

**“Ceremonial Culture of the Ahiska Turks in History and Modern Times: Tradition, Change and Continuity”****Received: 02 February 2026 | Accepted: 22 March 2026 | Published: 15 April 2026**

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**Abstract**

The Ahiska (Mashati) Turks are one of the ancient Turkic ethnic groups in the Caucasus region. Their ceremonial traditions are characterized by a profound synthesis of religious, social, and historical traditions. In this study, the evolution of the ritual traditions of the Ahiska Turks from the pre-exilic period to the present time, with a particular emphasis on the role of these traditions in the formation and preservation of national identity, is examined. In the context of globalization and the realities of the diaspora, the role of the preservation of traditional rituals is one of the most important factors in the formation and preservation of the unity of the community and cultural continuity. In the context of the role of globalization and the processes of modernity in the formation of cultural identity, the ceremonial traditions of the Ahiska Turks are particularly relevant. On the one hand, these traditions, as a historical memory, preserve the spiritual existence of the people, and on the other hand, they are adapted to the changing social environment and promote cultural continuity. Also, the other purpose of this study is to examine the historical phases of the formation of the ceremonial culture of the Ahiska Turks, its relationship with clothing, cuisine, folklore, and family traditions, and the ways of change in the modern period. The study was carried out using the historical-analytical and ethnographic method, comparing the cultural reality of the past and the present. Thus, the topic “Ceremonial culture of the Ahiska Turks in history and in the modern period: tradition, change, and continuity” is of scientific and socio-moral significance in the context of the preservation of the national identity and cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Ahiska Turks, ritual culture, customs and traditions, deportation, cultural identity, diaspora, ethnography.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The ritual culture of the Ahiska Turks is of crucial importance in the general context of the study of the processes of cultural preservation, development of new identities, and adaptation among migrant Turkic peoples. The Ahiska Turks, an ethnic group that originated in the Ahiska region in southern Georgia, are a unique example of a people that has survived the processes of forced migration, dispersion, and cultural change while retaining their ethnic and spiritual identity. From birth and marriage ceremonies to religious ceremonies and death rituals, their ritualistic practices form an integral part of their intangible cultural heritage and continue to provide the necessary platform for social cohesion in the past and the present. The

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relevance of the topic lies in the fact that the subject matter is the outcome of the interplay of various aspects of social sciences. The rituals of the Ahiska Turks were not merely the manifestation of their cultural heritage but were, in fact, the tools for the propagation of their values, ethics, and social structure. More particularly, after the forced deportation of 1944, in which tens of thousands of Ahiska Turks were forcibly deported to Central Asia by the Stalinist regime, their cultural heritage was the sole platform for the maintenance of their social memory and identity. In the contemporary era, the Ahiska Turks are settled in more than a dozen countries across the globe, including Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine, and the US, and hence their ritualistic practices continue to take diverse forms. In this way, an exploration of these changes offers useful insights into the ways in which migrant or diaspora communities seek to strike a balance between protection and adaptation. In terms of the host community, the Ahiska Turks have often been subjected to the pressure of assimilation, although in the realm of ritual, tradition is upheld with an astonishing level of continuity. In this way, an exploration of the continuity of these traditions offers useful insights into the ways in which these rituals act as a form of cultural anchor that allows younger generations to maintain their connection to their ancestral heritage in the face of geographical and political fragmentation (Dedeoğlu, 2022, pp. 5-7). In addition, in the modern world in which globalization is such an overarching phenomenon, the case of the Ahiska is a powerful example of the maintenance of tradition in the face of migration, homogenization, and the crises of identity that accompany these processes. The study of their ritual culture also contributes to comparative studies within Turkic ethnology, shedding light on the similarities and differences between the Ahiska people and other Turkic peoples in Anatolia and the Caucasus. This comparative perspective enriches our understanding of the Turkic cultural continuum and demonstrates how shared traditions have adapted in different historical contexts.

The Ahiska Turks are Muslims and have firmly preserved the traditional Turkic family structure, as well as their culture. Their otherization as Turks in the societies they live in and therefore their more closed social lives have played an important role in the transmission of the tradition to this day. This has also led to a high sense of group and identity among the Ahiska people. The fact that marriages mainly take place within their own communities, that they live together rather than scattered, that they do not speak any language other than Turkish within the family, that they keep their religion alive despite all kinds of pressure and pass it on to future generations stems from this sense of identity (Mirişli, 2024, pp. 4-5). However, the process of intercultural interaction was inevitable. As with the language of the Ahiskas, certain changes have been observed in their traditional cuisine and clothing styles due to the influence of the countries they live in.

Methodology: Research conducted on the ceremonial culture of the Ahiska Turks shows that the customs and rituals of this community are an integral part of their historically formed social structure, religious beliefs and collective memory. Studies by authors such as Aydingün, Wixman, Tuite, Sumbatzade emphasize that deportation, forced relocation, and long-term diaspora life have affected the ceremonial system, noting that elements such as weddings, engagements, mourning, kinship relations, collective solidarity, and community control are based on both traditional Turkic-Muslim values and the historical-cultural influences of the Caucasian environment (Aydingün, A. (2002). *The Ethno-cultural Identity of the Meskhetian Turks* (Doctoral Dissertation). Middle East Technical University, Wixman, R. (1980). *Language Aspects of Ethnic Patterns and Processes in the North Caucasus*. The University of Chicago Press, Tuite, K. (1996). "Highland Georgian Social Structure & the Meskhetian Turks Before Deportation." *Caucasus Studies Journal*, Sumbatzade, A. (1964). "Turkish Population of Southern Georgia and Their Social and Economic Life." *Soviet Ethnography*). The existing literature shows that the ceremonial culture of the Ahiska Turks is distinguished by its conservative nature, the strength of intra-community normative mechanisms, and cultural continuity, and these factors distinguish them to a certain extent from other Turkic groups and the regional societies in which they live. Scientist Nikolai Yakovlevich Marr studied a special ethno-cultural phenomenon widespread among the Ahiska Turks - "hand language", which reflects the unique cultural heritage of the region (Devrisheva, 2018, pp. 3-5). Unlike other studies, this article presents a different scientific approach from existing studies by comprehensively examining the functional role of the ceremonial culture of the Ahiska Turks in preserving national identity and cultural continuity, its organization as a single system with clothing, cuisine, folklore, and religious values, as well as the mechanisms of the impact of globalization processes on these traditions.

## **2. Clothing**

In the 19th century and early 20th century, the clothing style of the Ahiska Turks was part of the traditional Turkic-Caucasian clothing typology. Men's clothing consisted of a shirt (with a string at the throat), trousers, arkhalig, chukha, fur, and various silver, wool, silk, and leather belts. Men wore a hat and a fez as headwear. In most cases, a red or green sarong was wrapped around the fez.

Women's clothing consisted of a red dress decorated with plant ornaments, a blue apron (fartuk), and a silver belt. Young girls wore a shawl, tavshal, or shawl with a shawl (kösek) as headwear. Married women, in addition to these, wore a gatka (tübetay) decorated with gold coins. As outerwear, women wore a white veil, locally called ahram. Since the 1920s, changes have been observed in the clothing style of the Ahiska Turks. During this period, elements from the Soviet military style were added to men's clothing,

such as breeches, frocks (a traditional men's outerwear, shaped like the military frock of the Tsarist era, dark in color, buttoned, and tight-fitting, and worn mainly at official ceremonies), furashka, and gymnastics (Aydingün, Balim, Hoover, Kuznetsov, 2006).

### **3. Ceremonies and Entertainment Customs**

The wedding and funeral ceremonies of the Ahiska Turks mainly comply with the general customs and rules of the Sharia. Wedding ceremonies consist of several stages, for example: the preparation of the girl at home, the sending of messengers, the sherbet ceremony, the henna night, a consultation meeting, the removal of the bride from the house, and other stages. Although the individual elements of these ceremonies - horse shows, certain items, wedding expenses, etc. - are enriched with local characteristics, in terms of their general structure they are similar to the traditions of eastern Anatolia and western Azerbaijan. The Ahiska Turks make preparations for death in advance, settle debts, and resolve family and inheritance issues in accordance with religious rules.

Holidays play a special role in their social life; among them are Ramadan, Kurban, Mevlud, Rajab, Khidyrellez, Ilbashi, and Novruz. Traditional entertainment includes turkusaz, various games, cup-ring games, and ashug performances. Since the 19th century, intellectual and active games have also become widespread in this region and have attracted the attention of observers (Gültekin, 2012, pp. 95–112).

### **4. Oral literature and folk art**

In the absence of almost all the attributes of the national socio-cultural life of the Ahiska Turks (public institutions, national education and press, literature), folklore has been the main factor in preserving their national unity and cultural identity. The subject matter of oral poetry traditions is extremely diverse: mythological tales, heroic epics, legends, religious tales, historical sayings and stories of everyday life are combined here. This thematic richness is mainly due to the compact way of life of the Ahiska Turks; members of the community were able to actively share information about society, preserving the ethnographic micro-environment. Mythological concepts and folk beliefs are transmitted in legends, tales and sayings more fully and deeply than in other genres. This includes motifs of worship related to the forces of nature (water, wind, fire, etc.) and mythological characters (Al-Arvad, Khizir, Mataur, Nazar, good and evil spirits, demons, etc.). Religious motifs, which occupy a special place in the folklore of the Ahiska Turks, are closely connected with mythological ideas. These include stories about prophets and saints, elaborations of Quranic plots, legends about sacred objects (trees, stones, buildings, springs, etc.), and tales about supernatural forces. Interestingly, these stories have changed in functional terms, often carrying a

patriotic function rather than an educational character. They are listened to not from a religious point of view, but with ethnographic interest, that is, with the aim of obtaining information about a distant homeland (Gadjiyev, 2007).

## **5. Cuisine**

The cuisine of the Ahiska Turks is distinguished by its richness, diversity and ceremonial culture. The basis of their ceremonial tables is meat, milk, flour and vegetable products, and these rich culinary traditions have also influenced the cuisine of other peoples of the region, including Georgian and Armenian. The use of dish names such as bozbash, lavash, kavorma, basdırma, çığirtma in different peoples is an indication of this.

Although flour products predominate in the daily diet of the Ahiska Turks, meat dishes were prepared more often on holidays, ceremonies and special occasions. As I. Pantkhuyov noted, “In the Caucasus, people often make do with little food, and the body’s basic needs are met during holidays and festivities.” In this regard, ceremonial dishes played an important role in both socialization and satisfying energy needs.

Meat dishes are the main feature of festive and wedding tables. Meat dishes were considered the culmination of the ceremonial culture of the Ahiska Turks. At weddings, religious holidays and large family gatherings, dishes such as buglama, sucuk, kebab, bishi, bazlama, közlemä, paça, savutma, bozbash, dolma, piti and köfte were prepared. The abundance and variety of meat dishes expressed the host's wealth and the respect he showed to the guest (Aydingün, Balim, Hoover, Kuznetsov, 2006).

Soups. Ceremonial tables were unimaginable without soup. In particular, cincar soup, rice soup, noodle soup, milk soup, tutmac soup, ayran soup and lentil soup were distinguished by their diversity. These soups were often served both at wedding tables and at funerals.

The role of everyday meals in ceremonies. Everyday meals were prepared and served in a richer way for ceremonial reasons. Examples include potato mash, khoyul, pata, kelajosh, cheese gourması, pakhıraçlama and lazut bulamacı.

Sweets are an integral part of Ahiska gatherings. Sweets such as keta, qatmar, lokhum, halva, baklava, şekhleme and su börey were baked at weddings and special receptions. These sweets were both distributed at the wedding and indicated the abundance of the reception (Seçim, & Kaya, 2019, pp. 1631-1647).

Drinks Ahiska people did not drink vodka at ceremonies, preferring sherbet, ayran, tea and coffee. However, their own special grape wine was also considered one of the most important drinks at ceremonies. This is because the Ahiska people's religion prohibits alcoholic beverages, considers vodka harmful to family and society, whereas sherbet, ayran, tea and coffee are considered halal and symbols of hospitality, and grape wine is used only as a weak, limited and traditional drink of respect (Devrishova, 2016, pp. 142–154).

Changes in modern times. In recent years, the older generation is concerned about the fact that some traditional ceremonial dishes have not been cooked. According to them, the deterioration of certain dishes and neglect of the kitchen lead to a weakening of cultural memory.

## **6. Religion**

Just as the Akhisga Turks have limited their relations with groups of different religions, they have not established very close relations with the peoples of Central Asia who, although they belong to the same religion, have different cultural characteristics. This situation is especially evident in the issue of family formation. Among the Akhisga Turks, marriages outside the group are extremely limited, even with Muslim communities. Interviews conducted show that the vast majority of the Akhisga Turks consider endogamy — that is, marriage within the group — to be preferable. Those who stated that mixed marriages exist mainly emphasized that there are cases of taking a daughter from another nation, but the tradition of giving a daughter is not accepted (Aydingün, 2002, p. 26).

## **7. Ceremonial music**

Music occupies a special place in the ceremonial culture of the Akhisga Turks, and these musical forms reflect the historical memory, emotional world, spiritual values, and social relations of the people. Ceremonial music is mainly performed in close connection with weddings, engagements, henna nights, circumcision ceremonies, religious holidays and sometimes mourning ceremonies. These musics are not only a means of entertainment, but also considered one of the important rituals that carry the meaning of the ceremony. Ahiska music was formed from the synthesis of the general Turkic musical traditions and the Caucasian musical environment, and has developed as a rich example of folklore distinguished by its melodic structure, rhythmic structure and performance style.

The music performed at wedding ceremonies is mainly cheerful, rhythmic and playful in nature. Drums and flutes, saz, qaval and sometimes balaban have become inseparable attributes of wedding

ceremonies. In particular, the airs played during the bride's arrival, the movement of the groom's caravan, the girl's departure from her home and the beginning of the wedding have the function of creating collective enthusiasm and social solidarity. During the henna night, more lyrical, relatable and emotional musics are performed; these musics express the psychological state created by the separation of parents and children and the sacredness of family ties.

The music performed during mourning ceremonies, in contrast to wedding music, is heavy, harmonious and sad. The dirges and religious songs sung during these ceremonies both express collective grief and act as a symbol of respect for the memory of the deceased. Music plays the role of a psychological tool that strengthens social solidarity in these ceremonies (Akhundova, 2011, pp. 156–171).

The art of ashug also occupies an important place in the ceremonial music of the Akhisga Turks. Ashugs perform both entertaining and educational functions by singing epics, heroic songs, and poems on love and homeland at weddings and large family gatherings. Through this music and word art, values such as national identity, moral norms, loyalty and attachment to the homeland are transmitted to the younger generations. After the deportation, ceremonial music began to have a special importance in preserving cultural memory for the Akhisga Turks living in various countries.

Although urbanization and technological development have led to certain changes in ceremonial music in modern times, traditional melodies still form the main musical line of wedding and religious ceremonies. Although in some cases live performance has been replaced by recordings and electronic musical instruments, the melodic structures and symbolic content have been preserved. In this regard, the ceremonial music of the Ahiska Turks both adapts to changing social conditions and continues to live as one of the main carriers of national-cultural identity (Gadjiyev, 2007).

## **8. Birth, marriage and funeral customs**

In Mashati communities, birth, marriage and funeral ceremonies are based on traditions preserved by the family and community, and these customs are formed from the synthesis of both Islamic religious rituals and Caucasian-Russian cultural influences; mullahs are usually invited to birth and circumcision ceremonies, but in modern times, circumcision is performed in medical conditions and is followed by a "circumcision wedding" in which the kirva plays a special role; even if the kirva is not related to the family, a lasting social and spiritual bond is formed between the two families after the ceremony; the birth of a girl is sometimes met with public disapproval, but this attitude often does not reflect intra-family values; marriages remain an important social institution in Mashati society, and although the forms of the ceremony

change as they live in different countries, the process is mainly carried out under the supervision of parents - first there is an embassy, then there is an engagement with sherbet drinking and gift exchange, the engagement period is often short; At the wedding, the groom's party goes to the bride's house in a procession, a prayer is recited as the bride is taken away from the house, money and candy are scattered on the groom's caravan, before entering the house, the bride breaks a plate and draws a mark with honey on the door, then sits silently in the room holding a child in her arms, demonstrating a symbol of blessing; the bride can only speak and remove her veil after the symbolic "cutting" of her tongue, her father gives her gold, and rituals related to the groom are performed; In Mashati families, there are cases of girls being married off at an early age, and consanguineous marriages are traditionally prohibited and a gap of at least five to seven generations is required between husband and wife, but in rare cases, cousin-aunt marriages occur; although marriages are mostly concluded within their own community, in some cases Mashati men marry women from other nations, including Azerbaijanis; divorce is generally not welcomed and is more often caused by alcohol and drug addiction;

Relatives gather extensively at funerals, the body is washed within a day, wrapped in a white shroud and green cloth, buried facing Mecca after the funeral prayer, 61 people are given a fitka, a charity table is opened at home after the burial, and prayers are recited for 40 days; thus, birth, marriage, and funeral ceremonies live on as the main traditional institutions that preserve the social solidarity, family ties, and cultural identity of the Mashati Turks.

In general, for Mashati people, marriage is not only a means of establishing a family, but also a means of strengthening community unity and preserving traditional gender roles. For Mashati people, a funeral, like birth and marriage, is considered an important ceremony that brings family and community members together. The mourning ceremony is attended by close and distant relatives, and sometimes hundreds of people participate. Men usually stay outside the house, while women mourn for the deceased inside the house. Funeral customs begin no later than one day after the death. The funeral is washed by men or women, depending on the gender of the deceased. After the "funeral prayer" is recited by men, the body is wrapped in a white shroud and a green cloth. Then a prayer is said and the body is taken to the cemetery. It is considered in accordance with the Sharia law that the grave should face Mecca, and the deceased is buried in a fetal position, covered only in a white shroud. During the ceremony, 61 people are given alms called fitka — this amount is equivalent to the price of a kilo of bread on the last day of Ramadan. After the burial, the mourning ceremony continues in the deceased's house and a "khayrat" meal is distributed. Prayers are recited every day for the next 40 days, and a special ceremony is held on the 40th day.

Thus, the three main life events of birth, marriage, and burial occupy an important place in the social and cultural life of the Mashti Turks, and although these customs are influenced by local traditions of various countries on the one hand, they also serve to strengthen unity and spiritual bonds between the family and the community on the other (Hajiyev, 2014, pp. 167–189).

## **9. CONCLUSION**

The clothing, cuisine and ceremonial culture of the Ahiska Turks act as a typical example of the Turkish-Caucasian synthesis. Traditional male and female clothing, headdresses, decorations and color symbolism combine both Turkish aesthetics and local characteristics of the Caucasus. Although the Ahiska Turks have adapted to the socio-economic and cultural realities of the countries in which they live in modern times, the traditional ceremonial culture has not lost its relevance. Interest in national identity is re-strengthening among the younger generations, and national motifs are reviving in wedding and religious ceremonies. However, processes such as globalization and urbanization have caused a number of customs to change in form, but continue to live in content. As a result, the ceremonial culture of the Ahiska Turks plays an important role in preserving the historical memory, spiritual stability and national identity of this people. It is both a cultural bridge connecting the past with the present, and a guarantee of identity and social unity in the conditions of diaspora. The preservation of traditions today is a bright indicator of the cultural resistance, spiritual stability and loyalty of the Ahiska Turks to the Turkish cultural system. The study of this culture is of invaluable value, not only from the ethnographic point of view but also from the national and humanities point of view.

Ultimately, this research is relevant not only for the documentation and preservation of the cultural heritage of the Ahiska Turks but also for the comprehension of the larger cultural transformations in the contexts of displacement and diaspora. This research bridges the gap between the traditional studies of ritual systems and the contemporary discussions of multiculturalism, heritage preservation, and identity politics. The research, through the study of the role of rituals in the support of the community through continuity and transformation, is also of scientific and social value.

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