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The Concept of Dissimilation in the Study of Inter-ethnic Marriages within Homogeneous Meskhetian Turkish, Azerbaijani Marriages in Turkestan

Abstract

While analyzing the preservation of cultural heritage is more straightforward in homogeneous households, inter-ethnic marriages present a captivating lens through which to examine cultural integration, social identity, and the preservation of tradition within diverse societies. This study explores the dynamics of inter-ethnic and homogeneous marriages among *Meskhetian* Turks and Azerbaijanis in Kazakhstan, applying the theoretical framework of dissimilation theory. By drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2024 which involved 45 interviews from two research villages, *Turki Poselkasy* and *Kentan*, located in the Turkestan province in the southern part of Kazakhstan, the research investigates the historical context and contemporary realities faced by these communities. In doing so, it highlights differences in culture, language, and social norms that can influence the formation of both mixed and homogeneous marriages among minority groups in the region. The theoretical background of the study is grounded in dissimilation theory, which posits that individuals in inter-ethnic marriages tend to distance themselves from their own ethnic groups to establish new identities within the context of their relationships. Through interviews and surveys conducted across diverse settlements, the study explores social identities and groups as well as concepts of cultural and social differences including gender dynamics, to uncover the intricate mechanisms of dissimilation.

Keywords: dissimilation, multiethnic coexistence, inter-ethnic marriages, homogeneous families, cultural preservation



Preface

Inter-ethnic marriages have long captivated the curiosity of scholars from various disciplines, serving as windows into societal attitudes towards race, ethnicity, and cultural integration. These unions offer a unique context for exploring the complexities of identity formation and cultural dynamics within multicultural societies. Conversely, homogenous households provide fertile ground for examining the nuances of multiethnic coexistence and the preservation of cultural heritage, which in turn deepens our understanding of inter-ethnic marriages. According to the data collected for this study, 45 interviews were conducted in Turkestan, comprising 14-homogeneous and 9 inter-ethnic families. The data reveal that marriages between individuals of the same nationality are more common than mixed marriages in the area of study. This is in line with dissimilation theory, which suggests that some families aim to preserve their national values. Additionally, *Meskebetian* Turks and Azerbaijanis married to individuals from other ethnic groups often relocated to a different area. This theory, which has its roots in Ralph Linton's research¹ and was later expanded upon by sociologist John Milton Yinger, suggests that those who marry outside of their own ethnic group may separate from it in order to forge new identities within their new relationships.²

Cultural legacy and migration histories play significant roles among the diverse ethnic populations of Kazakhstan, especially in the targeted research settlements of Turkestan, namely *Turki Poselkasy* and *Kantau*, where *Meskebetian* Turks and Azerbaijanis reside. The classification and understanding of these ethnic groupings in census data, however, have sparked debates, prompting further research in this area.

Against this backdrop, this study explores the theoretical underpinnings of dissimilation theory, illuminating the historical context, migratory patterns, and current circumstances faced by these communities in the research areas. Central to this exploration is the overarching question: How does dissimilation theory predict the likelihood of inter-ethnic marriages among individuals striving to balance cultural identity and societal integration?

Building upon this inquiry, the hypothesis posited is that interethnic marriage may result in the erosion of an ethnic group's core values and culture. Rooted in the framework of dissimilation theory, this hypothesis suggests that individuals who marry someone from a different ethnic or cultural background

¹ Linton 1940: 25.

² Yinger 1976: 225.

may undergo a process of distancing themselves from their own ethnic group as they forge a new identity within the inter-ethnic relationship.

The primary objective of this research is to assess the applicability of dissimilation theory in understanding the dynamics of inter-ethnic marriages, with a specific focus on *Meskebetian* Turks and Azerbaijanis in Turkestan, Kazakhstan. By exploring historical contexts, contemporary realities, and lived experiences within these communities, the research endeavors to uncover the intricate mechanisms of cultural adaptation and social integration among minority groups.

Methodology

This study adopts a fieldwork approach, conducted in targeted villages within the Turkestan region of Kazakhstan. Employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including interviews, surveys, and observations, the study aims to unravel the complexities of cultural adaptation, social identity, and groups, as well as the concepts of cultural and social differences, including gender dynamics, in these specified research villages.

Each interview in this study followed a standardized questionnaire format, ensuring that all participants were asked the same set of questions in the same order. This facilitated direct comparisons of responses. The structured nature of the interviews allowed for the collection of comparable data across different families, ensuring data consistency and reliability in the results. Furthermore, the use of closed-ended questions and multiple-choice options enabled the researchers to systematically quantify respondents' attitudes and experiences.

Surveys were administered to gather quantitative data on the social and cultural practices of the families involved, with particular focus on aspects of family life including language use, religious practices, and cultural customs. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select families that represented the diversity of the Turkestan region, specifically focusing on Azerbaijanis and *Meskebetian* Turks. The surveys included questions that generated quantifiable data, such as the frequency of certain cultural practices and the extent of adherence to traditional customs.

The questions were divided into two main groups after fundamental data regarding the interviewee's personal details—particularly their social environments, which constitute a substantial portion of the research—had been gathered. The first group of questions were aimed at families where couples are from different ethnicities (i.e., mixed marriages), while the second group of

questions was directed at families where couples come from the same ethnic groups. Every set of questions included the following key aspects: language use, religion, family and community circumstances, and broader cultural elements, including national clothing styles, the preparation of national dishes, and the celebration of holidays. These questions also investigated social norms based on the interviewees' attitudes and personal experiences in the Turkestan region. The researchers aimed to examine how certain cultural elements are integrated into daily routines, celebrations, and decision-making processes within these marriages. Additionally, the analysis aimed to examine instances of selective adoption, where individuals may assimilate certain aspects of their partner's culture while maintaining distinct elements of their own.

23 families, comprising both homogeneous and mixed marriages and ranging in age from 25 to 50, participated in the survey. Despite equal participation from men and women, it was observed that women generally had greater access to knowledge than males did and were more willing to share information. As such, in the case of one household only the wife was interviewed and not the husband, resulting in 45 interviews instead of 46 from the 23 families. The dynamics of dissimilation theory were also evident during the interview process. Local Azerbaijanis and *Meskebetian* Turks often showed reluctance to exchange information with local Kazakhs and representatives of other ethnic groups, and even when they consented, they frequently prohibited the use of media tools (e.g., dictaphones, audio and video tools, photos, etc.). Thus, the author's handwritten notes serve as the foundation for this study.

This study examines social identity and groups, which are based on the concepts of ethnic identity maintenance and social pressure, as well as cultural and social differences, which arise from language barriers, religious differences, social norms, and traditions. These elements serve as the foundation of dissimilation theory. In cultural anthropology, dissimilation theory can explain how group differences become more pronounced and significant, and can be used to investigate how individuals identify with their ethnic group and how this identification affects their marital preferences. Specifically, this study considers (1) Ethnic identity maintenance: How a preference for intra-ethnic marriages may stem from a desire to preserve one's ethnic identity, (2) Social pressure: How societal and family pressures can encourage integration and discourage inter-ethnic unions, (3) Language barriers: How linguistic disparities can hinder communication and pose challenges in marriage, (4) Religious differences: How various religious beliefs and practices can affect the likelihood of interethnic marriages, and (5) Social customs and traditions: How cultural practices and traditions can either positively or negatively impact interethnic

unions. Additionally, the ways in which gender roles and expectations shape personal and interpersonal behavior are also explored in the study. This includes variations in the division of labor, authority within the household, and behavioral expectations. These differences can pose significant challenges if partners' views on gender roles clash.³

Moreover, the study extends its focus to inter-ethnic families, particularly those formed between *Meskehetian* Turks and Russians, offering insights into the fusion of cultural heritages, familial customs, and identity formation.

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of multicultural dynamics in Kazakhstan, informing policies and initiatives promoting social cohesion and inclusion. By amplifying the voices and experiences of minority groups, the study endeavors to chart a path towards a more equitable and harmonious society.

Explication of the study framework

During the data collection process from *Meskehetian* Turks and Azerbaijanis residing in *Kentau* and *Turki Poselkasy*, the locals volunteered a wealth of information regarding their migration history. This information provided a historical context for the research to inform the exploration of the culture and way of life of the aforementioned ethnic groups. Based on the data gathered, the historical backgrounds of the *Meskehetian* Turks and Azerbaijanis show remarkable parallels, suggesting close ancestral ties. Nonetheless, the interview data indicates that both groups have maintained unique ethnic values while avoiding significant affinities with the local Kazakh population or other groups residing in the region. It is important to note that these insights are based on the interviewee's self-perceptions, who are entrusted with providing definitive descriptions of their ethnic identities. Ongoing research will continue to investigate the precise differences between the *Meskehetian* Turks and Azerbaijanis.

Description of the research locations

The territory of the Turkestan region spans an area of 117.3 thousand km², with the city Turkestan serving as its administrative center. It is bordered by the *Ulytau* region to the north, the *Zhambyl* region to the east, *Kyzylorda* to the

³ Hofstede 2001: 305.

west, and the Republic of Uzbekistan to the south. The region includes 11 administrative districts, 4 city *akimats*, 7 cities (except *Shymkent*), 13 settlements, 171 rural districts, and 932 villages. Over the past two years, the state has focused significant attention to the city of Turkestan, constructing numerous new ultra-modern buildings and crowning it as the cultural and spiritual capital of Kazakhstan.

The region was originally established as South Kazakhstan Oblast in the Kazakh SSR of the Soviet Union. Between 1962 and 1992 it was referred to as *Chimkent Oblast*. *Shymkent* served as the administrative center until 19 June 2018, when it was excluded from the region to be administered directly under the government of Kazakhstan. Consequently, the administrative center was moved to Turkestan and was renamed as the Turkestan Region.⁴

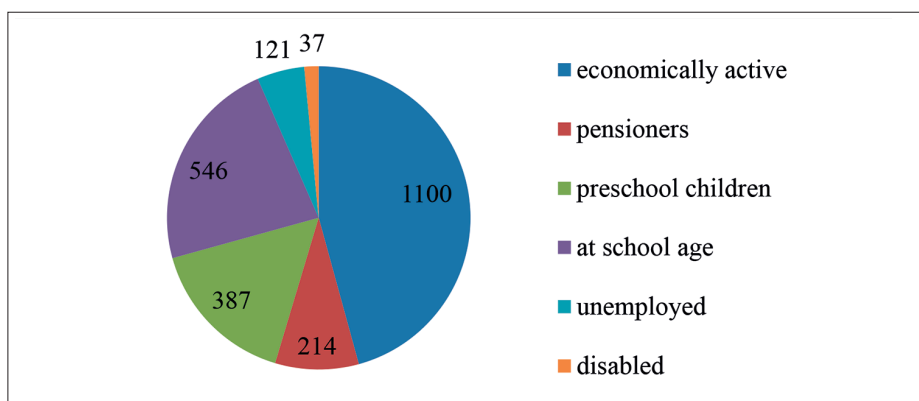


Fig. Nr. 1: Statistical Information on the Social Composition of the Population
Source: Data collection by Usen, 2022, Turki Poselkasy

Turki Poselkasy, a rural district in Turkestan known locally as *Турки поселкасы* [Turkish settlement] is primarily inhabited by *Meskhetian* Turks, which explains its local name. Officially, it is called the *Bekzat* region. Information about the rural district is scarce both online and in territorial databases. Nevertheless, fieldwork research yielded some basic information about the location from the village's administrative sources. According to these sources, *Turki Poselkasy* currently has a total population of 2,405, with the following ethnic composition: 2350 *Meskhetian* Turks, 49 Kazakhs, and six Uzbeks. The economically active segment of this population constitutes includes 1,100 individuals, while the number of pensioners stands at 214, indicating a smaller proportion of elderly

⁴ Ақорда 2018.

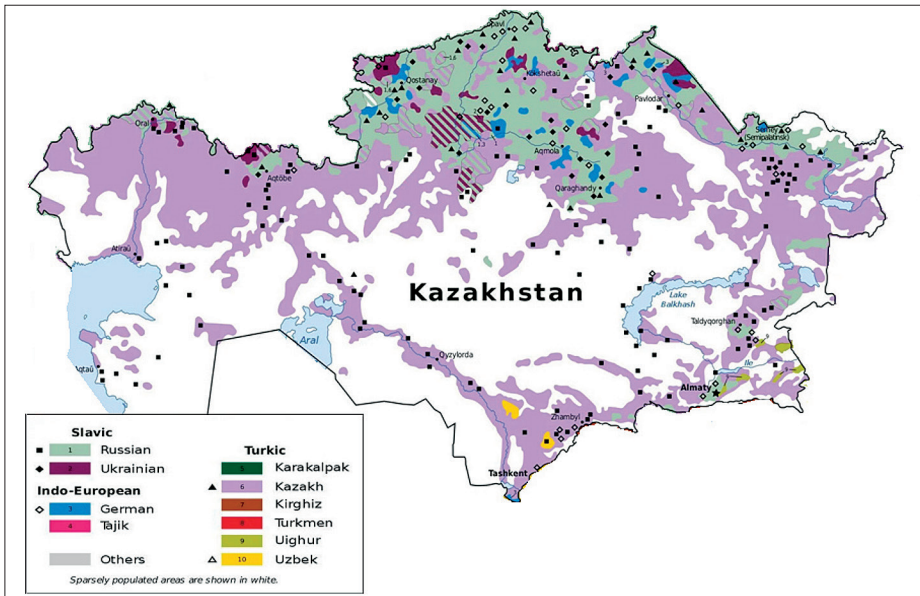
residents. Preschool children number 387, and school-age children, (i.e., those enrolled in primary and secondary education) total 546, highlighting the substantial youth presence within the population. There are 121 unemployed individuals, representing those actively seeking employment. Additionally, there are 37 individuals classified as disabled, encompassing those with physical or mental impairments that impact their daily activities (Fig. Nr. 1).

Kentau, known in Kazakh as *ken tau* [Ore Mountain], is a city under regional jurisdiction of the Turkestan region of Kazakhstan. Located at the southern foot of the *Karatau* ridge, 24 km northeast of the city of Turkestan and 190 km from *Shymkent*. *Kentau* itself covers an area of 7104 hectares and has a population of 67,713. The administrative jurisdiction of the city includes several villages: *Achisay* (8402 hectares, 2176 residents); *Bayaldyr* (1562 hectares, 1528 residents); *Hantagy* (1610 hectares, 6364 residents); *Karnak* (includes the central village of *Karnak* and the village of *Kushbata*; 42,571 hectares, 11,703 residents).⁵



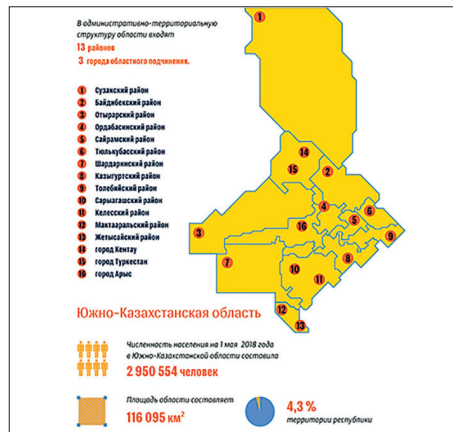
Pic. Nr. 1: *Kazakhstan and the Turkestan Region*
Source: <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/30611190.html>

⁵ Аған 2005.



Pic. Nr. 2: Map of Kazakhstan by the Distribution of Ethnic Groups

Source: <https://ontheworldmap.com/kazakhstan/map-of-ethnic-groups-in-kazakhstan.html>



Pic. Nr. 3: Map of the Turkistan Region

Source: <https://ru.sputnik.kz/20180621/karta-kazakhstan-izmenneniya-6112704.html>

Theoretical background regarding the interpretation of the origin of *Meskhetian* Turks and Azerbaijanis in Turkestan

Even during Soviet times, Kazakhstan was referred to as a laboratory of friendship between peoples, a title which reflected not only the multinational composition of its population, but also the significant demographic changes strongly influenced by migration over the past 150 years. Migrants from other provinces of post-reform Tsarist Russia—those who came to the “construction sites of socialism”, those who were repressed or evacuated during wartime, and the “virgin lands” farmers of the 1950s—all contributed to the formation of the modern multicultural landscape of Kazakhstan. According to statistics data from March 1, 2024, the population of Kazakhstan totals 20,075,271 according to the latest statistics. The composition of major ethnic groups based on the summary results of the 2021 census was published on September 1, 2022 and is detailed in Fig. Nr. 2.

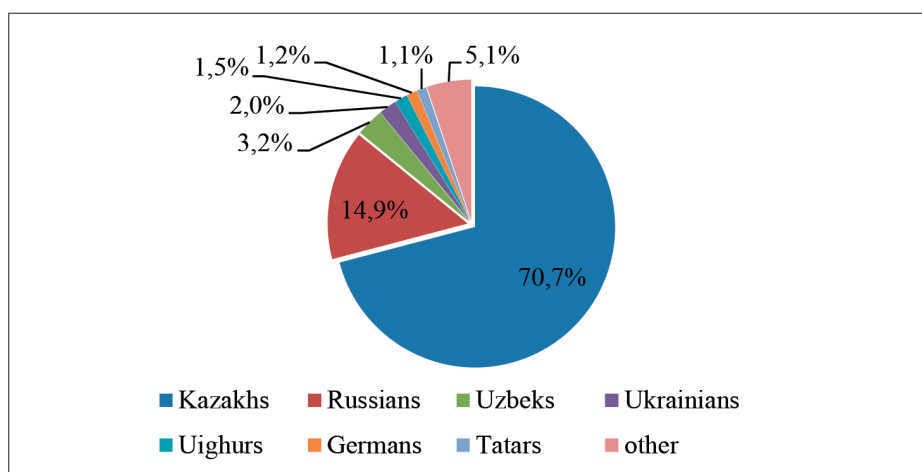


Fig. Nr. 2: *Population of Ethnic Groups in Kazakhstan*
Source: Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Strategic Planning and Reforms 2021: 60.

The categorization of *Meskhetian* Turks in the 1999 Census shows that they are subsumed under the categories of Azerbaijanis (78,000), Turks (76,000), and *Meskhetian* Turks themselves (3,000).⁶ It is not possible to determine the

⁶ Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Strategic Planning and Reforms 1999.

precise number of *Meskebetian* Turks included within the Turk and Azerbaijani populations. Therefore, it was hypothesized that the majority of those listed as Turks and about $\frac{3}{4}$ of those listed as Azerbaijanis could be attributed to *Meskebetian* Turks. This assumption is based on expert opinions from the *Meskebetian* Turk community and on research into the circumstances in which Azerbaijanis came to be in Kazakhstan. During fieldwork in February and March 2024, visits were made to meet with the local administration in *Turki Poselkasy*.

History of arrival in Kazakhstan

The *Meskebetian* Turks arrived in Kazakhstan in December 1944 after being forcibly removed from the Caucasus. According to activists *Meskebetian* Turk societies, the total number of those expelled in 1944 ranges from 90,000 to 100,000 people. After arriving in Kazakhstan, these individuals, unfamiliar with both the local language and way of life, were forcibly resettled across various villages in family groups.⁷

The *Meskebetian* Turks, who refer to themselves as *Ahiska Turks* or *Yerli* in pre-Soviet times are a heterogeneous Turkic-speaking Muslim ethnic group of disputed origin. Originating from the *Meskeheti* region in southwestern Georgia and speaking the *Kars* dialect of Turkish, they are either considered to be Turkified Georgians or a distinct ethnic group related to the Turks. Regarding their origins, Аккиева writes that

“researchers E. Panesh and L. Ermolov believe that the Turks from Meskhethi represent a special ethnic group of the Turkish ethnos, which developed in the zone of two ethnic territories - Georgia and Turkey. Naturally, it was formed from representatives of both peoples and even to some extent combined the features of the cultures of these peoples. The Turkish component turned out to be more influential. Today, among a significant part of the Meskhethian Turks, the second point of view is more widespread, and they consider their origin to be Turkish, and their true name is ‘Ahiska Turks’ Turk - ‘Ahiska Turklyari’.”⁸

Similarly, another Russian scholar, А. Г. Осипов, considering both versions of the origin, concludes that

⁷ Savin 2007: 44.

⁸ Аккиева 2016: 21–22.

“in general, we can say that the appearance of a Turkish-speaking Muslim population in Akhaltsikhe could be the result of complex demographic and linguistic processes that chronologically extend beyond the period of Ottoman rule in the 17th – early 19th centuries and not reducible to the assimilation of the Georgian population”⁹.

Although the majority of *Meskebetians*, most of whom were born outside of *Meskeheti*, refer to themselves “*Meskebetian* Turks”, a significant minority actively seeking to return to Georgia continue to identify as Georgian Muslims.¹⁰ This variation extends to those living in different countries; for example, *Meskebetian* Turks in Azerbaijan, according to Yunusov, often feel a stronger connection to a Turkish identity, whereas those in Georgia vehemently deny this connection and emphasize their distinctiveness from Turks.¹¹ Azerbaijanis and *Meskebetian* Turks were both interviewed during research fieldwork in the selected settlements. Although they may share the same ethnic origins, the information provided and the following analysis are based on their own perceptions.

Research fellow (И.Савин) from the Institute of Oriental Studies RAS, who conducted his research in the southern part of Kazakhstan, notes that almost all *Meskebetian* Turks identify themselves as Ahiska Turks and strongly reject the term “*Meskebetian* Turks”. Despite its use in census forms, the term itself is not accepted by the community itself. This may be why so few of them agreed with this definition during the 1999 census.¹²

The concept of dissimilation in the study of inter-ethnic families in the *Kentau* region and *Turki Poselkasy*

Yinger highlighted the role of social institutions such as education, religion, and the media in shaping the processes of assimilation and dissimilation.¹³ These institutions can either facilitate or impede the integration of minority groups into mainstream society depending on their attitudes and policies toward cultural diversity. This is evident in the way *Meskebetian* Turk families navigate their cultural practices and integration into the broader community.

⁹ Осипов 2013: 122.

¹⁰ Jones 1993: 14–16.

¹¹ Bilge 2012: 13.

¹² Savin 2007: 61.

¹³ Yinger 1981: 250.

Yinger argued that dissimilation can be a legitimate response to cultural autonomy and self-determination among minority groups. His work provides a deeper understanding of how minority groups, such as the *Meskebetian* Turks, negotiate their identity, power, and belonging within multicultural societies. This theoretical framework is essential for analyzing the integration strategies of *Meskebetian* Turk families and their interactions with the broader community.

Dissimilation theory, which examines variations in cultures, languages, and social norms, can serve as a robust analytical framework for investigating the dynamics of interethnic unions. This theoretical approach enables a systematic exploration of how distinct cultural, linguistic, and social factors influence the formation and evolution of interethnic marriages. By focusing on the increasing salience of group distinctions, dissimilation theory provides insights into the complex interplay between individual identities and broader societal structures in shaping interethnic relationships.

Social identity, heavily influenced by the preservation of ethnic identity and influenced by social pressures, plays a crucial role in promoting homogeneous marriages. This inclination often stems from the desire to maintain and transmit one's cultural traditions, language, and customs. Individuals are more likely to select partners from their own ethnic group to ensure the continuity of their cultural heritage. This phenomenon underscores the impact of social identity and external pressures in shaping marital choices and preserving ethnic distinctiveness. An understanding of social pressure illuminates how family and community expectations can be exerted to compel individuals to choose partners from within their own ethnic group to maintain cultural integrity and unity. Such pressures discourage interethnic marriages and reinforce differences between ethnic groups, promoting dissimilation.¹⁴

During the compilation of the respondent list for the research project in the Turkestan region, it was discovered that over 70% of the households in the village were made up of members of the same ethnic group, resulting in a higher number of homogeneous marriages than mixed ones. Regardless of how long they had resided in their community, families in mixed marriages often moved to other nearby villages due to societal pressures. In order to ensure useful comparative data for the study, families who relocated to a different area were contacted and included in the data collection process.

The data collected from *Meskebetian* Turks and Azerbaijanis in Turkestan provides a compelling illustration of dissimilation theory in relation to social identity. The fieldwork reveals that despite coexisting in the same region with

¹⁴ Fowers–Richardson 1996: 619.

other ethnic groups, *Mesketian* Turks and Azerbaijanis prefer endogamous marriages and tend to live in separate villages with minimal interaction with other ethnic groups. This preference for intra-group marriages underscores the desire to preserve ethnic identity and cultural continuity.

Turki Poselkasy, primarily inhabited by *Mesketian* Turks and Azerbaijanis, is characterized by unique architectural features, house designs, and places of worship that further emphasize their ethnic distinctiveness. These observable differences raise questions about how local residents from different ethnic backgrounds perceive and respond to this segregation, forming the basis for future research. This analytical perspective highlights the intersection of social identity and dissimilation processes, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of ethnic relations in the region.

Cultural and social differences between ethnic groups can influence the propensity for interethnic marriages. In this context, the following aspects can be considered: language barriers, religious differences, social norms, and traditions. Data collected from various types of families in *Kantau* and *Turki Poselkasy*, including both homogeneous and mixed marriages, indicates that although these are distinct, autonomous families, the viewpoints and responses of men and women in Azerbaijani and *Mesketian* Turk households frequently match, with 80% of them sharing the same views on language, religion, social norms, customs, and other fundamental daily aspects.

In the interethnic marriages discussed during the interviews, men typically were the dominant party and had the freedom to choose their spouses. Conversely, women did not enjoy the same freedom, which explains why the author did not find households where *Mesketian* Turk or Azerbaijani women were married to men from other ethnic groups in the observed research settlements. The interviews also shed light on the impact of language barriers, religious diversity, and the preservation of traditions within homogeneous Azerbaijani marriages compared to mixed *Mesketian* Turk marriages. For instance, an Azerbaijani man emphasized the importance of maintaining linguistic and cultural practices, noting that his family exclusively uses their native language at home. This practice underscores the significance of language as a key component of ethnic identity preservation.

In mixed educational settings, Azerbaijani families often opt for Russian-language schools due to the scarcity of public and educational institutions offering instruction in their native language. This preference for Russian is a legacy of the Soviet era, when it was the primary language of education for

many immigrant communities. The reliance on Russian as a substitute for their native language highlights the complex interplay between historical influences and current efforts to preserve cultural identity.

The analytical comparison between homogeneous and mixed marriages reveals how language choice and educational decisions are influenced by broader socio-historical contexts. This interplay underscores the persistent impact of Soviet-era policies on current linguistic practices and the ongoing efforts to preserve ethnic identity within the community.

Gender Roles and Social Integration in *Meskhethian* Turk Families

Yinger's dissimilation theory, when applied to gender roles, suggests that individuals in inter-ethnic marriages may adapt their traditional gender norms and behaviors to better align with those of their partner's culture. This can lead to a blending or reshaping of gender expectations, as both partners negotiate their roles within the marriage. The theory highlights the fluidity of cultural and gender identities in the context of inter-ethnic relationships.¹⁵

The research highlights the critical role of gender order in shaping the perception and integration strategies of *Meskhethian* Turk families within their local communities. Traditional gender roles significantly influence both internal family dynamics and external social interactions. According to the data collected, most women interviewees emphasized the importance of gender policies in their society.

When discussing gender-related issues during the research and data collection phase, it became evident that men predominate in all major spheres of public social life. For instance, empirical findings suggest that children, irrespective of the nationality of their father, tend to speak more in the father's native language, maintain stronger ties with their father's side of the family, and initially adhere to the customs, religious beliefs, and family values of their paternal side.

The daily routines of *Meskhethian* Turk families reveal a strong adherence to traditional gender roles. Approximately 95% of women interviewed reported that girls are raised to be meek, frugal, and subservient, and are often trained to become good housewives. Boys, conversely, enjoy more freedom but are also raised with strict expectations, including a strong sense of responsibility

¹⁵ Yinger 1981: 613.

towards their sisters. These gender-specific upbringing practices reflect deeply entrenched cultural norms.

Wedding customs further illustrate the community's commitment to traditional gender norms, particularly in relation to women. For instance, new brides are often restricted from speaking to their husband's family for extended periods. A notable example from the interviews describes how a new daughter-in-law was expected to remain silent and perform her duties without question until a formal ceremony permitted her to speak. This practice underscores the community's dedication to maintaining social order and respect towards elders.

Additionally, traditional gender roles influence household authority, with men typically holding decision-making power and women managing domestic responsibilities. These roles can pose challenges in inter-ethnic marriages, especially when partners come from different cultural backgrounds with varying expectations regarding gender behaviors and responsibilities.

The observed reluctance of men to participate in interviews and the gendered patterns in cultural transmission highlight the complexities of navigating gender dynamics in inter-ethnic marriages. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the broader processes of social integration and identity negotiation within multicultural societies.

Homogeneous Meskhetian Turk Families

In the subsequent section, following a discussion of the analysis of the collected data, specific examples will be provided which highlight the differences between *Meskhetian* Turk homogeneous families and Turkic-Russian inter-ethnic marriages. This comparative analysis will focus on the distinct cultural practices, family structures, and social dynamics that characterize each type of marital arrangement.

Inter-ethnic couples often face the challenge of adapting to each other's cultural norms, values, and practices. According to dissimilation theory, individuals may consciously or subconsciously distance themselves from aspects of their own culture to better integrate into their partner's cultural milieu. This process of cultural adaptation can be observed in various aspects of daily life, such as language use, food preferences, and religious practices.

For example, *Meskhetian* Turks grow up in a multicultural society, interacting with Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Azerbaijanis, Tatars, and Russians. Their childhood memories, especially from their school years, reflect a sense of unity and mutual support across ethnic lines. However, in their current settlement, *Meskhetian*

Turks predominantly occupy the central area, maintaining a distinct cultural and social identity. They prioritize their native language, using it exclusively at home and comfortably among friends from similar ethnic backgrounds. Their social circles often include Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Turks, or Azerbaijanis. Religion, particularly Islam, plays a significant role in their daily lives, influencing social etiquette and children's education. In terms of family structure, *Meskebetian* Turk families preserve traditional lifestyles and customs, setting themselves apart from other ethnic groups. Extended families are common, with close bonds among relatives creating a supportive network that upholds social norms and customs. This family structure typically includes parents, children, and often grandparents or other close relatives, who live together or nearby, forming a tightly knit social network.

Meskebetians Turk-Russian inter-ethnic families

The following section of the research focuses on interethnic marriages involving *Meskebetian* Turks, based on the findings from the gathered data. Specifically, the study examines marriages between *Meskebetian* Turks and Russians to assess the degree of integration and other significant components of these interethnic unions. To conduct interviews with these interethnic couples, the author traveled to a rural district near the city of *Shymkent*, where these couples currently reside having relocated from the initially investigated region. These moves were primarily due to the social pressure mentioned above.

Interethnic relationships often involve the renegotiation of cultural values, traditions, and beliefs to reconcile the diverse cultural backgrounds of the partners. Accordingly, this subsection will explore how inter-ethnic couples navigate the celebration of holidays, traditional clothing, and ceremonial rituals within these marriages, areas which were highlighted in the interview results.

In several case studies, a *Meskebetian* Turkish man married a Russian woman. Upon their arrival into a Turkish family, Russian women were often given a new name in order to integrate into the family's cultural milieu. For example, in one case, a Russian woman originally named Ksenia was renamed Gozel by her new family. This renaming signifies the cultural adaptation expected within the *Meskebetian* Turkish community. The bride's upbringing and lifestyle stood in stark contrast to those of the *Meskebetian* Turks. Raised by a single parent and speaking only Russian with limited Kazakh, the bride was initially unfamiliar with Turkish customs and language, which she began learning after joining the family. Her background as an athlete and basketball player also contrasted with

the more conservative *Meskebetian* Turkish norms, where even activities such as attending a dance club might be restricted. I. Savin, in his work *Kazakhstan: Successful Integration but Inadequate Protection*, notes that dance groups often face a scarcity of dancers, as some families do not permit their daughters to perform in public.¹⁶

The researcher focused on religious differences between two distinct ethnic groups, identifying these as significant contributing factors to the escalation of several ethnic conflicts between these groups. In one case mentioned in the interviews, a Russian bride, despite her Christian background, adapted to the demands of her husband's family out of love and respect. However, she faced internal conflict as she struggled to reconcile the obligations of Islam with her lifelong Christian upbringing. The adaptation process for new brides often includes learning their husband's language and converting to Islam, demonstrating significant cultural and religious integration.

A second point of conflict emerged from the cultural traditions upheld by elders, who play a central role in organizing and enforcing customary practices during weddings and other celebratory events. This tension was particularly evident in the case of a bride of Russian heritage adhering to Turkish wedding customs, underscoring the challenges of reconciling different cultural expectations within the marriage. The wedding and the bride's departure ceremony were conducted according to Turkish customs due to the man's dominant role in the family and the influence of the husband's ethnic background on family rituals. The data gathered for the present study reveals that in mixed marriages where the husband is of Turkic descent, fundamental family values and traditions are predominantly influenced by Turkic customs. This influence is evident in the prioritization of the husband's family's ethnic values over the wife's original cultural practices. For instance, while Russian customs around marriage proposals and bride departure ceremonies are less defined, *Meskebetian* Turkish weddings are elaborate events that bind not just two individuals but entire families. Overall, the research highlights significant cultural adaptation and integration in inter-ethnic marriages involving *Meskebetian* Turks. The preservation of Turkic traditions within these marriages underscores the importance of ethnic identity and the continuous negotiation of cultural values in shaping family life.

Similarly to homogenous *Meskebetians* Turkish families, the family structure typically includes parents, children, and often grandparents and other close relatives, either living together or nearby. This also forms a tightly knit social network.

¹⁶ Savin 2007: 55.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of migration, cultural adaptation, as well as cultural and social identity among the *Meskebetian* Turks and Azerbaijanis in Kazakhstan, particularly in the context of Turkestan. By examining historical backgrounds, demographic data, and firsthand accounts, the research illuminates the multifaceted experiences of these ethnic groups, highlighting their diverse origins and the challenges they have faced in integrating into Kazakh society. The comparative analysis between homogeneous *Meskebetian* Turkish families and Turkic-Russian inter-ethnic marriages reveals significant distinctions in cultural practices, family structures, and social dynamics influenced by the underlying principles of dissimilation theory. Turkish-*Meskebetian* families exhibit a robust preservation of their cultural identity, characterized by cohesive family structures, strong adherence to traditional customs, and a unified linguistic environment. In contrast, Turkic-Russian inter-ethnic marriages exemplify a dynamic process of cultural negotiation, where individuals actively adapt to their partner's cultural milieu, often leading to a reconfiguration of identity. Despite these adaptations, men often play a notably dominant role. The findings indicate that inter-ethnic couples experience both challenges and opportunities as a result of their marital arrangements, especially in regard to religious differences. As illustrated through the case study of a Turkish-*Meskebetian* man and his Russian wife, significant cultural adaptation occurs which encompasses language acquisition, religious conversion, and the integration of cultural practices. This case highlights the transformative impact of love and respect in facilitating cultural exchange and adaptation, yet also underscores the predominance of Turkic customs within the family dynamics, which often supersede the original cultural practices of the Russian partner. The analysis demonstrates that while homogeneous Turkish-*Meskebetian* families maintain a distinct cultural identity rooted in traditional values, inter-ethnic marriages embody a complex interplay of adaptation and integration. The preservation of Turkic traditions in these marriages serves as a testament to the resilience of ethnic identity amid the challenges posed by cultural diversity. Future research could further explore the long-term effects of these dynamics on the identity formation of children from inter-ethnic unions as well as the potential for evolving cultural identities within a broader social context.

Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity, power dynamics, and belonging among ethnic minority

groups in Kazakhstan. As such, it provides valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners in the fields of migration studies, cultural anthropology, and social integration.

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