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Displacement and the Politics of Identity: Reterritorialization of Ahıska Turk identity in the United States

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Abstract

Today, most anthropologists seem to agree that world views based on the fixed category identity-place, such as the ideology of the nation-state, wrongly assume that identities are inescapable destinies, naturally predetermined by kinship ties, ethnicity, locality, and shared culture. For refugees, the complexity of their experiences in their countries of origin, and in response to their diaspora itself, add further complexities to the process of ethnic identity formation. Ahıska Turks, a stateless community, who has experienced multiple displacements, violent persecution, and ongoing exile since 1944, claim to preserve their ethnic identity during exile years in different geographic locations through a strong link of place with memory, loss, and nostalgia. This article aims to investigate whether the Ahıska Turk identity is de-territorialized and reterritorialized through adapting the routines of the host culture in everyday life in the midst of all the efforts of achieving an economically and socially self-sufficient family and community lives in the United States.

Keywords: Identity; Ahıska Turks; homeland; reterritorialization; migration; refugees

Introduction

What does it mean, asks Clifford, at the end of the twentieth century, to speak of a native land? What processes rather than essences are involved in present experiences of cultural identity? Such questions are of course not wholly new, but issues of identity whether collective or ethnic today do seem to take on a special character, when more and more of us live in what Said (1979) has called a generalized condition of homelessness, a world where identities are increasingly coming to be, if not wholly de-territorialized, at least differently territorialized relationship to this. A problem of perceptions of home and homeland in a dynamic world exists that is characterized by migration, expulsion, travel, transnationalism, and multiculturalism, and it draws attention to the following question: What and where becomes home after someone has crossed state borders and cultural boundaries, either voluntarily or forced by particular circumstances.

Most homeland literature assumes that culture, historical memory and societal organization were already inscribed in the space. This concrete spatial view and the assumed "isomorphism

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of space, place and culture" result in some significant problems (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992:32). Immigrants, people living in borders, refugees, transnational business people or professional elites, will not fit into this way of space-culture premise. According to Gupta and Ferguson (1992) and transnationalism literature a disjuncture exists between the place and the culture lived by certain groups such as Khmer refugees in the United States or by Indians in England (Clifford, 1997; Kearney, 1995; Rouse, 1991; Basch et al., 1994). Today, most anthropologists seem to agree that world views based on the fixed category identity-place, such as the ideology of the nation-state, wrongly assume that identities are inescapable destinies, naturally predetermined by kinship ties, ethnicity, locality, and shared culture. A widespread consensus seems to exist that people are rather engaged in multiple identification processes, many of which are not necessarily rooted in genealogical or territorial assumptions (Basch et al., 1994; Baumann & Sunier 1995; Kearney 1995; Malkki 1992).

The prolonged displacement of Ahıska Turks for years resonates with this way of thinking. They were displaced from Georgia in 1944 due to their link with Turkish heritage and possible fear of their alliance with Turkey during World War II. After that, they had to be deported from Uzbekistan where the majority of the Ahıska Turks used to live due to rising nationalism and ethnic tensions. Finally, they had to take refugee from Krasnodar Krai, Russia to the United States due to their ethnic heritage in a nation state which is still in the process of creation (Dogan, 2020).

A variety of arguments exists concerning the relevance of home/homeland with identity. Displacement does not lead to culture loss or a crisis of identity. In this understanding, cultural identity is not dependent on presence within a specific place for Ahıska Turks, as seen in the cases of diasporic communities such as Armenians, Greek Cypriots, and Jews in the United States. Also, territory and place do have a role to play in cultural identity. Territory becomes relevant once more when we recognize that culture and identity are often re-territorialized. It is important not only to focus on the de-territorialization of an identity but also to take it a step further and consider the ways in which people can re-territorialize their identity in exile (Diener, 2009:45). At the same time, not to mention about the link between place and identity just simplifies the unique relationship between person and place. What is crucial to recognize is that Georgia continues to play vital roles in the lives of Ahıska Turks in the United States as a spatially unbound entity: not fixed, and not unchanging, and not totally irrelevant. (Diener, 2009:45).

By incorporating qualitative data collected through fieldwork in Houston, Texas this article aims to investigate if we can observe the deeply territorializing concepts of identity among Ahıska Turks, as a community that has been displaced and uprooted multiple times for many decades? While place continues to play an important role, do we see that place continues to be constructed, re-imagined, and preserved both collectively as a community in exile as well as by individuals. For present purposes, I look at how Ahıska Turks preserve and maybe redefine their cultural values and ethnic identity in the United States.

Rather than mitigating the importance of place in a world of movement, a further analysis of the limits of what constitutes place allows for a more holistic approach to understanding its resonance among those who have been violently forced to leave the places that they have come to call their own. Indeed, one major tenet of this article is that despite or perhaps due to the multitude of disparate locations to which Ahıska Turks have been forcibly or voluntarily moved, place, while its meaning may be contested, never loses its importance. While studying

the case of Ahıska Turks in the United States and their identity preservation techniques we see how culture and identity are often re-territorialized. In the context of forced migration, Ahıska Turks illustrate how it is important not only to focus on the de-territorialization of an identity but also how people can re-territorialize their identity in exile. Before moving on to the details and examples of the identity de-territorialization and reterritorialization, it is important to define what I mean with identity de-territorialization and reterritorialization. Throughout the article I use Deleuze and Guattari's approach to de-territorialization which is how a territory, loses its current organization and context. When thinking of the concept within the context of Ahıska Turks in the United States, I propose the losing importance of the land of origin in the ethnic identity formation and preservation process. Whereas, identity reterritorialization is more of producing an aspect of the culture, doing so in the context of their local culture and making it their own away from the original land (Günzel, 1998).

Who Are Ahıska Turks?

Ahıska Turks are a small non-titular group who has experienced multiple displacements, violent persecution, and ongoing exile since 1944. Initially, they were one of the several groups who were deported from their homeland, Georgia, to Central Asia under Stalin's rule along with the other groups such as the Chechens, Crimean Tatars, and Ingushes who were designated as traitors of the Soviet Union in 1944 (Oh, 2012). After being victims of mass deportation from Georgia, the Ahıska Turks experienced pogroms in Uzbekistan, and human rights abuses in Russia. Starting from 2004, the U.S. accepted approximately 14,000 Ahıska Turks as refugees (Aydingun, 2002).

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

Small number of Ahıska Turks could settle in Georgia. Those Ahıska Turks who succeeded in moving to Georgia faced discrimination and legal difficulties. Ahıska Turks who remained in Krasnodar Krai (elsewhere in Russia the situation was resolved) were denied Russian citizenship and the basic rights associated with citizenship. As of 2005 and, throughout the previous decade, their legal status was defined as "stateless people temporarily residing in Krasnodar" (Swerdlow, 2006:35). Soviet Union collapsed, and they became the citizens of a country which does not exist anymore. No other country accepts them, and they became

stateless. Constrained in their ability to move, Ahıska Turks had been residing in that part of Russia trying to make sense of transformations around them. They also continued to appeal to authorities hoping to find legal permanence and stability. Yet, after 15 years of struggle Ahıska Turks were still denied Russian citizenship. Their plea was heard by the United States where they were accepted as refugees of special humanitarian concern (Koriouchkina and Swerdlow, 2007). Throughout these transitions, from a minority group in Georgia with strong connections to Turkey, to the victims of displacement and deportation, and now as a diaspora, a strong traditional community, with its own cultural practices, values, and beliefs, has persisted and flourished.

In this article, I use the term 'Ahıska Turks' since that is what most of my respondents in the United States call themselves. The term 'Ahıska Turkleri' (Ahıska Turks) is used with reference to Akhaltsikhe, the largest city in their native region in Georgia (Pentikäinen and Trier, 2004). Almost all of my interviewees regard themselves as Turks who lived in the area called Meskhetia under the former Soviet Union. In contrast, Georgian officials (as well as some Ahıska Turk leaders) prefer to use the term Ahıska Turks to emphasize an underlying Georgian identity (Aydıngün et al., 2006). Many of my respondents stated that they prefer not to use the latter term since they see it as a denial of their Turkishness. It should also be noted that all the Ahıska Turks I interviewed clearly stated that they are culturally different from the Turks of Turkey, and they specifically defined their ethnic identity as Ahıska Turk.

Being a Refugee in the United States

The United States did not have a formal refugee policy until 1980, when Congress worked out a formal process for dealing with refugees from conflicts in Southeast Asia. The challenges of resettling various groups, such as the Hmong and Vietnamese "boat people", served as the catalyst for the late Senator Edward Kennedy to propose the Refugee Act of 1980. This act systemized entry into the United States and standardized the services that refugee entrants should receive. The 1980 Act, which remains in place to this day, also defined the term "refugee" to conform to the working definition used by the United Nations, and, for the first time, made a clear distinction between refugee and asylum status. The act also established a comprehensive program for the resettlement of these newcomers, and, because the Unites States sees itself as a nation of immigrants, concrete paths to citizenship was built into it. Its provisions gave all Indochinese refugees conditional status for one year, after which they could adjust to permanent resident status and then, as people who were no longer welcome in their last country of residence, they were expected to proceed to a naturalized citizenship status in five years, thereby establishing their loyalty to their country of refuge (Aleinikoff et al., 2001).

Beginning in 2004, Ahıska Turks arrived in the United States went through the same process, and by the time I was conducting interviews in Houston, most of my interviewees had been naturalized as citizenship after living in the U.S. for five years. America's refugee policies and legal paths toward citizenship were based on the idea that America would become their permanent country of residence. By enabling the Ahıska Turks to achieve permanent resident status, the process automatically opened up a wide range of employment opportunities for them and made them eligible for in-state tuition rates at state colleges. At the time of the arrival Ahıska Turks in the Houston area, the local Non-Government Organizations, YMCA-

international, were in charge of resettlement including permanent residency, food stamps, and Medicaid applications as well as enrollment of the children in public schools.

Being a Citizen in the United States

Citizenship means different things to different people. Legal scholar David Weissbrodt (1998: 248) defines it as "a legal status that connotes membership in and a duty of permanent allegiance to a society which arrives with it specific rights and responsibilities." Several scholars, however, have noticed a general trend of immigrant and refugee decisions to elect citizenship based more on the rights and ease of restrictions, and less, if any, on feelings of loyalty and allegiance (Schuck, 1998; DeSipiro, 2001; Mavroudi, 2007). This presumes that they have stronger feelings toward the country they left behind. On the other hand, other scholars like Jansen and Lofving (2009: 6) who criticize any presumption that a "'refugee's' real identity, if they were allowed to be themselves, is their belonging to an ethno-national category territorialized in relation to the homeland." This is not to say that people have some primordial national identity, but that their identities have, in part, been forged by the nationalizing efforts of their homelands.

For refugee groups, like the Ahıska Turks who arrived in the United States from Krasnodar Krai, Russia with no nation-state the sentiments that they did carry with them to their resettlement sites were a combination of what Peggy Levitt (2001) refers to as cultural belonging, and a dimension of diasporic ethno-belonging rooted in principles of blood ties and clan connections. This blood affiliation binds their community. Notwithstanding the opportunities given by the host country, such as citizenship, construct ties with the community and the host country. Within the U.S., their belonging to the new host country is strengthened through the opportunity to gain citizenship. Ahıska Turks naturalize for practical and material reasons, such as ease of travel and fear of deportation. They were eager to process their permanent residency and eventually citizenship with the thought that without citizenship they could be forced, once again, out of one space and in search of another zone of refuge.

Most of the refugees and immigrants in the United States followed the path of citizenship, which is first to gain permanent residency and then after five years to become naturalized for "practical and material" reasons. However, just because citizenship is elected for practical and material reasons, it does not mean it is valued any less by those who elect it. To the Ahıska Turks who were fleeing persecution, the status of permanence and safety were highly valued.

Immigrant scholars have noted that those taking citizenship in the United States often do so for pragmatic and legal reasons while often maintaining a place-based sense of cultural belonging to their home country (Brettell, 2006; Gilbertson and Singer, 2003; Vertovec, 2004). The Ahıska Turk experiences offer a different dimension to these analyses as they reveal practical reasons for adopting citizenship that coexists with an identity that is maintained in an unfixed, stateless, diasporic space of ethnic identity. As a community that has been displaced and stateless for decades, gaining citizenship grants a sense of belongingness along with ethic identity de-territorialization and eventually identity reterritorialization. Georgia has an important place for the Ahıska Turk identity and the memory, loss and nostalgia played a significant role to preserve Ahıska Turk identity for many years. However, the Georgian government's reluctance for the repatriation of the deported groups and the possible economic and social re-integration issues in the form of restitutions of land, property rights, language barriers, citizenship questions, tensions between Ahıska Turks, who are Muslim, and

Georgians, who are mostly Orthodox Christian complexify any hope for repatriation and may even weaken the ties with the original land. In this vein, throughout my fieldwork among the group in the United States what I observed is reterritorializing Ahıska Turk identity in the form of adapting some of the characteristics of the host culture. In the following section I illustrated these adaptations through some changes in the family dynamics and language usage.

Ahıska Turks in the United States and Preserving Ethnic Identity

Ahıska Turks have been a closed society and have had very limited interaction with other ethnic groups due to the concerns of maintaining their own cultural values. During the exile years in diaspora Ahıska Turks seemed engaged in the construction of what Anderson defined an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983). They claimed that they diligently preserved their language, religion, and tradition since 1944 deportation and being a closed community helped them to maintain their culture and tradition over the years. However what the other studies show that, even though Ahıska Turks claim and define themselves as a closed society, the group manifest a variety of practices of their relationship with the other ethnic communities (Dogan, 2020; Oh, 2012; Inan, 2020). Shared language, religion and family values play significant role in the decision processes for the interaction.

Conversely, the United States has been a very different experience for them. They almost have nothing shared with the larger society culturally. However, the United States provided a great deal of opportunities for them including citizenship, job, higher education, and security. Many of the refugees arriving in the United States take advantage of an extensive resettlement program which provides a wide variety of services. The resettlement program grants the permanence residency and early economic self-sufficiency through employment (Franz, 2003). Therefore, many Ahıska Turks in the United States have direct and immediate access to the job market. As a prolonged displaced community, Ahıska Turks in the United States focused on self-sufficiency economically and socially. In order to accomplish this goal, most Ahıska Turk men and women are eager to be employed to secure their self-sufficiency in diaspora.

While it seems to bring a substantial contribution to the economic self-sufficiency of the Ahıska Turk family, both men and women's participation to the workforce and education will challenge the strict patriarchal family settings of the community. As mentioned earlier, Ahıska Turks emphasize the importance of preserving their cultures and traditions. One of the characteristics of the group is having a strict hierarchical patriarchal family structure. They mainly practice patrilocal family settings. Most of the married couples initially live either with their husband's family or very close to them. In general, Ahıska Turk families live as extended family. There is a strict hierarchy within the family that depends on age and gender. The older members of the family need to be respected by the younger ones. The eldest male member of the family has the power, not only traditional power but also economic power. Elderly women have an important place in the family, but their power only extends to the matchmaking strategies and teaching proper behavior to the young members of the family. As more and more Ahıska Turk family members regardless of gender entering the workforce, the strict patriarchal family setting is being challenged. Even though the group members specifically state the importance of maintaining the Ahıska Turk family traditions and gendered labor division at home, participants' attitudes demonstrate that the expansion of women's education

and employment participation is not a direct indication of their increased power within the home, or of power sharing between men and women.

Comparing with many other diasporic communities in the United States, Ahıska Turks are relatively a young community consists of predominantly first generation immigrants. However, as the population shifts to younger generations, and through gaining education in American settings it is a high possibility to see the changes in the family traditions and values. Based on my interviews among the relatively younger generations, I see changes in the family settings. Due to the practical reasons such as the availability of the higher paid jobs, or better work conditions, some young families may sacrifice to be away from the extended family. I also observe several of the examples that women work and men stay at home due to the lack of job opportunities for men which challenges the traditional breadwinner role of man in the family. Even though my young informants stresses upon the importance of maintaining Ahıska Turk family traditions, they do not see it as a problem for men not to work or women earn more money than their husbands. While focusing on economic and social self-sufficiency in the diaspora, the group members are not very much aware of the changes happening to their traditions. Normalization of the changes of family dynamics and the changing attitudes of the younger generation is only one of the examples that how the identity can be re-territorialized in diaspora. While claiming to preserve the traditions, accepting the other culture's way of life albeit some contradictions, illustrates how identities can evolve over the time and reterritorialized.

In addition to family setting, language is an important component of Ahıska Turk identity and can be another example for identity reterritorialization. They could draw clear boundaries of their ethnic identity with their language and religion during the Soviet period. Although all the members of the community speak Russian, they maintained their Anatolian dialect of Turkish through speaking it at home with the other family members. Elderly members of the family had an important role on this. When it comes to the United States, Ahıska Turks still speak their original language at home with their children, yet as I personally experience that since the children spend most of their time at school, they feel more comfortable with English compare to Turkish. They prefer to speak in English with their friends which make English as their first language. I also observed that young Ahıska Turk children at the age of 8-12 speak in English with each other although their parents' reminded them to speak in Turkish. Language usage is another example how ethnic identities are slowly shifting among immigrant or refugee groups. Although there are plenty of studies on how the change in language usage is one of the indicators of assimilation or acculturation (Alba and Nee, 1997; Carliner, 2000; Zhou, 2002; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001), what is particular in this case is, preserving Ahıska Turk language has been one of the key defense mechanism of preserving Ahıska Turkishness over the exile years. The changing attitude towards acquiring another language and widely usage of it among the group can be another indicator for the reterritorialization of the identity.

Language and family traditions are only two aspects to illustrate how identity can be re-territorialized in this article. Adapting some of the elements of the host culture added to the symbolic meaning of the citizenship for a displaced and stateless society are possibly leading to reterritorialized Ahıska Turk identity in the United States. The examples can be extended to religion, gender roles and other traditions and customs of the group. As mentioned earlier a strong link of place with memory, loss, and nostalgia still exists among the Ahıska Turks living in the United States. However, when it comes to the Clifford's question about the

meaning of native land, the answer is not simple for Ahıska Turks or any other stateless and displaced groups with complex migration patterns in current models of national attachment, group boundary making, communal life, gender and generational differences and identity structuring.

Conclusion: Reterritorialization of Identity and the Re-Imagination of the Place of Origin in Diaspora

Whether called living in a generalized condition of homelessness or not (Said, 1978), what I observed during my ethnographic studies among Ahıska Turks in the United States is they all emphasized the importance of preserving their Ahıska Turk identity. Ahıska Turks relate their ethnic identity with their original homeland, Georgia. However, the link between territory and identity is becoming complex as Ahıska Turks settle in the United States, which has granted them citizenship and a safe place to live.

All of the research and documents about the Ahıska Turks has shown that they preserve their identity and attachment to home during and after the former Soviet Union period (Aydingun, 2009; Oh, 2006; Pentikäinen and Trier 2004). The decisive factor in re-territorializing identities is an image of community, not necessarily the present territory in which the community lives. The research on Ahıska Turks in the United States and Central Asia shows how the link between person and place can be de-naturalized. "This understanding means that refugees are not out of place, their place is defined by the particularity of their social interactions that intersect at the specific location where they are present" (Brun, 2001: 20). Among the Ahıska Turks living in the United States or elsewhere, a strong link of place with memory, loss, and nostalgia continues to exist. As Gupta and Ferguson (1997) conclude in Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference, de-territorialization has destabilized the fixity of "ourselves" and "others". But, it has not created subjects who are free-floating nomads. Instead of just stopping at the idea of de-territorializaton, we must theorize how space is becoming re-territorialized in the contemporary world (p. 50).

The established and structured refugee resettlement program of the United States provided a more intimate resettlement experience that resulted in more social capital, better access to language classes and public schools for children, enhanced employment opportunities, and the stability through giving permanent residency and eventually citizenship. Ahıska Turks living in the United States benefit from a structured refugee resettlement program, and most of them have gained their citizenship. Therefore, they tend to stay in the United States while keeping their ties with the other Ahıska Turk in diaspora in the United States and in different parts of the world.

Being displaced multiple times, having had to live under oppression for long years and facing ethnic discrimination influenced the homeland concept of Ahıska Turks in the United States. Forms of methodological nationalism that are applied standardly to migration research cannot adequately account for the group for whom nationality was not a known part of their social life for more than 70 years. This methodology also misguides policies that define belonging in terms of national loyalties and legal passports. Only by stepping back from the notion of formal ties can we understand why those ties established through citizenship rights do not necessarily bring about attachments of belonging; why formal ties affirm a condition of "being in" but do not automatically translate into feelings of "belonging to" a place. Ahıska Turks living in the United States were given a variety of benefits and rights, however most of the

first generation Ahıska Turk interviewees living in the United States did not express their sense of belonging to the United States. The Ahıska Turk diasporic data suggest that, for some refugee groups, this global space may be the core of their experience not the periphery. It is the place where multiple identifications and belongings get sorted out. Levitt (2001: 196) has argued that, while multiple studies have demonstrated that diasporic networks exist and have revealed a great deal about their characteristics in a specific setting, we as yet do not fully understand their relative weights or how they change in the face of different localized practices or the extent to which they remain salient beyond the first generation. Few Ahıska Turk had de-territorialized notions of belonging to Georgia, which came with a global web of rights and responsibilities. The vastness of their connections and eager search to infinitely expand them, adds to our knowledge of groups who link themselves to a global diaspora as opposed to groups that remain more restricted to trans-state spaces. I argue that Ahıska Turkish global connectedness and the constant negotiations that take place across diasporic space concerning what it means to be an Ahıska Turk are driven, in part, by the claim to a co-ethnicity that can only be realized in the diaspora. In their own imaginations to be an Ahıska Turk is to be diasporic. However, the data from this research suggests that Ahıska Turk identities are more locally situated and that the diaspora becomes the space in which those local identities are contested. Therefore, this research calls attention to the more complicated process of reconciling a diasporic identification with a localized one. Thus, I argue that the group identity of Ahıska Turk people in each field site must be analyzed as convergences of people, place, and perception of a shared past and local positioning, of structure and agency, and of intersections and scale.

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