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Faith, Deportation and Collective Memory: Islam as a Cultural Anchor Among the Ahiska Turks Diaspora

Leyla Derviş

Faculty of Letters, History Department, Akdeniz University, Antalya 07070, Turkey; leyladervis@akdeniz.edu.tr

Abstract

This article examines how the Ahiska Turks—deported from Georgia's Meskheti region to Central Asia in 1944—sustained their religious belonging under shifting Soviet and post-Soviet political and social conditions, and how this religious continuity became intertwined with processes of collective memory formation. Drawing on published archival materials, existing scholarship, and a long-term ethnographic corpus composed of fourteen life-history oral interviews conducted between 2006 and 2025 in Turkey and Kazakhstan, the study traces the multigenerational trajectories of ritual practice. The findings show that funeral ceremonies, mevlid gatherings, Ramadan practices, and domestic prayer circles function as "sites of memory" through which the trauma of displacement is reinterpreted and intergenerational belonging is continually reconstituted. These ritual forms generate a meaningful sense of continuity and communal resilience in the face of prolonged experiences of loss, uncertainty, and "placelessness." Situated at the intersection of the anthropology of religion, cultural trauma theory, and Soviet/post-Soviet diaspora studies, the article conceptualizes Islam as more than a realm of belief: for the Ahiska Turks, it operates as a core cultural infrastructure that anchors post-displacement resilience, social organization, and collective memory. The study contributes to the literature by offering an integrated analytical framework that places the Ahiska community within broader debates on religion, memory, and forced migration; by examining rituals not only as emotional practices but also as institutional and cultural scaffolding; and by foregrounding the understudied post-traumatic religious experiences of Muslim diasporas.

Keywords: Ahiska (Meskheti) Turks; deportation; collective memory; religious belonging; Islam; cultural resilience; social cohesion; diaspora; post-Soviet Muslim communities; ritual anthropology

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1. Introduction

Forced displacement in modern history entails far more than the physical movement of people; it often marks a profound social rupture in which the foundations of identity, memory, and religious life are destabilized. In such periods, communities are not simply removed from their lands-the continuity of the cultural worlds to which they belong is fractured. When mass relocations are implemented as instruments of demographic or political engineering, they become far-reaching interventions that reorder lives, relationships, and ritual systems across generations (Malkki 1995, pp. 498–502). These forms of coerced mobility compel displaced groups to reinterpret their past, recalibrate ritual orders within unfamiliar political and spatial contexts, and renegotiate the terms of belonging. The deportation of the Ahiska Turks on 14 November 1944 under Stalinist rule exemplifies

such a rupture: it was not merely a transfer of population but a moment in which cultural, religious, and emotional continuities were violently disrupted. This article examines the forms of faith-based resilience that took shape in the wake of this rupture, the intergenerational transmission of memory it produced, and the role of ritual practices in reconstituting coherence within the dispersed community.

Within the post-Soviet context, the resilience-producing dimensions of religious practice have become a subject of increasing scholarly interest, particularly in relation to Kazakhstan. Yerekesheva's analysis of collective ritual transformations (Yerekesheva 2022) demonstrates that funerals, festive gatherings, and communal prayers- despite decades of anti-religious campaigns- continued to generate social cohesion and cultural continuity. Similarly, Beisenbayev et al. (2024) underscores how the post-Soviet restructuring of religious education enabled Islam to re-emerge as an institutional and communal axis of resilience. These insights help illuminate how the concealed forms of religiosity cultivated by Ahiska Turks during the Soviet era evolved into more visible and organized expressions in the post-Soviet period.

Historically situated along the frontier between the Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia, the Ahiska region became, from the nineteenth century onward, a strategic zone shaped by imperial rivalry, demographic engineering, and recurrent episodes of forced migration. Now located in Georgia's Samtskhe–Javakheti province, the region comprises more than two hundred villages organized around the centers of Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni, Aspindza, Akhalkalaki, and Bogdanovka (Uravelli 2009; Bugay and Gonov 1998). The decisive rupture, however, came during the closing stages of the Second World War. Following the secret GKO[1] Directive No. 6279/ss of 31 July 1944, a large-scale operation was executed on 14 November 1944: 220 villages were emptied in a single night, and approximately 91,095 Ahiska Turks were deported to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Their lands were subsequently resettled with nearly 7000 Armenian and Georgian households (Bugay and Gonov 1998, pp. 176, 213; Zeyrek 2006; Arı and Güngör 2022; Devrisheva 2019). This was not a demographic rearrangement alone but a systematic form of ethnopolitical engineering justified under Soviet security discourse. At the same time, roughly 40,000 Ahiska men were serving in the Red Army; nearly 25,000 died at the front, while those who survived found their villages emptied and families dispersed. Many spent the rest of their lives searching for relatives they would never see again. NKVD[2] archives record a second wave of deportations from Georgia in 1946–1947, involving approximately 3180 additional individuals (Bugay 1995, p. 170). These layers of displacement produced what community members refer to as a "double trauma." Their ordeal remained one of the most suppressed chapters of Soviet history until President Boris Yeltsin publicly condemned the deportations as "shameful" on 24 February 1994 (Bugay 1995, pp. 302–3).

The journey into exile and the subsequent resettlement left enduring marks on collective memory. Testimonies describe the transport conditions as harsh and profoundly inhumane. P.1 recalls: "*They packed us into broken, freezing cattle wagons… Many of our people died on the way from cold, hunger, and illness. There was no way to bury the dead; at each station Russian soldiers forced us to hand over the bodies, leaving them on the steppe.*" Similar accounts from the first generation attest that the journey, which lasted between one and one-and-a-half months, claimed the lives of children, women, and the elderly; most of the deceased were left unburied along the route. These narratives testify not only to the trauma of physical displacement but also to the formation of a shared memory of suffering that has been transmitted across generations. In Alexander et al.'s (2004) terms, these experiences crystallized into a "cultural trauma," generating a moral and mnemonic framework through which the community came to understand itself. The Ahiska deportation was part of broader Soviet-era forced migration policies during World War II. In these years,

Germans, Chechens, Ingush, Karachays, Balkars, Crimean Tatars, and numerous other groups faced similar fates (Bugay 1995, 2007). While these groups shared the experience of Soviet-era forced displacement, this study does not assume a uniform post-exile trajectory among them. Rather than offering a comparative analysis of deported populations, the article focuses specifically on the Ahiska case in order to examine how religious ritual and memory were configured within a particular historical, cultural, and communal context. Archival materials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs show that thousands of Caucasian soldiers were added to deportation lists immediately upon demobilization, revealing a logic of collective punishment rather than individualized judgment. For some, demobilization never came; soldiers fought until the war's end, only to return to empty villages and fragmented families. These successive displacements embedded a multi-layered rupture in communal memory, one that extended beyond physical relocation to encompass the systematic suppression of religious and ritual life.

Under the Soviet atheist modernization project, the closure of mosques, the arrest of religious figures, and the prohibition of public worship forced Ahiska Turks to retreat into private spaces to sustain their faith. Yet prayers, mevlid gatherings, funeral rites, and Ramadan practices persisted in quiet, domestic forms, becoming subtle modes of resistance and vital sources of moral order and cultural continuity. This emphasis on the quiet continuity of religious life resonates with recent scholarship that shows how communities rebuild religious collectivity through everyday often understated practices (Khoja-Moolji 2023). In this literature, religious belonging is sustained less through formal institutions than through relational, domestic, and care-oriented practices- an approach that helps contextualize the Ahiska experience without assuming historical or doctrinal equivalence.

The 1989 Fergana[3] events and the subsequent waves of displacement deepened the community's cycle of uprootedness, giving rise to sub-diasporas across Kazakhstan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, and the United States (Bugay 1995; Aydıngün and Aydıngün 2015). Beginning in the 1990s, especially in Russia's Krasnodar Krai, discriminatory local policies- restrictive *propiska* regulations, denial of citizenship, and barriers to housing- rendered life untenable. Popov and Kuznetsov (2008) demonstrate how "indigenous majority" rhetoric facilitated the exclusion of Ahiska Turks and produced a second wave of forced migration. The post-2004 resettlement of many Ahiskas to the United States should thus be understood not as individual mobility but as a collective search for security and belonging. In each new geography, religious practices became central to reconstructing identity through family life, linguistic continuity, ritual timing, and communal solidarity.

This multi-layered displacement reshaped the religious landscape of the diaspora, producing new configurations of Islamic practice across divergent political and cultural settings. The removal of restrictions on religion after the Soviet collapse opened new spaces for visibility: mosques, madrasas, and communal religious institutions reopened, and intergenerational transmission regained momentum. As P.2 explained, "*We practice our religion openly here, but even in the hardest times of the Soviets, we never abandoned it*." This aligns with recent scholarship showing that Sunni Muslim communities in Kazakhstan maintained ritual practices privately during the Soviet era and reintroduced them publicly after independence (Yerekesheva 2022). Beisenbayev et al. (2024) work on the institutional restructuring of religious education similarly illustrates how Islam has re-emerged as both an individual and collective axis of social cohesion. For the Ahiska community, these developments underscore the role of religion in transforming trauma and reconstructing identity across generations.

Existing scholarship on Ahiska Turks has focused primarily on political history, forced migration, and citizenship regimes (Aydıngün et al. 2006; Aydıngün and Aydıngün 2015; Darieva 2011). More recent articles in Religions have expanded the discussion by examin-

ing the community through the lenses of return migration, state policy, and human rights (Dolidze 2023). Meanwhile, emerging post-Soviet religious studies-ranging from everyday piety among Baltic Muslim women (Vidūnaitė 2023) and collective rituals among Kazakhstani Sunni communities (Yerekesheva 2022), to transformations in religious education (Beisenbayev et al. 2024) and the prospects of Shia higher learning (Tahiiev 2023)-provide a broad analytical foundation for understanding the moral, organizational, and resilience-building roles of Islam. Yet, for the Ahiska case, the memory-making dimensions of ritual life, the solidarities it generates, and the intergenerational transmission of displacement experiences remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by drawing on long-term fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2025 in Turkey and Kazakhstan to analyze the central role of religious practice in shaping collective memory and by situating the Ahiska experience within the broader field of post-Soviet religious anthropology.

This framework offers a critical lens through which to understand the multi-layered roles of religion in contexts of displacement, dispersal, and resettlement. Both historical sources and ethnographic testimonies indicate that religious practices function not merely as personal expressions of spirituality but as key mechanisms through which communities preserve coherence during periods of uncertainty and repression. Examining Ahiska religiosity therefore requires exploring how displacement is interpreted, how rituals sustain forms of memory, and how identity is renegotiated across diverse geographies.

The central argument advanced in this article is that Islam functions not simply as a realm of metaphysical belief for the Ahiska Turks but as a foundational cultural structure that reorganizes life after displacement, generates social solidarity, enables the interpretation of trauma, and sustains intergenerational continuity. The following section develops the theoretical framework through which these dynamics are examined, engaging with scholarship on collective memory, cultural remembrance, and diaspora.

While this study refers to three generational cohorts among the Ahiska Turks diaspora, it does not conceptualize them as isolated or strictly sequential units. Instead, the research problem is grounded in understanding how memories of deportation, religious practice, and communal belonging are transmitted, negotiated, and reinterpreted across overlapping generations. The first generation's experience of forced displacement constitutes the foundational layer of collective memory; however, this memory is neither passively inherited nor uniformly reproduced by subsequent generations.

The second generation, raised under Soviet ideological constraints, occupied a mediating position between lived trauma and enforced silence, often translating deportation memory into domestic religious practices rather than explicit narratives. The third generation, shaped by post-Soviet transformations, engages these inherited memories selectively-sometimes reaffirming them through renewed religious expression, sometimes reinterpreting them within broader transnational and civic frameworks. In this sense, the relationship between the first and second generations was not unidirectional: while the first generation transmitted silence shaped by repression, the second actively transformed this silence into routinized ritual practices that, in turn, sustained the elders' moral world.

Furthermore, although the Ahiska Turks are frequently described as a resilient diaspora, this article does not assume internal homogeneity. The research problem explicitly addresses how resilience, religious practice, and memory articulation vary across different settlement contexts and generations. By examining these variations, the study seeks to move beyond a monolithic representation of the diaspora and instead analyze how shared historical trauma produces differentiated forms of belonging.

2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

The theoretical foundations of this study bring together three major bodies of scholarship- diaspora studies, trauma and collective memory theories, and research on the historical transformation of Islam in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts- to examine the interwoven dynamics of religion, memory, and resilience among Ahiska communities. This interdisciplinary approach enables the deportation to be understood not as a singular historical break but as a social process continually re-created through ritual life, oral transmission, and locally embedded mechanisms of endurance.

Diaspora studies provide an essential conceptual entry point for interpreting the post-exile positioning of Ahiska groups. Safran's (1991, pp. 83–99) framing of diaspora as a formation shaped by rupture and held together by an imagined ideal of return offers a useful perspective for grasping the long emotional trajectory of Ahiska identity. Cohen's (2008) emphasis on dispersion, shared memory, and multiple affiliations helps illuminate both the community's resettlement paths across Central Asia and its cultural orientation in contemporary Turkey and Kazakhstan. Equally significant is Brubaker's (2005) proposal to view diaspora not as a fixed ethnic marker but as a stance articulated through concrete practices and discourses; this shift sheds light on the renewed centrality of religious life within Ahiska identity in the post-Soviet period. Building on these debates, Darieva's (2011) notion of "diasporic infrastructures" brings into focus the material and symbolic structures- mosques, funeral committees, cultural associations, kin networks- that sustain memory, offering an analytically rich lens for understanding Ahiska communal life.

Scholarship on trauma and collective memory provides a second analytical pillar. Halbwachs's (1950) theory of social memory demonstrates that accounts of deportation are reproduced within shared communal frames rather than through isolated individual recollection. This insight clarifies why exile narratives among Ahiska families are transmitted so consistently through ritual forms, prayer gatherings, and oral storytelling. Assmann's (2011) formulation of cultural memory deepens this understanding by showing how symbolic practices become institutionalized carriers of trauma across generations- an observation that resonates strongly with the enduring structure of prayer circles, mevlid gatherings, and funeral customs. Alexander et al.'s (2004) cultural trauma framework, together with Alexander's (2012) later elaboration, highlights how collective suffering becomes constitutive of group identity through specific carrier figures. In the field, the continuing importance of elders' deportation prayers, the mnemonic authority attributed to imams, and the central roles women play in organizing ritual settings all exemplify these processes. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, this article treats memory not as an individual psychological residue but as a socially framed process sustained through shared narratives, rituals, and institutionalized practices. For Halbwachs, individual recollections become meaningful only within collective frameworks that define what is remembered, how it is remembered, and for whom. In the case of the Ahiska Turks, deportation memories are continuously reactivated through family storytelling, religious observance, and communal commemorative practices that anchor the past within present social relations.

The concept of cultural trauma further complements this framework by shifting attention from the event of deportation itself to its subsequent interpretation and transmission. Cultural trauma emerges when a collectivity comes to define a past experience as a fundamental threat to its identity, embedding that interpretation into shared symbols and moral narratives. In this sense, Islam functions not merely as a belief system but as a culturally legible medium through which historical suffering is rendered intelligible, morally ordered, and transmissible across generations.

Research on Islam in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts constitutes the third framework for situating the religious transformations observed among Ahiska communities. Khalid's (2007) examination of Soviet atheist modernization shows how religious visibility was systematically repressed, establishing the conditions under which discrete and semi-private forms of piety developed. Yerekesheva's (2022) findings on the renewed public visibility of collective Sunni rituals in post-Soviet Kazakhstan closely mirror the intensification of religious practices observed among Ahiska groups today. Beisenbayev et al. (2024) analysis of the reinstitutionalization of Islam through emerging educational structures offers a broader lens for understanding contemporary religious formation. Similarly, Tahiiev (2023) identifies the mechanisms that expanded access to higher Islamic education across the region, shedding light on why younger members of the Ahiska community now encounter religion within more formalized institutional settings. Complementing these accounts, Ro'i and Wainer's (2009) empirical study on Muslim identity, communal organization, and everyday worship practices in Central Asia, together with Louw's (2007) ethnography of moral and ritual order, demonstrates how Islam operates as a cultural system that sustains social resilience.

Discussions of cultural sustainability and cultural resilience further enrich this broader literature. Soini and Birkeland's (2014) definition of cultural sustainability- as a community's ability to transmit its values, practices, and identity across generations—helps contextualize the historical continuities visible in Ahiska ritual life. Cultural resilience, by contrast, points to the adaptive reconfiguration of cultural forms in response to trauma or political constraint. Tavares et al. (2021) analysis of the relationship between intangible cultural heritage and community resilience provides an especially valuable framework for understanding how ritual practices simultaneously preserve and recreate communal bonds. Taken together, these concepts highlight the distinctive mnemonic structure that Ahiska rituals embody, combining both continuity and transformation.

The historical and sociological literature on Ahiska groups has documented in great detail the political context and demographic consequences of the 1944 deportation. The works of Bugay (1995, 2007) and Polian (2004) reveal the structural violence of the operation by focusing on its logistical and security rationales. Zeyrek's (2006) demographic contribution demonstrates how the region itself had long been shaped by ethno-political pressures. Meanwhile, Aydıngün et al. (2006) and Aydıngün and Aydıngün (2015) examine transnational networks, negotiations with citizenship regimes, and return movements. Devrisheva (2019), Afanasieva et al. (2021), and Doğan (2023) offer comparative analyses of identity strategies across different settlement contexts. Studies by Kolukırık (2011), Poyraz and Güler (2019), and Faigov (2020) explore oral history, language transmission, and diaspora organization, yet they rarely address the role of religious rituals as generators of post-exile memory or the ways prayer practices mediate trauma and sustain cultural continuity within the family.

By engaging with this gap, the present study argues that Islam constitutes not only a sphere of belief for Ahiska communities but also a foundational cultural medium through which post-deportation social life has been reorganized, communal resilience upheld, and collective memory transmitted. Rituals, prayer texts, oral narratives, and spatialized practices of remembrance enable the community both to interpret the historical rupture and to reconstruct identity within new geographical settings. In this sense, religious life emerges simultaneously as a line of continuity and a domain of adaptive change, occupying a central place in the conceptual framework of this research.

3. Methodology

This study was designed within a qualitative and ethnographic framework to explore how religion becomes intertwined with the experience of deportation among Ahiska communities. The approach rests on an anthropological sensitivity that treats religious practices not merely as expressions of metaphysical belief but as emotional, social, and cultural structures through which life after displacement is reorganized. Making visible the ways in which rituals, prayer traditions, and oral memory have been carried across generations constitutes the central aim of this methodological design.

The research proceeded along two complementary axes. The first involved a detailed reconstruction of the historical background of the 1944 deportation based on Soviet archival materials, official reports, and existing secondary literature. Key sources included NKVD documents published by Bugay, Polian's (2004) atlas of forced migration, and Aydıngün and Aydıngün (2015) historical evaluations. This analysis revealed that the deportation constituted not only a demographic intervention but also a form of population engineering shaped by the ideological orientation of the Soviet security apparatus.

The second axis consisted of fieldwork-based data collection through oral history interviews and ethnographic observation. Interviews were conducted with Ahiska individuals living in Turkey and Kazakhstan and were structured to bring together three generational cohorts. The study included a total of fourteen participants: a first generation (born 1928–1933) who personally experienced the deportation, a second generation (1960s) who inherited memories of religious suppression through parental narratives, and a third generation (1980s) engaged in post-Soviet negotiations of identity and belonging. This composition made it possible to trace intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge, moments of discontinuity, and the ways religious life has been reshaped in new social settings. The gender distribution—eight women and six men—proved especially valuable for understanding women's central roles in prayer circles, mourning rituals, and domestic religious transmission. Each interview lasted approximately 90 to 120 min, was audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed. To preserve linguistic authenticity, expressions in Turkish, Russian, and Kazakh were retained as closely as possible during transcription and analysis. Ethical procedures followed the guidelines of the author's institution; informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized.

To contextualize these generational categories, the study employs a narrative demographic timeline rather than a strictly quantitative model. The first generation is defined by forced deportation in 1944 and subsequent dispersal across Central Asia, marked by demographic rupture and limited mobility. The second generation experienced relative settlement stabilization under Soviet rule, characterized by constrained migration, institutional marginalization, and the privatization of religious life. The third generation emerged in the post-Soviet period, shaped by renewed mobility, secondary migration, and the reconfiguration of communal and religious practices within transnational contexts. This timeline does not assume uniform demographic trajectories but serves as an analytical device to trace shifts in memory transmission, religious practice, and communal belonging across generations.

In addition to the most recent fieldwork, this study draws on the author's long-term oral history archive on Ahiska communities. This archive, compiled through extensive fieldwork conducted in 2006, 2012, 2016, and 2025, contains testimonies from different periods and generations. Its longitudinal character made it possible to observe shifts in memory practices and religious life over time.

The data were analyzed through thematic content analysis. Coding was conducted manually and iteratively, and themes were refined through cross-case comparison. This analytical process clarified the role of ritual in producing collective memory, demonstrated

how Islamic traditions support communal solidarity, and traced the ways in which practices rooted in the Hanafi tradition have become embedded in everyday life after displacement. Ethnographic notes from mevlid gatherings, prayer circles, and funeral ceremonies observed in Antalya and Almaty provided detailed documentation of ritual organization, emotional intensity, and contributions to shared remembrance. Themes were developed through iterative coding of interview transcripts and fieldnotes, followed by constant comparison across generational cohorts and settlement contexts. I documented analytic decisions through memoing and returned to discrepant cases to refine theme boundaries. This procedure allowed interpretive claims in the Findings to be traceable to recurrent narrative patterns and to specific textual excerpts. Analytically, the interpretation of interviews and ethnographic notes was guided by a reflexive orientation, with attention to how positionality, access, and ongoing analytic memoing shaped the development of interpretive insights. The research involved varying degrees of access to spaces and practices that may be more readily available to "insiders." I therefore adopted a reflexive stance toward positionality, attending to how access, familiarity, and relational trust shaped what could be observed and what remained opaque. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, anonymization, and careful omission of identifying details, particularly when describing domestic religious gatherings. This positional awareness is treated as both a methodological strength- enabling access to intimate ritual settings- and a limitation, requiring continual reflexive attention to interpretive authority.

Although the fieldwork component is extensive, access to Ahiska groups dispersed across Russia, the United States, and Azerbaijan remained limited, and the empirical scope was therefore confined to Turkey and Kazakhstan. This constraint restricted direct comparison with communities in these additional regions, particularly regarding institutional religious structures and resettlement trajectories. Nevertheless, the depth and richness of the oral histories substantially mitigated this limitation.

Taken together, the methodological approach employed here illuminates the multifaceted ways in which Islam contributes to identity formation, memory transmission, and communal resilience among Ahiska groups. It demonstrates that religious life constitutes not only a symbolic resource but also an emotional, institutional, and social infrastructure that shapes everyday existence in the aftermath of displacement.

Participants

The selection of interviewees was guided by two criteria: direct relevance to the research topic and voluntary participation. In keeping with ethical principles, participants' names are not disclosed, and all data are presented using anonymized codes.

Participant quotations are referenced using anonymized identifiers (P.1, P.2, etc.), where "P" denotes "participant"; these identifiers correspond to the interviewee characteristics summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Oral history sources- participants.

Participant	Generation	Birth Year	Marital Status	Gender	Country	Education Level	Interview Date
P.1	First	1932	Married	Male	Kazakhstan	Primary School	28 June 2006
P.2	First	1928	Married	Male	Kazakhstan	Primary School	7 July 2006
P.3	First	1928	Married	Male	Kazakhstan	Primary School	9 July 2006
P.4	First	1932	Married	Female	Kazakhstan	Primary School	3 June 2012
P.5	First	1933	Married	Female	Kazakhstan	Primary School	10 July 2012
P.6	First	1930	Married	Male	Kazakhstan	Primary School	5 June 2012
P.7	First	1932	Married	Female	Turkey	Primary School	1 February 2016
P.8	Second	1962	Married	Male	Turkey	Secondary Education	17 June 2025

Table 1. *Cont.*

Participant	Generation	Birth Year	Marital Status	Gender	Country	Education Level	Interview Date
P.9	Second	1964	Married	Female	Turkey	Secondary Education	19 June 2025
P.10	Second	1964	Married	Female	Kazakhstan	Secondary Education	12 March 2025
P.11	Third	1980	Married	Male	Kazakhstan	University	14 March 2025
P.12	Third	1982	Married	Female	Turkey	University	29 July 2025
P.13	Third	1980	Married	Female	Turkey	University	15 June 2025
P.14	Third	1982	Married	Female	Turkey	Vocational School	15 July 2025

Source: field research and oral history interviews conducted by the author (2006–2025).

4. Operationalization

In this study, the theoretical categories of religion, memory, ritual, and resilience were translated into observable units of analysis through concrete forms of narrative and on-site observation. The operationalization strategy aimed to identify how these conceptual elements become visible within the everyday lives of Ahiska communities-through practices, discursive patterns, and emotional arrangements. Abstract notions such as *collective memory, cultural memory, Islamic resilience*, and *diasporic* belonging were therefore grounded in empirically traceable phenomena, including ritual performance, linguistic expressions, trauma narratives, intergenerational transmission, and patterns of social organization.

Religious rituals constituted one of the principal operational indicators in this process. The organization of funeral ceremonies, the performative structure of mevlid and hatim gatherings, Ramadan and holiday practices, household worship shaped by the Hanafi tradition, and the rhythmic language of prayer circles formed the core data categories through which the role of religion in producing collective memory could be examined. For instance, P.1's nightly prayer- "*I lay on my right, turned to my left… O God, grant us a blessed morning*"- was interpreted not solely as a devotional utterance but as an element of oral culture mediating emotional regulation, memory transmission, and familial continuity. Similarly, P.5's statement, "*We lived among seven religions yet preserved our own*," illustrated how ritual practice functions not merely as a normative obligation but as a moral domain that grounds communal endurance.

The concept of collective memory was operationalized through the intergenerational flow of narratives. First-generation testimonies of the deportation, second-generation accounts of clandestine worship during the Soviet era, and third-generation reflections on what may be described as "cultural Islam" provided a means to measure both the persistence and transformation of memory. P.2's recollection- "*we traveled for twenty-four days in forty degrees below zero*"- and P.3's prayers invoking protection for both Turkey and Kazakhstan served as discursive markers showing how trauma became reframed as a moral responsibility across generations. Likewise, third-generation participants such as P.13, who emphasized "learning rituals from elders," illustrated how memory functions as a renewed and reshaped domain of practice.

Islamic resilience was operationalized through three primary indicators that capture how religion supports endurance under conditions of trauma, displacement, and uncertainty: the continuity of moral order- as expressed, for example, in P.6's assertion that "*you took our homeland but not our religion*"- the strength of communal solidarity and mutual aid networks, and the stabilizing function of rituals in creating zones of security within the community. These indicators, expressed through both ritual performance and narrative articulation, were coded into empirically measurable analytical units.

Diasporic belonging was conceptualized through linguistic continuity, domestic religious transmission, relations with local Muslim communities, and the reinterpretation of ritual in new social settings. In the Kazakhstani context, P.2's remark- "*the Kazakh people*

had forgotten their old customs, but we had not"- demonstrated how diaspora consciousness is constructed through a comparative sense of cultural continuity. Moreover, the sustained ritual life of third-generation participants, combined with multilingual everyday practices, showed that diasporic belonging is grounded not only in ethnic or territorial reference points but also in symbolic and emotional frameworks.

All indicators were thematically categorized through a close reading of interview transcripts, ritual observations, prayer texts, domestic religious practices, and long-term oral history materials. Through this process, abstract theoretical concepts were systematically linked to their manifestations in the field. The operationalization strategy thus made visible the multilayered social architecture through which religious practices among Ahiska communities operate- not only within the realm of worship but also across identity formation, memory-making, communal resilience, and local organization. In this sense, religion emerges in the study as both a measurable cultural practice and a symbolic framework that transforms the historical wounds of displacement across generations.

5. Findings

Religious practice among the Ahiska Turks is neither abstract nor uniform; it is enacted through everyday rituals that structure communal life. Interviewees repeatedly referred to domestic prayer gatherings, Qur'anic recitations commemorating deceased relatives, and collective fasting practices as moments in which memory and faith converge. These practices do not simply reproduce religious norms but function as embodied narratives of displacement, loss, and continuity. As one first-generation participant described this mode of transmission, "*we did not explain our history to the children; they learned it through prayer and ritual, by watching how we lived*" (P.3). Importantly, variations emerge across generations: while first-generation practices emphasized preservation through restraint and silence, younger generations increasingly articulate religious belonging in more explicit and discursive forms, particularly in post-Soviet public spaces.

Crucially, these variations are not limited to generational position alone but also reflect differences across settlement contexts and social environments. Although the Ahiska Turks share a common historical experience of deportation, ritual practices, modes of religious expression, and patterns of communal cohesion are not uniform. Field data reveal differences in the organization of rituals, the public visibility of religious life, and the intensity of communal ties between communities settled in Kazakhstan and those living in Turkey. As one participant living in Turkey noted, "*here religion is more visible, but it is not always as close as it was in Kazakhstan, where we depended on each other more*" (P.8). These differences do not undermine the notion of resilience; rather, they demonstrate that resilience is locally produced, context-dependent, and unevenly articulated across both communities and generations.

The field data reveal that religious practices among Ahiska communities function not merely as companions to the experience of deportation but as cultural infrastructures that actively shape the moral and social order of post-exile life. Ritual and memory practices- funeral ceremonies, mevlid gatherings, Ramadan observances, prayer circles, and especially domestic forms of prayer- serve as a "site of memory" through which the historical rupture of displacement is continuously reinterpreted across generations. Rather than simply preserving the past, these practices recreate it, transforming ritual into a temporal structure that sustains communal identity and coherence. As one participant summarized this continuity: "for us, religion was home; we lost our home, but we did not lose our religion" (P.6).

This intergenerational continuity, however, was not produced through explicit narrative transmission but through ritual practice embedded in everyday life. As one second-

generation respondent recalled, "My parents rarely spoke about the deportation directly, but prayer was never abandoned. It was through daily rituals that we learned what had been lost" (P.10).

5.1. First Generation: A Memory Regime of Hidden Piety

The narratives of first-generation participants illustrate how Ahiska families safeguarded religious life in private spaces during a period when Soviet atheist modernization sought to eliminate public expressions of faith. This generation witnessed both the physical devastation of the 1944 deportation and the systematic suppression of the custodians of religious knowledge. P.3's recollection- "*we prayed in basements, taking turns so no one would see us; even the children were kept in separate rooms*"- points to a regime of surveillance that rendered religious practice invisible even within the household. P.4's statement regarding Ramadan- "*they checked the kolkhoz fields at noon and forced us to drink water*"- reveals not only the prohibition of rituals but also the extent to which the body became an object of state discipline. These accounts demonstrate how religion was transformed into a covert ritual calendar and a muted form of remembrance under Soviet rule.

For this generation, ritual was closely intertwined with moral endurance and resistance. P.6's assertion- "*they took our homeland and our lives, but they could not take our religion*"- expresses the ways in which belief was reinterpreted as a primary anchor of existence after displacement. His further observation- "*our elders prayed in whispers; that whisper still keeps us standing today*"- captures how prayer became a quiet but persistent temporal thread passed down through generations. In line with Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, rituals served both as techniques of remembrance and as mechanisms for producing communal resilience. The transformation of suffering into a shared cultural identity, as described in Alexander et al.'s (2004) theory of cultural trauma, appears vividly in the accounts of this generation

The early years in Kazakhstan also emerge in the narratives as a setting in which religious cohesion was renewed. P.2's remark- "*the Kazakh people had forgotten their old customs, but we had not*"- reflects a sense of cultural discipline shaped by displacement and underscores the perception of Ahiska communities as guardians of religious continuity. His further statement- "*this land has been good for us; we are all Muslims here*"- illustrates how religious affinity contributed to the reconfiguration of belonging in the new environment.

The accounts of first-generation women reveal the often-invisible labor through which domestic ritual life was maintained. P.7, now living in Turkey, recalls, "*on Eid morning we never sat at the table before reciting a prayer; I still teach my children the same*". These narratives show how domestic rituals provided not only emotional cohesion but also a normative framework that restructured social life after exile. Women's quiet but sustained labor became one of the principal channels through which religious continuity was preserved, positioning this generation as the foundational custodians of a memory regime that combined resilience with continuity.

5.2. Second Generation: Oral Continuity and Intermediary Transmission

The narratives of the second generation show that despite the collapse of institutional religious knowledge under Soviet rule, rituals continued through oral memory. As P.8 noted, "*the imams had been killed, the Qur'an was forbidden; religion survived only through oral tradition*". Such statements indicate that their religious life was shaped less by textual learning and more by familial patterns of repetition. P.10's reflection- "*we learned by watching the elders at funerals; now our children watch us*"- highlights a performative pedagogy in which ritual knowledge is transmitted through embodied observation rather than formal instruction.

This generation's experience corresponds to what the literature identifies as "collective ritual memory." Yerekesheva's research on Sunni communities in Kazakhstan demonstrates that during periods of repression, rituals persisted in small domestic units, independent of text-based knowledge- a pattern mirrored in the Ahiska case. The oral transmission of rituals thus became a communicative space that both preserved the past and sustained communal bonds.

Participants living in Turkey emphasized the tension between inherited oral knowledge and the renewed visibility of institutional Islam in the post-Soviet context. P.9's statement- "*what we learned was all oral; here we had to learn everything again*"- reveals the adjustments required as religious education structures re-emerged. This process aligns with Beisenbayev's observations on the reinstitutionalization of Islamic education in Kazakhstan, where encounters with textual knowledge reshaped religious understanding.

Consequently, the second generation acts as an intermediary cohort. While bearing the whispered ritual memory of the first generation, they simultaneously prepare the ground for the third generation's engagement with more visible, institutionally supported forms of religious practice. Their religious life creates symbolic spaces that sustain family cohesion and preserve emotional links to lost geographies, positioning them as both carriers of the past and architects of future meaning.

5.3. Third Generation: Renewed Visibility and the Evolving Meaning of Ritual

A third-generation interviewee, born after the Soviet collapse, framed this inheritance differently: "*We did not live the exile, but we live with its meaning. Islam became a way to understand who we are, not only what happened to our grandparents*" (P.14). The third generation inherits the legacy of hidden piety yet encounters religion within an environment of institutional and public legitimacy. For many, religious practice has shifted from the quiet economy of the household to the more structured space of mosques, courses, and communal organizations. P.11 observed, "*now there are mosques and courses; when we were children, it was not like this*," pointing to both spatial and pedagogical transformations. This tension also reflects a broader shift in religious identification: increased access to institutional knowledge and public religiosity does not necessarily reproduce the intimate solidarities forged under repression and may coincide with more individualized or differently organized forms of Islamic association.

For this generation, ritual functions as a means of forming social bonds and redefining belonging rather than addressing a scarcity of religious knowledge. P.12's observation- "*the mevlid now feels like a gathering that brings the family together*"- captures this shift, emphasizing the ritual's integrative rather than strictly devotional role.

Yet several participants suggested that increased visibility has not necessarily enhanced the emotional weight of ritual. As P.14 put it, "*in the Soviet times, we knew less but we practiced more; now we know more but the old unity is not the same*". This echoes broader findings in the literature on post-Soviet Muslim revival, which note that institutional reestablishment does not always restore the intimate affective dimensions of ritual life.

I develop a more nuanced discussion here because gendered labor emerged as a cross-cutting mechanism that materially sustained multiple ritual forms, making it analytically central rather than merely illustrative. The narratives of third-generation women reveal the deeply gendered nature of ritual continuity. As P.13 recalled, "*the religious life of the house was our responsibility; we organized the mevlid*". Women's roles in organizing rituals, leading prayer circles, and guiding children into ritual time demonstrate their central place in sustaining religious memory. Her additional remark- "*we learned Kazakh and Russian, but we always recited the mevlid in the Ahiska way; that never changed*"- underscores how ritual forms function as stable cultural anchors despite linguistic and geographic change.

Accounts of ritual life further show that religion is often perceived as one of the few remaining cultural resources after displacement. P.5 remarked, "*after we were exiled to Kazakhstan, we taught our children; we spoke our own language at home. . . but we held onto our religion*". Echoing earlier testimonies, P.6 stated, "for us, religion was home; we lost our home, but we did not lose our religion," underscoring how religious practice can function as a symbolic homeland in the absence of a physical one. These dynamics resonate with recent scholarship, such as Vidūnaitė's study of Muslim women in the Baltics, which demonstrates how women's religious agency shapes moral subjectivity and cultural continuity.

Recent scholarship on women's religious agency in post-Soviet contexts- exemplified by Vidūnaitė's (2023) study of Muslim women in the Baltic region- demonstrates that religion shapes not only ritual continuity but also ethical self-formation, subjectivity, and modes of public representation. When the contributions of Ahiska women to prayer gatherings, ritual preparation, and the organization of domestic religious life are read through this lens, the gendered texture of religious memory becomes unmistakably visible. Their work reveals that the preservation and transmission of ritual practices depend heavily on forms of labor that remain largely unacknowledged. For this reason, the third generation should not be viewed simply as a cohort encountering a more institutionalized form of Islam; it also embodies the intricate interplay between women's labor, ritual pedagogy, and cultural continuity. Through these dynamics, women emerge as central agents in sustaining the moral and mnemonic structures that shape Ahiska communal life across generations.

5.4. Prayer as a Rhythm of Memory

Across all generations, prayer emerges not merely as a devotional act but as a rhythmic medium through which past experiences are interpreted, the community's moral universe is articulated, and intergenerational continuity is sustained. The formula recited by P.1- "*I lay on my right, turned to my left. . . O God, grant us a blessed morning. Praise be to Your divine unity*"- extends beyond the realm of individual piety, forming a repetitive mnemonic chain that echoes across generations. As Assmann's (2011) theory of cultural memory underscores, such recurrent utterances transcend the limits of personal recollection and become symbolic texts that shape a shared horizon of meaning.

P.3's prayer- "*May Allah protect both Turkey and Kazakhstan*"- reveals the dual structure of belonging that characterizes post-exile life: gratitude toward the new homeland and enduring longing for the lost one coexist within a single utterance. These prayers create a discursive space in which the spatial ruptures produced by displacement are emotionally reconfigured into a sense of coherence. Louw's (2007) observations on everyday Muslim practice in the post-Soviet context similarly demonstrate that prayer functions not only as a spiritual exercise but also as a communicative act that reinforces social solidarity. The Ahiska case reflects this dynamic with particular clarity.

Ultimately, prayer becomes a multilayered symbolic instrument that carries the intertwined processes of remembering, enduring, and rebuilding. It operates as a continuous bridge between individual interiority and the community's historical memory, binding personal devotion to collective experience through rhythmic repetition.

5.5. Synthesis

Viewed together, the findings show that the role of Islam within Ahiska communities has shifted across three historical regimes, yet these shifts have not diminished the core meaning of ritual; rather, they have expanded its functions in response to changing social and political conditions.

Soviet period. During this era, when public expressions of religion were heavily suppressed, religious life took shape as a quiet mode of resistance and a moral framework

through which individuals and families navigated loss. Rituals served as discreet carriers of identity and as key practices through which collective trauma was rendered intelligible.

Post-Soviet period. The renewed public visibility of religion allowed rituals to be practiced within institutional settings such as mosques, religious courses, and organized communal structures. This transformation facilitated the reconstitution of religious knowledge. Yet for some participants, this new visibility weakened the emotional intensity that characterized earlier forms of clandestine piety and introduced different modes of religious socialization.

Contemporary diaspora. For Ahiska groups dispersed across various countries, religion operates as a symbolic, cultural, and ritual center of belonging. Ritual practices provide both a means of compensating for lost geographical anchors and a foundation for sustaining diasporic identity. Prayers, mevlid gatherings, and funerals thus become primary instruments through which identity is reproduced in transnational settings.

Taken together, these three phases illuminate how the trauma of exile is continuously reshaped through religious ritual. Participants' narratives show that Islam functions not only as a domain of worship but as a technique for coping with loss, a moral axis that structures communal life, and a cultural infrastructure that sustains intergenerational memory. In this sense, rituals emerge as a language of memory- one that simultaneously produces both fragility and resilience, carrying the emotional weight of history while preserving the continuities that bind the community across time and space. Across findings, gender operates as a cross-cutting infrastructure of ritual continuity, even where it remains less visible in public narratives.

Rather than merely confirming existing scholarship on religion and post-Soviet Muslim revival, this study contributes a generational and relational perspective on ritual and memory in contexts of long-term displacement. By tracing how religious practices shift from hidden piety to mediating ritual regimes and finally to renewed public visibility, the article demonstrates that religious resilience is neither static nor uniform but produced through intergenerational negotiation and contextual constraint. This approach highlights the analytical value of examining ritual not only as a marker of continuity but also as a dynamic medium through which loss, adaptation, and belonging are continually reworked across time and space.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the existing scholarship on Ahiska communities, a literature that has largely focused on historical, political, and demographic dimensions. The distinctive contribution of this research lies in demonstrating, with ethnographic detail, how religious rituals function not merely as devotional practices but as cultural infrastructures through which trauma is transformed, identity is reconstituted, and intergenerational continuity is sustained in the aftermath of displacement. This perspective allows Ahiska religiosity to be understood as a multilayered historical trajectory that moves from hidden piety to renewed visibility and ultimately to a form of cultural-ritual Islam.

Finke's (2014) work on communal organization and the reconstruction of moral order among Central Asian Muslim populations resonates with the Ahiska case. However, unlike Finke's focus on institutional structures, this study highlights how ritual spaces- funerals, prayer circles, and mevlid gatherings- generate emotional and mnemonic forms of solidarity within the community.

The field data support Halbwachs's (1950) central proposition that collective memory is shaped within social frameworks, while also extending his model in important ways. In the Ahiska context, memory is not merely the recollection of the past; it is the reorganization of emotion, space, and time through ritual. Prayers in funeral ceremonies, the transmission of

exile narratives within families, and the rhythmic language of mevlid gatherings exemplify what Assmann (2011) conceptualizes as cultural memory in its most vivid form.

These insights suggest that post-exile identity is shaped not only through nostalgia for the past but also through rituals that reproduce a sense of "presentness." P.5's statement- "*For us, religion was home; we lost our home, but we did not lose our religion*"- makes clear that the symbolic homeland created through rituals and prayers compensates for the loss of a physical homeland. This provides a valuable intervention into broader debates on "home" and belonging in diasporic studies.

Furthermore, although third-generation participants often expressed a lack of religious knowledge, they consistently attributed emotional and social significance to rituals. This indicates the emergence of what may be described as cultural Islam in the post-Soviet era. It also highlights an important tension: during the Soviet period, religious knowledge was limited yet ritual commitment was strong; today, knowledge has increased, yet communal unity appears comparatively weaker. This paradox remains underexplored in studies of post-Soviet Islam.

Another significant contribution of this study lies in documenting the central role of women in transmitting religious memory. Narratives from participants such as P.13 and P.7 show that domestic prayer practices, mevlid recitations, and holiday rituals have been organized and transmitted largely through women. This reveals a "female memory" that has been overlooked in the Ahiska literature and demonstrates that women are among the most enduring custodians of religious continuity.

Finally, the relative religious freedom encountered in Kazakhstan emerges as a context that strengthened Ahiska identity. P.2's observation- "*When we arrived here, the Kazakh people had forgotten their old customs, but we had not*"- suggests that post-exile settings can become zones of reinforcement, enabling communities to reaffirm cultural continuity in new environments.

Taken together, these analyses show that the Ahiska case offers not merely the historical narrative of a displaced community but a compelling anthropological example of how ritual, prayer, and collective memory operate as cultural infrastructures that transform trauma, stabilize identity, and sustain communal life into the future.

6.1. Recommendations

The findings of this study show that religion among Ahiska communities constitutes a multilayered cultural infrastructure that enables individuals and families to cope with the ruptures created by deportation. This infrastructure- sustained through rituals, oral prayer traditions, women's custodianship of memory, and the rhythmic continuity of intergenerational transmission- remains vibrant today. Accordingly, future research should deepen field-based inquiry and strengthen interdisciplinary approaches in the areas of religious memory, diaspora organization, and cultural sustainability.

First, there is a need for comparative research on Ahiska sub-diasporas across different geographical contexts. Religious practices among communities in the United States, the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine have not yet been systematically analyzed with respect to how they are shaped by immigration regimes, citizenship structures, and local religious environments. Particularly in the United States, resettlement programs have created new institutional settings that offer a valuable opportunity to study the relationship between ritual institutionalization, diasporic resilience, and identity negotiation.

Second, comparative analysis between Ahiska communities and other deported Muslim groups- such as Chechens, Crimean Tatars, and Karachay-Malkars- is essential. Such comparisons could illuminate both shared and distinctive patterns of post-exile religios-

ity, highlighting the role of Islam in structuring responses to trauma, displacement, and resettlement across the broader Central Asian and Caucasian region.

Third, the central role of Ahiska women in sustaining ritual life and prayer traditions warrants its own dedicated research agenda. While this study foregrounds women's contributions, more extensive ethnographic analysis is needed to detail how women shape domestic religious order, organize mevlid gatherings, and transmit ritual knowledge. Given that women's religious labor forms a cultural backbone of continuity, deeper investigation into this field is crucial.

Fourth, the documentation of prayer texts and oral ritual repertoires through digital memory projects is strongly recommended. Prayer notebooks, hatim cycles, post-exile hymns, and personal ritual recordings constitute fragile components of cultural memory. Digital archiving would create a sustainable resource with value both for academic research and for diaspora communities, linking this material to broader cultural heritage initiatives.

Fifth, longitudinal research is needed to track how the meaning of ritual changes among younger generations. The tension observed among some third-generation participants—who feel the symbolic weight of ritual yet report limited religious knowledge—raises important questions about the future trajectory of Ahiska religious identity. Long-term ethnographic studies would shed light on how the emotional, social, and symbolic functions of ritual evolve over time.

Finally, research on Ahiska communities should be more closely integrated with discussions on cultural sustainability and religious heritage policy. The role of religion in reinforcing communal resilience should be recognized by diaspora organizations, local administrations, and international cultural heritage institutions. Protecting ritual practices and oral traditions within a broader cultural heritage framework could contribute to a more holistic sustainability strategy for the community.

Overall, these recommendations build on findings that identify Ahiska religiosity as one of the most enduring cultural architectures of post-trauma social reconstruction. They highlight new research directions aimed at examining the *religion-memory-exile* nexus not only historically but also within contemporary socio-cultural contexts.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

While this study illuminates how religion intertwines with the experience of deportation among Ahiska communities, several methodological and field-related limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted with fourteen participants living in Turkey and Kazakhstan and does not encompass the broader geographical dispersion of the Ahiska population- including substantial communities in the United States, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan. This limits the study's ability to represent the full diversity of religious practice across varied political regimes, citizenship environments, and cultural settings. In addition, oral history narratives may reflect selective memory, silenced experiences, or intergenerational reinterpretations. Although interviews were cross-validated with ritual observations and historical sources, the subjective intensity inherent in memory-based accounts constitutes an unavoidable limitation of this research.

A further limitation concerns the predominance of first-generation elderly participants, which enabled a deep understanding of early trauma but restricted the diversity that a larger sample of younger participants might offer regarding contemporary negotiations of religious identity. Moreover, the research focused specifically on the cultural and emotional functions of ritual, leaving aside other sociological variables such as diaspora organizations, economic conditions, social media practices, and the participation of younger generations in transnational networks.

These limitations suggest several promising avenues for future research. First, comparative fieldwork across the various countries where Ahiska communities reside should be undertaken. The religious organizational models of resettled groups in the United States, the political contexts shaping identity in Russia and Ukraine, and the ritual continuity practices in more established Azerbaijani communities offer critical points of inquiry for understanding how post-exile religiosity adapts to different spatial settings.

Second, forms of religiosity specific to the Ahiska case- such as cultural Islam, memory rituals, and the legacy of hidden piety- should be compared with those of other deported Muslim populations. This would help identify shared patterns of resilience and the distinctive ways in which trauma is processed through religious practice. Third, further ethnographic studies are needed to examine the central role of Ahiska women in religious transmission. Domestic prayer circles, mevlid arrangements, mourning rituals, and food and language practices indicate that women's religious labor is both quiet and foundational, offering a vital research pathway into the architecture of communal memory. Fourth, digital preservation of prayer books, ritual recordings, exile narratives, and oral history materials is essential for sustaining diaspora studies. Digital archives would ensure the long-term safeguarding of ritual language, prayers, and trauma narratives for both academic and cultural heritage purposes.

Finally, longitudinal studies should examine how the meaning of ritual evolves among younger cohorts. The tension observed in the third generation- between strong symbolic attachment to ritual and limited religious knowledge- offers insights into the future trajectory of Ahiska identity. Tracking the emotional and social functions of religious practice over time would clarify the community's cultural resilience capacity.

Taken together, these research paths show that the Ahiska experience is not solely a narrative of displacement but a compelling example of how ritual, prayer, and memory form a dynamic model of social resilience. Future studies should therefore examine the multilayered relationship between *religion, memory*, and *exile* within a broader geographical and theoretical framework.

7. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that religious practices among Ahiska communities transcend the realm of individual belief and have become a cultural infrastructure that carries collective memory, nurtures social resilience, and reproduces identity across generations in the aftermath of displacement. Along the axis of exile, faith, and memory, religion emerges as both a mnemonic space that opens onto the past and a site of solidarity that reweaves a fragmented social fabric. The Ahiska case thus offers a compelling anthropological example of how religious practices provide a powerful basis for communal endurance under conditions of repression, uprooting, and prolonged uncertainty.

At the theoretical level, the study brings together the literature on diaspora, cultural trauma, and post-Soviet religiosity, situating the Ahiska community at the intersection of these three fields. The findings illustrate how ritual-centered mechanisms of continuity emphasized in the memory theories of Halbwachs (1950) and Assmann (2011), as well as Brubaker's (2005) conceptualization of diaspora as a set of everyday stances and practices, find concrete expression in the Ahiska context. Islam is thereby redefined not simply as a metaphysical system of belief but as a foundational cultural framework that transforms the ruptures of exile and sustains identity across generations.

Methodologically, the study combines long-term oral history interviews conducted between 2006 and 2025 with contemporary ethnographic observations, enabling an analysis that traces both intergenerational memory transmission and the temporal transformation of ritual practices. The hidden religiosity of the first generation, the oral prayer repertoire

of the second, and the third generation's engagement with an increasingly institutionalized religious sphere were integrated into a context-sensitive comparative framework. This approach shows that post-exile religiosity cannot be reduced to immediate reactions but instead represents a deep, cumulative memory process, offering an instructive case for both the anthropology of religion and diaspora studies.

From the standpoint of historiography and cultural policy, this study reframes the Ahiska deportation not merely as an ethno-political intervention but as a structural rupture aimed at cultural existence itself. Findings on the preservation of rituals and prayer traditions under repression, the reorganization of communal life in the post-Soviet period, and the increasing visibility of the religious sphere provide important insights for the politics of memory, cultural sustainability, and the protection of diaspora cultural heritage. The research fills a significant gap in the literature by demonstrating that cultural continuity depends not only on state institutions or formal structures but also on micro-level cultural carriers such as domestic rituals, everyday prayer practices, and the largely invisible labor of women.

By unveiling the multilayered interconnections among religion, memory, and post-Soviet transformations in the Ahiska case, this study aligns closely with *Religions*' ongoing scholarly focus on the role of religious practices in memory production, post-traumatic social reconstruction, and the evolving religious landscapes of post-Soviet regions. The findings illuminate three key themes highlighted in recent Central Asian and Caucasus research: the foundational role of ritual in producing collective memory, the capacity of religion to generate social resilience amid political and spatial rupture, and the ways in which re-institutionalized religious fields shape diaspora identity in the post-Soviet era. Thus, the article not only documents the historical experience of a displaced community but also contributes meaningfully to broader theoretical debates about the potential of religious practices to generate cultural continuity and *resilience*.

Overall, the study shows that Islam has become a central axis of resilience in the reconstruction of social order for Ahiska communities after trauma. By examining the interrelations of exile, collective memory, and faith through both historical and ethnographic lenses, the article offers a holistic analysis that aligns directly with *Religions*' thematic focus on "religion, memory, and post-Soviet transformations." Future research could extend this longitudinal lens to fourth and subsequent generations, including forms of short- or long-term "return" mobility. In particular, examining service-oriented return practices—where younger cohorts travel to ancestral locales to "give back"—may clarify how ritual, memory, and belonging are reconfigured through circular mobility rather than permanent settlement.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Institutional Review Board approval was waived for this study due to the adoption of Non-invasive, voluntary oral history interviews and No collection of medical, biometric, financial, political, or other sensitive personal data. In Türkiye, the relevant legal framework is: Regulation on Research and Publication Ethics in Türkiye (Türkiye Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Yönergesi); Turkish Personal Data Protection Law (Kişisel Verilerin Korunması Kanunu–KVKK No. 6698, Articles 2, 3, 28); Council of Higher Education (Council of Higher Education (YÖK), Türkiye) Ethics Directive, which stipulates that non-invasive oral history interviews conducted voluntarily and without the collection of identifiable sensitive data are exempt from formal board review. This study involved: Non-invasive, voluntary oral history interviews; No collection of medical, biometric, financial, political, or other sensitive personal data; Full anonymization of all participants; Procedures aligned with the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision); Compliance with Akdeniz University's institutional ethics guidelines for oral history research; Accordingly, under Turkish national regulations and university policy, this research qualifies for ethics exemption, and no IRB approval is required.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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Notes

[1] GKO-State Defense Committee (Gosudarstvennyi Komitet Oborony) was an extraordinary governing body established in the Soviet Union during the Second World War to centralize all military, economic, and security policies under a single authority. Chaired directly by Stalin, the GKO functioned as the highest decision-making mechanism of the wartime Soviet state, operating with virtually unrestricted powers throughout the conflict.

[2] NKVD-(Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del), the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, was the Soviet Union's central authority responsible for internal security. During the 1930s and 1940s, it oversaw critical domains such as state security, intelligence, border control, mass arrests, and deportation operations. Under Stalin, the NKVD played a direct role in organizing and implementing large-scale deportations, forced population transfers, and other instruments of political repression.

[3] The 1989 Fergana Events, which erupted in June 1989 in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan, were ethno-social clashes that rapidly escalated into large-scale violence. The unrest resulted in mob attacks, looting, and the forced evacuation of Ahiska Turks, who were specifically targeted during the upheaval. Viewed within the broader dynamics of late Soviet disintegration, the Fergana events are widely regarded as a critical case that reveals how inter-republic tensions and the weakening of central authority made underlying ethnic vulnerabilities increasingly visible.

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