dundes, 1969), the study contributes to our understanding of cultural identity.

Moving forward, looking forward, or moving on are concepts in the American culture, pointing to the future orientation. There are many languages where these phrases cannot be translated. For instance, the concept of moving on cannot be translated to Turkish. One can try to explain the concept, however, the phrase itself does not have an equivalent.

Future oriented or history oriented? Looking forward or looking back? Especially when it comes to intercultural interactions, we need to understand the

orientation of the parties. If one party is focused on the past or has reservations because of historical reasons, it is much more challenging to talk about the future. An excellent example of how past orientation can affect communication, in this case peacebuilding processes in a situation of protracted conflict, is Broome's (2004) work in Cyprus.

In regards to immigration and adaptation, this notion is crucial. Refugees from all around the world, such as Rwanda, Sudan and Iraq come to US for a safer and better life. Their circumstances and lives changed for the better in the US, however, the past is still a part of who they are. Many organizations, such as Amnesty International or International Rescue Committee help refugees acculturate into life in the United States.

The study shows that understanding cultural perceptions through their focus of history versus future can help these organizations guide refugees to a more future oriented perspective, where their wounds can heal and they can focus on a future. Helping refugees understand the future-oriented cultural perspective will also help them understand American culture better.

From personal experience, I can attest to the fact that many misunderstand the future-oriented perspective of American culture and believe history is irrelevant. Considering how significant history is for a large number of cultures, future-orientation is misjudged as irrelevance of history. Helping refugees understand the difference can only aid them in their adaptation to this culture.



### *Challenges*

The study presents certain limitations, which are common with any qualitative research. As the nature of qualitative research demands, the results or any interpretation thereafter, are products of a limited number of participants. Since the goal of this study was to understand individual experiences, making generalizations is not possible. Hence, claims regarding results which are applicable to a general population are not possible. This study demonstrates experiences of a particular group of people. We can surely learn from their experiences, as well as their perceptions; however, we cannot make claims of universality.

Therefore, in this section I will focus on particular challenges the study presented as a result of its nature and set up. This study was a collection of narratives, which demanded my participation in the community as well as my interpretation throughout. Both the narrative nature of the study and my personal involvement and perspective presented unique challenges.

The interview process and structure presented the first challenge. I conducted all interviews in Meskhetian Turkish homes. Most interviews took place at the home of the interviewee. In the case of three interviews, the setting was the home of a relative; a brother, a cousin, and a father-in-law. There were two reasons for the choice of setting. One, I wanted the interviewees to feel comfortable while answering questions. Two, I wanted to be able to observe their lives and interactions to gain a better understanding.

I gained invaluable insight and had a chance to interact with many more community members as a result of the setting. However, this also meant talking to the interviewee one on one and without interruptions was a challenge. Family members were present through most interviews, at least through parts of the interviews. They always respected the interview process and the person being interviewed at the time, hence, their involvement with the interview was very limited. Nonetheless, there were a few instances, where the spouse or sibling of the interviewee intervened. These interventions were, in the end, very helpful. Usually, if the third person intervened, it was to add or clarify a point. Nonetheless, I found myself wanting to talk to the interviewee alone.

Moreover, a few times unexpected visitors, such as friends or neighbors interrupted the interviews, at least for a short while. At first, I feared the interviewee would lose train of thought or would try to shorten the interview because of guests. Fortunately, I was proven wrong. Even if the interview halted for a while, the interviewees always picked up where they left off, and they were always willing to share as much as they could. In the end, I spent many more hours than the interview itself with the interviewees. For instance, the first interview took 4 and a half hours; yet I was in the home of the interviewee for over 8 hours. The time I spent there included having tea, dinner, and after dinner tea with unannounced guests, who stopped by for a visit.

The lack of privacy was frustrating in the beginning of the interview process. However, quickly I realized that these interruptions were giving me a new insight about the lives and culture of Meskhetian Turks. The sense of

community, interaction between family members, and even the depths of their understanding of hospitality became much clearer as a result of these encounters.

The second challenge presented itself through the interviews. As the study focused on narratives, I aimed to understand personal experiences and perceptions of each individual. However, it always took a while for the interviewee to talk about his or her personal story or personal experiences. Interviewees wanted to answer the questions, first within a cultural context. For instance, talking about their lives in Russia first started with stories of Meskhetian Turks in Russia and the historical context. They first started with the more generalized stories, in a way they wanted to talk on behalf of their people. Only after giving me the general context, when I asked specifically, they started talking about personal experiences. Once again, a challenge that was difficult in the beginning provided me with an insight. In this case, their willingness to talk about their people first, helped me see the importance of historical context.

The third challenge emerged from my own cultural identity. Certain cultural characteristics of Meskhetian Turks are very familiar to me. It is challenging to step back and see the culture from the outside so I can explain it. This is an indication of the commonalities between Turks and Meskhetian Turks. However, taking these commonalities as granted would have hindered a valid study. Therefore, to my best abilities, I tried to verify my understandings. If a notion, a tradition, or an understanding seemed familiar; instead of assuming that cultural meanings are the same for both Meskhetian Turks and Turks, I asked for clarifications and explanations to evaluate my own interpretations. Nevertheless,

it is likely that certain cultural notions were invisible to me because of their familiarity.

Differences are easier to observe. They capture one's attention more than similarities. So I had to look at the Meskhetian Turkish culture with more of an American perspective, in other words, I tried to see the differences between the larger, more general American culture and the Meskhetian Turks. I tried to reflect on the differences other than those reported by Meskhetian Turks as differences between themselves and what they perceive as the American culture. This is solely my observation and my interpretation as a result of my understanding of Meskhetian Turkish and general American societies.

For instance, in the previous section, I argued that gender roles may seem unjust. However, a deeper understanding explains them as more of a division of labor as a result of circumstances. I do not subscribe to the traditional gender roles. I don't believe in the division of labor between genders, where the home is the responsibility of the woman. However, I am very familiar with these expectations because the Turkish society is more traditional in this sense. In Turkey, stay at home mothers are not common. Especially educated women work outside the home (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1998) and stay at home mothers are seldom among them. However, responsibilities within the home still belong to women.

Hence, even though I do not subscribe to this understanding, the Meskhetian Turkish gender roles are still familiar to me. In fact, when I reflect upon it, I realize that these gender roles were expected for me. Therefore, I had to

take a step back and evaluate them from a different perspective in order to articulate them correctly.

Finally, my personal attitude and involvement presented a challenge. As a result of the study, I interacted with Meskhetian Turks and built relationships with some of them. I listened to their stories, got to know them, and understand their culture. In the end, I not only understand their perceptions, but I also see their situation from their point of view. For a researcher, this level of understanding is a great gift. However, one instance I encountered made me question my position as the researcher.

In July 2010, I attended an international conference in Istanbul, Turkey. During this conference, I met a scholar from a university in Georgia. When the Georgian scholar learnt my research topic, she said she couldn't understand why Meskhetian Turks wanted to return to Georgia; after all "they left Georgia a long time ago." After this remark, I felt the strong need to correct her and remind her that Meskhetian Turks didn't actually "leave" Georgia, but they were forcefully relocated away from it. The conversation wasn't particularly long, and mainly consisted of my clarifications about the situation.

Later on, when I reflected on this encounter, I questioned my approach. Yes, I was talking about facts, not perceptions. It is a fact that Meskhetian Turks didn't leave Georgia with their freewill; they were forced out. It is a fact that as a result of two other forced relocations, they ended up being refugees in the United States. It is a fact that since 1944, they endured discrimination and violence.

These are facts. However, I questioned my desire to correct the Georgian scholar, instead of listening to her point of view more thoroughly.

As the researcher, shouldn't I listen and explore, instead of trying to correct? Instead, I felt the need to defend and advocate for Meskhetian Turks. I wanted her to see the "truth" as it told by Meskhetian Turks. I questioned whether I identify with Meskhetian Turks because of our ethnic kinship, or because I know them personally and I am invested in them and their wellbeing.

Now that the study is complete, I still question my position as the researcher. Do I feel a connection to Meskhetian Turks? Should I question how I relayed their story? Am I just providing a space for them to share their stories or am I so involved that I, too, feel a connection to their story? Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated the researcher is a part of the study, placing herself along side of her participants.

Hence, perhaps it is acceptable to be an advocate, more than a simple reporter; as long as I recognize and acknowledge my own bias and recheck my assumptions and inferences looking for my own biases. Perhaps, it is acceptable to take a stand, as long as I can, at least, see it from the opposing point of view and as long as I can say there is another side to this story. In this case, the Georgian scholar presented a political and, unfortunately, a bigoted point of view; when she expressed that Meskhetian Turks just left Georgia and Georgian government was right to refuse these "outsiders." Her point of view was erroneous, however, I did not have to correct her. Nonetheless, I felt the need to do so.

### *Future Studies*

This study is complete; however, the topic is still rich with unexplored areas. Hence, there is a strong need for future studies. First of all, research needs to continue with other Meskhetian Turkish communities in different parts of the U.S. We cannot make assumptions for all Meskhetian Turkish communities. For instance, this study showed strong relationships between Meskhetian Turks and Turks in the area, which, as explained, influences the community's adaptation in the United States. Future studies, exploring Meskhetian Turkish communities in different parts of the United States will help us understand this connection further.

Similarly, how does location influence Meskhetian Turks' relation with Turks, and as a result their perceptions of the American society? What are the differences in communities, which are embedded in locations with a large Turkish or Turkic population (such as New Jersey or Long Island); or in communities where there is hardly any Turkish presence (such as Michigan or Washington). How is their adaptation process different in these places? The perceptions and experiences of these communities will help us understand identity and adaptation concepts better. In other words, the research needs to continue.

Further research is also needed on Meskhetian Turks in Turkey. Determining the similarities and differences between their adaptation process and how their cultural identity is shaped in Turkey will provide a deeper understanding about these concepts. Meskhetian Turks' perceptions of Turks and relationships they have with the Turkish community are intertwined with the American cultural context and Meskhetian Turks' adaptation process to this

country. Exploring their adaptation and perceptions in Turkey, investigating similarities and differences between communities in the context of Turkey and context of United States, will help us better understand Meskhetian Turks in the United States.

Trier and Khanzihn (2007) gave us valuable general information about the statistics and status of Meskhetian Turks in several countries. Although the main context of both Trier and Khanzihn's (2007) research and this study is cultural identity, the focus of these two works is ultimately different. My study explored a more specific and more in-depth understanding of the Meskhetian Turkish identity construction. I believe expanding this study to the countries where there is a relatively significant Meskhetian Turkish population, i.e. the countries portrayed in Trier and Khanzihn's (2007) research, can complement the general knowledge we gain through the aforementioned research.

However, it is also prudent to add that my focus was Meskhetian Turkish identity as refugees and many Meskhetian Turkish communities in these countries have been there for multiple generations and may have exceeded the refugee status, which indicates the need for a new focal point/perspective of research. Subsequently, implementing this study on the Meskhetian Turkish populations in the countries regarded in Trier and Khanzihn's (2007) research can provide a new insight and answer questions such as whether exceeding the refugee status legally is an indication or aide for Meskhetian Turks to feel "more at home" or if they still feel like home is the unattainable Meskheti. Exploring whether Meskhetian



Turks in these contexts have passed the refugee status, officially, mentally, and culturally will also further our understanding of cultural adaptation.

Similar studies are also needed for other refugee groups. The United States grants refugee status to more people than any other country in the world. As a result, these communities add to the diverse make up of this country. Therefore, we need to understand how similar groups view themselves, the US culture and their adaptation. Do they also have a connection to other ethnic groups, similar to Meskhetian Turks' connection to Turks. Do these connections aid them in their adaptation or hinder it because they provide the necessary social comfort and eliminate the need to become a part of the American society? These questions can be answered with more research on various groups.

*Conclusion:*

My goal in this study was to understand Meskhetian Turks and their culture. I set out to focus on their culture and their lives in the United States. Stories, rich details, and invaluable perceptions that interviewees shared with me helped create a study, which provided a much deeper understanding of culture and cultural identity than I ever anticipated. However, the more I understand, the more I see how much I am still to explore. The section on future studies is a testament to a lifetime worth of research to come. Hence, as the final word I would like to state that this research is just a beginning.

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APPENDIX A  
IRB APPROVAL



Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

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**To:** Benjamin Broome  
STAUF

*to* **From:** Mark Roosa, Chair *SR*  
Soc Beh IRB

**Date:** 09/27/2010

**Committee Action:** Exemption Granted

**IRB Action Date:** 09/27/2010

**IRB Protocol #:** 1009005501

**Study Title:** Cultural Identity and Adaptation of Meskhetian Turks in the United States

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.