Displacement Effects on Gender Roles, Family Structure and Ethnic Identity: Muslim Meskhetians in the USA

From the accusations and discrimination of nationalistic prejudice and totalitarian politics, Muslim Meskhetians, also known as Meskheti Turks and Ahiska Turks, have faced forced deportation and displacement for almost a century. The small group of ethnic Turks formerly inhabited the Meskheti region of Georgia, but was forcibly sent to Central Asia during the Stalinist era. Since 1989, many Muslim Meskhetians moved to other former Soviet Republics, and since 2004, have created several communities in the United States. 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 her Noontime Scholars lecture, entitled “Displacement Effects on Gender Roles, Family Structure and Ethnic Identity: Muslim Meskhetians in the USA,” Professor Ekaterine Pirtskhalava explored the ways in which life in the United States has shaped the family structure, gender roles, and sense of identity of Muslim Meskhetians. Using interviews conducted with Muslim Meskhetians living in Pennsylvania and Illinois, her talk specifically explored how family relationships and traditions, specifically in the context of marriage, have changed in the last few years. Pirtskhalava looked at these changing ideas in a specific social construct through the theories of place identity, place attachment theory, and imagined communities.

Though the Muslim Meskhetian communities Pirtskhalava studied have remained relatively isolated from the rest of society, limiting social interactions to those within the diaspora community and maintaining particular religious and social practices as well as continuing to use Russian and Turkic languages, she found that there has been an important shift specifically in the conception of marriage by younger and older generations alike. Meskhetian Muslims have kept the tradition of arranged marriages throughout displacements and deportations over the years, but in the U.S., these have taken on a new form. Although marriages still stay within the Meskhetian community, young people have been given a stronger voice in the selection of future spouses. This is true of both men and women. Even though marriages once were more pragmatic, with the husband and wife often meeting for the first time shortly before their wedding, love and personal connections have taken an ever-increasing role in the process. A parent might say to their child they know of someone in the community that might be a good match for their child, but now the changing values of their children and community in general have given the children the agency to meet this candidate, and decide for themselves if they want to marry them. In a similar vein, marriages are taking place later in Meskhetian Muslim communities than they once did.

Professor Pirtskhalava considered various factors which may have contributed to these changes in tradition and cultural values. She pointed to multiple economic and cultural factors which could have acted in confluence to change the conception of a good marriage. What is clear is that this community’s status as a displaced culture in America has changed an important tradition which has held this community together for generations of external political, cultural, and
social pressures. Pirtskhalava’s research will continue to explore other changes in which this culture changed in an American context, and which divides have become apparent between those generations which grew up in Georgia and Russia, and those which are coming of age here.

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