

# NARRATIVES OF TRAUMA: MEMORY, SPACE, AND GENERATIONAL IDENTITY AMONG MUSLIM MESKHETIANS

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## Abstract

*The historical experience of Muslim Meskhetians (Ahıska Turks) illustrates how historical trauma transforms into a dynamic system of social identity. This study analyzes the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory and the formation of trans-territorial traumatic identity (TTI), through which the group adapts to multilocal and transnational contexts. The empirical material is based on narrative interviews conducted between 2004 and 2025 in Georgia and the United States with members of the community. The research is grounded in theories of traumatic memory, hybridity, and transnationalism. Findings show that traumatic events – such as the Stalin-era deportation and the Ferghana conflict – have developed into intergenerationally transmitted emotional and social systems. Family narratives, rituals, and symbolic practices are central to the mechanisms of memory transmission. Distinct generational strategies have emerged: the older generation preserves traditional identities and symbols of trauma, while younger individuals construct hybrid identities that blend emotional attachments to ancestral history with current social realities. Particular attention is given to the symbolic construction of homeland and emotional space. Akhaltsikhe and its surrounding region have become emotional reference points in the absence of physical return. Moreover, transnational networks and trans-territorial marriage chains generate social and emotional capital, supporting adaptation to global mobility and cultural change. Based on these insights, the study proposes a theoretical model of trans-territorial traumatic identity (TTI), which synthesizes traumatic memory, hybrid adaptation, and transnational linkages. This model offers a useful analytical framework not only for the Muslim Meskhetian case, but also for broader studies of forced displacement.*

**Keywords:** Muslim Meskhetians, traumatic memory, hybridity, transnationalism, symbolic homeland, Transterritorial Traumatic Identity.

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary migration and identity studies, increasing attention is being paid to how traumatic experiences are transformed into social narratives and how individuals strive to construct a sense of belonging within transnational spaces (Hall, 1990; Bhabha, 1994; Hirsch, 2012; Vertovec, 2009). Within this context, the case of Muslim Meskhetians (Ahıska Turks) holds particular significance. Their collective biography is marked by episodes of forced displacement, historical trauma, and multiple transformations of identity.

The narrative of trauma among Muslim Meskhetians is not merely a recounting of historical events, but a dynamic process of social identity formation. Memory, space, and intergenerational differences collectively shape emotional ties to both the past and to new sociocultural contexts (Alexander, 2004; Eyerman, 2001). Traumatic memory is not simply

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transmitted across generations as knowledge; rather, it is reconstituted within emotional and symbolic frameworks, undergoing reinterpretation and acquiring new meanings in each successive generation.

This study focuses on the following research questions:

How is traumatic memory transmitted intergenerationally?

How are symbolic spaces (e.g., the Pashalik of Akhaltsikhe) constructed?

How do individuals perceive and seek to reinforce their sense of belonging in the context of migration and trans-territorial displacement?

The theoretical framework of the present research draws on theories of cultural trauma (Alexander, 2004; Hirsch, 2012), the concept of hybrid identity (Bhabha, 1994; Gamsakhurdia, 2019), and scholarship on transnationalism and spatial identity (Vertovec, 2009; Proshansky et al., 1983).

The primary aims of the study are:

To analyze the intersections of trauma, space, and identity in the narratives of Muslim Meskhetians;

To identify generational and gendered differences in the transmission of memory and in the construction of belonging;

To propose a theoretical model of Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI) as a novel analytical framework for interpreting social and cultural practices.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates theories of trauma, identity, hybridity, transnationalism, and adaptation – drawing from both Western and locally rooted intellectual paradigms. Based on this integrative approach, the analytical model of Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI) was developed to offer a novel conceptual lens for understanding identity within the context of this research.

The theory of traumatic identity (Alexander, 2004; Eyerman, 2001; Hirsch, 2012) explains how individual and collective traumatic experiences are transformed into social narratives transmitted across generations. In the case of the Muslim Meskhetians, such narrative structures are shaped by two major historical traumas: the 1944 deportation and the 1989 Fergana crisis. These events serve as foundational episodes that have defined group self-awareness and the core axes of social identity.

The hybridity theory (Bhabha, 1994) and the concept of proculturation (Gamsakhurdia, 2019) explore how migrants simultaneously preserve cultural codes while adapting to new social standards. Whereas Bhabha emphasizes the emergence of hybrid identity within the “third space” of intercultural encounters, Gamsakhurdia’s proculturation concept is rooted in an internal, organic process of cultural transformation. The latter reflects adaptive mechanisms specific to the Georgian sociocultural context.

Transnationalism theory (Vertovec, 2009; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004) examines how migrants sustain multifaceted social, cultural, and economic ties across geographic bound-

aries. However, traditional conceptions of transnationalism often fall short in accounting for the symbolic and emotional spaces that are vital in the construction of migrant identities (Proshansky et al., 1983). For Muslim Meskhetians, the imagined homeland – the Pashalik of Akhaltsikhe – represents such a symbolic and emotional anchor, playing a pivotal role in identity formation.

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957; Breakwell, 1986) provides insight into how migrants navigate conflicting cultural expectations and demands, developing corresponding adaptive strategies. In the narratives of Muslim Meskhetians, cognitive dissonance manifests both in the efforts to preserve traditions and in the process of aligning with new social roles and environments.

This article presents the author's original theoretical model of Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI), which synthesizes the aforementioned theories and concepts into a cohesive analytical framework. The model offers a multidimensional approach to understanding the complexity of migrant identity, enabling deeper interpretation of the social and cultural practices that shape experiences of displacement, memory, and belonging.

The concept of Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI) serves as a conceptual framework that synthesizes historical trauma, memory, hybrid identity, and transnational connections. Developed within the scope of this study, the TTI model is grounded in several foundational theoretical components:

*Traumatic memory and postmemory* – the emotional and interpretive transmission of collective trauma across generations, encompassing not only historical facts but also the forms through which these events are represented (Alexander, 2004; Hirsch, 2012);

*Hybridity and intercultural integration* – fluid forms of self-identification that emerge in the navigation between distinct cultural codes, allowing migrants to adapt to new sociocultural environments (Bhabha, 1994);

*Proculturation* – the selective preservation of cultural heritage and its transformation in response to evolving social and cultural contexts (Gamsakhurdia, 2019);

*Symbolic space and emotional geography* – imagined “homelands” constructed through memory and emotion, rooted not in physical territory but in symbolic and identity-based spatial imaginaries (Proshansky et al., 1983; Anderson, 1983);

*Transnationalism and networked identity* – a fluid, network-based identity that transcends traditional, monolithic forms of belonging and evolves through transnational connections (Vertovec, 2009).

The TTI model provides an analytical lens for understanding how migrants perceive their identity not through rigid national or ethnic categories, but as a multi-layered, emotionally charged, and spatially mobile formation. It moves beyond essentialist frameworks and, instead, emphasizes identity as a contingent and dynamic process shaped by movement, memory, and context.

Within this theoretical framework, traumatic identity is conceptualized as a dynamic and multidimensional social construct, continually formed at the intersection of migration, memory, and space. The TTI approach enables a nuanced analysis of how migrant com-

munities experience trauma, transmit memory intergenerationally, and reconstruct identity in ways that are context-sensitive, temporally fluid, and structurally complex.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches within a constructionist paradigm, which conceptualizes identity as a dynamic formation shaped by socio-cultural interactions (Gergen, 1999).

The qualitative component was based on the narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), focusing on the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory, emotional symbolization of space, and identity narratives. The quantitative component drew on data from a custom-designed survey assessing identity, psychosocial wellbeing, and civic engagement.

Data collection spanned 2012–2025 across Georgia and the United States. In Georgia (2017–2018), the fieldwork included 60 in-depth interviews and a survey of 250 respondents from Kobuleti, Ozurgeti, Samtredia, Vali, Akhaltsikhe, and Tbilisi. In addition to the demographic data, the survey included validated instruments such as: Twenty Statements Test (TST) (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002), Bogardus Social Distance Scale (1924), East Asian Acculturation Measure (Barry, 2001), adapted by Ia Shekrladze.

Interviews were conducted in Georgian, Russian, and Turkish (with interpreters where needed). In the U.S. (2012–2025), 81 in-depth interviews were conducted in Pennsylvania and Illinois, with participants aged 18–80 (52% women, 48% men), using a semi-structured guide. Depending on the period, interviews were either audio-recorded or documented via detailed notes, based on participant preference.

Quantitative data provided a general overview of acculturation strategies and self-identification patterns, while qualitative narratives added emotional depth and contextual nuance. This triangulated approach enabled the exploration of intergenerational and gendered patterns in identity reconstruction.

For example, older participants showed separatist tendencies (Barry, 2001) and emphasized preserving traditions, while younger respondents demonstrated more integrative and hybrid strategies, reflecting linguistic flexibility and openness to global social networks.

#### ***Analytical Framework***

Data were analyzed using a narrative-thematic strategy, combining Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis with Riessman's (2008) narrative structuring. The approach aimed to identify both key themes and underlying emotional/narrative patterns across social variables.

An inductive–deductive coding process was employed: initial codes were informed by theoretical categories (e.g., traumatic memory, hybridity, spatial symbolization), with space

for emergent themes from the narratives. In total, 27 codes were identified and grouped into five thematic clusters:

1. Traumatic memory narratives – representations of Stalin-era deportation and the Fergana conflict;
2. Intergenerational transmission – how trauma is passed on through family narratives, rituals, and symbolic practices;
3. Symbolic spatiality – Akhaltsikhe and surrounding areas as emotional homelands;
4. Hybrid adaptation strategies – cultural blending and social mobility across generations;
5. Transnational social capital – kinship and community networks in global contexts.

Verbatim transcription in Georgian preceded the coding process, conducted by two independent researchers. A parallel coding method yielded a 92% agreement rate, ensuring interpretive reliability. Source triangulation across generation, gender, and geography further enhanced analytical depth, enabling nuanced insights into how diverse social groups construct identity amid migration and cultural shifts.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

Thematic exploration was guided by five key questions:

How is trauma structured and transmitted generationally?

How does memory function in identity transfer?

How are symbolic spaces emotionally constructed?

How do adaptation strategies shift across generations and genders?

How do individuals relate to their community and the diasporic field?

This multi-layered analysis formed the empirical foundation for the Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI) model, which synthesizes spatial, generational, and emotional-symbolic dimensions of identity construction.

### ***Ethical Framework***

All procedures complied with the ethical standards of Tbilisi State University (Georgia) and Rutgers University (USA). An informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout, in line with institutional and international research ethics.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### **4.1. Historical Context and Foundations of Trauma**

#### ***4.1.1. The Historical Trajectory of Muslim Meskhetians and the Formation of Identity***

The collective history of Muslim Meskhetians represents a powerful narrative of forced displacement and identity transformation. In the early sixteenth century, when the region of Meskheta came under Ottoman control, a large portion of the population converted to Islam and developed a Turkic-speaking, regional identity (Baramidze 2011; Janiashvili 2006).

This period marked the onset of cultural hybridity, traces of which are still evident today in religious rituals, language, and family structures.

***The Soviet Period and the Politics of Identity.*** During the Soviet era, the ethnic classification of Muslim Meskhetians was strategically altered to align with political objectives. From the 1930s, they were officially designated as “Azeris,” a move designed to encourage cultural and linguistic assimilation (Sumbadze 2002). This policy deepened cultural instability and internal identity conflicts.

***The 1944 Deportation – The Core of Traumatic Memory.*** On November 15, 1944, under the Soviet government orders, approximately 92,000 Muslim Meskhetians and other Muslim groups were deported to Central Asia (Bugai 1994; Bugai & Mamaev 2009). This forced displacement became the central event in the community’s traumatic memory. The loss of ancestral homes and the memory of those who perished during the deportation were transmitted across generations as powerful emotional symbols.

***The Fergana Tragedy and Secondary Displacement.*** In 1989, ethnic conflict in the Fergana Valley forced Muslim Meskhetians residing in Uzbekistan to relocate once again, this time to Azerbaijan, Russia, and later the United States (Aydingun 2002; Trier & Khanzhin 2007). This second traumatic experience further entrenched traumatic memory and reinforced the construction of transterritorial identity.

***Migration to the United States and the Formation of Transnational Identity.*** Beginning in 2005, the United States accepted thousands of Muslim Meskhetians as refugees. In this new social and cultural environment, they continued to develop hybrid adaptation strategies and to build transnational social networks (Aydingun et al. 2006; Pirtskhalava & Surmanidze 2015). Clear generational distinctions emerged: the older generation endeavored to preserve traditional identity, while younger members formed hybrid identities.

***Symbolic Homeland and the Emotional Construction of Space.*** Although physical return to Meskheti remains unattainable for many families, the Akhaltsikhe Pashalik and associated ancestral locations have become symbolic homelands. These spaces anchor emotional and cultural self-awareness and constitute a vital element of the community’s traumatic memory (Nora 1989; Proshansky et al. 1983).

#### ***4.1.2. Changes in Designations and Identity Stigma as Components of Trauma***

The traumatic experience of Muslim Meskhetians extends beyond physical deportation and forced displacement. It also encompasses the stigma attached to their identity and the consequences of multiple changes in designations across different historical periods – each playing a significant role in shaping both public perception and self-awareness.

Historically, Muslim Meskhetians have been known by a variety of names, reflecting shifts in social perceptions and the political efforts of different regimes to reconstruct and control their identity. At various times, they were referred to as: “Georgians” – in the Cau-

casus province of the Russian Empire until 1917 and in the Georgian SSR after the revolution; “Muslim Georgians” – a religious minority within Christian Soviet Georgia; “Muslim Meskhetian Turks” – emphasizing regional and genealogical ties to the Ottoman past; “Meskhetians” – highlighting geographical identity; “Turks” – a general genealogical and religious identifier; “Azeris” – a Soviet administrative classification based on linguistic and religious similarities; “Meskhetian Turks” – a political term during Stalin’s era; “Akhalsikhe Turks” or “Ahıska Turks” – a designation adopted in the diaspora, particularly in the United States (Trier & Khanzhin 2007).

This variability in designations was not merely an administrative or ethnographic phenomenon; it was also an expression of symbolic violence. Over time, the community was compelled to accept externally imposed labels, leading to identity destabilization (Breakwell 1986) and the accompanying stigma.

According to the trauma theory (Caruth 1996; Alexander 2004), such changes in nomenclature are perceived within the group’s collective memory not simply as shifts in identity, but as its fragmentation and as symbols of continuous external control. These processes intensify the traumatic experience and facilitate its transmission across generations.

Ultimately, the term *Ahıska Turk* evolved into a strategic self-designation that, in the context of emigration, served both as a means of social recognition and a survival mechanism. Nonetheless, even this name reflects a compromise, embodying the community’s negotiation with stigma and its struggle against global social challenges.

#### **4.1.3. Georgian Identity, the Figures of Stalin and Beria in Traumatic Narratives, and Contemporary Stigma**

Between 1578 and 1883, parts of Meskheti and Javakheti, as well as Adjara, became part of the Ottoman Empire. As a result of colonization, segments of the population converted from Eastern Orthodoxy to Sunni Islam. This religious transformation coincided with linguistic divergence: while Adjarians retained the Georgian language, many Meskhetians adopted a Turkish (Anatolian) dialect (Baramidze, 2011; Janiashvili, 2006). This linguistic and cultural differentiation later became a significant source of stigma from Georgia’s Christian population.

Despite sharing the same faith, Adjarians preserved their Georgian language and cultural identity (Baramidze, 1998), while Muslim Meskhetians underwent a transformation driven by mass displacement and traumatic experiences (Trier, 2010). Adjarians themselves often highlight this distinction, frequently questioning the “Georgianness” of Muslim Meskhetians – a stigma particularly acute for those living in Georgia.

**Georgianness as a Dual Marker in Traumatic Narratives.** In narratives collected from Muslim Meskhetians across multiple countries, Georgianness holds a dual meaning. On the one hand, it is viewed as a source of historical origin and ancestral connection; on the other, it symbolizes the perceived responsibility for traumatic experiences and processes of identity exclusion historically faced by the group. This duality is especially evident in intergenerational narratives, which frequently include statements such as:

“We were Georgians, but the Georgians expelled us,” or  
“If we were truly Georgians, why were we deported?”

These expressions reflect an emotional structure within traumatic memory that blends the Soviet repressions personal (Stalin and Beria) and ethnonational personifications. In this framework, both the Georgian state and society simultaneously represent the homeland and sources of rejection and stigma.

***Stalin and Beria in Traumatic Perception.*** A prominent layer of collective memory among Muslim Meskhetians is the personification of bureaucratic repression in specific historical figures. Joseph Stalin and Lavrentiy Beria are seen not only as instruments of Soviet power but also as Georgian leaders who sanctioned the group's deportation. This discourse emerges strongly in intergenerational narratives and emotional recollections.

These figures play a dual role in group memory: As agents of Soviet state violence, as national traitors of Georgian origin who orchestrated ethnic cleansing.

This merging intensifies the traumatic experience. Deportation is perceived not merely as a Soviet political repression but as a betrayal experienced internally, where the national identity became an unexpected source of violent discourse.

One respondent noted:

“They deported us, and later the Georgians refused to take us back.” (*Male, age 71, interview, 2025*)

This narrative illustrates an emotional strategy developed by the group to process traumatic experience and construct social identity. Stigma and historical dispossession have been transformed into a symbolic system that today forms a key element of the Muslim Meskhetians' transterritorial traumatic identity.

***Personified Trauma and the Narrative of National Betrayal.*** These elements underscore that the collective memory of Muslim Meskhetians is not merely a chronicle of the past events. Instead, it is an emotional and symbolic construction intertwining historical trauma, a crisis of national self-awareness, and the younger generations' reinterpretations of identity. In Stalin and Beria, the group sees both institutional sources of violence and familiar national betrayers, exacerbating feelings of exclusion from the Georgian state and the ongoing struggle for social recognition in transnational spaces.

***Stigmatizing Policies and Social Stereotypes in Georgia.*** Following deportation and into the post-Soviet period, the Georgian state failed to ensure genuine and inclusive reintegration for Muslim Meskhetians. This failure manifested on legal, social, and cultural levels.

Contemporary stigma continues to affect Muslim Meskhetians, especially within discourses on national belonging and cultural authenticity. The historical layering of religious, linguistic, and political otherness has contributed to persistent social boundaries between Muslim Meskhetians and the broader Georgian society. The following table summarizes key differences in identity trajectories between the Adjarians and Muslim Meskhetians, as contextualized in the preceding discussion



**Table 1. Identity Trajectories of Muslim Meskhetians and Adjarians**

Aspect	Adjarians	Muslim Meskhetians
Religion	Islam (Sunni)	Islam (Sunni)
Language	Retained the Georgian language	Language loss and transition to Turkish
Cultural Identity	Preservation of Georgian cultural codes	Transformation into a Turkish self-perception
Mobility	Local integration	Mass deportation and transterritorial dispersion

**Delayed Repatriation Process:** The Georgian Parliament passed the Law on Repatriation only in 2007 – almost two decades too late. Its implementation was further hindered by bureaucratic barriers, with actual repatriation efforts commencing only in 2012.

**Stigma and Social Marginalization:** Lingering linguistic, religious, and ethnic stereotypes within Georgian society continue to obstruct Muslim Meskhetians' integration. They are frequently perceived as cultural and ethnic "others."

**Narratives of Ethnic Incompatibility:** Muslim Meskhetians are often viewed not as "real Georgians" but rather as "Turks" or a "demographic threat" to Georgian identity and national unity. This narrative deepens the group's traumatic feelings and fosters emotional distance from both the state and the broader society.

### ***The Impact of Stigma on Transnational Self-Positioning***

The stigmatizing narratives present in Georgian state structures and society not only reinforce the sense of historical trauma, but also influence the transnational self-positioning of Muslim Meskhetians. Stigma, as a socio-emotional barrier, has prompted group members to develop new identity strategies, including:

- **Strengthening transnational social networks** that provide emotional and practical support to members across different countries;
- **Developing hybrid adaptation models** to enable successful integration into new cultural environments;
- **Constructing a symbolic homeland** that links historical roots with present-day experiences.

Within these processes, the trauma narrative and stigma function simultaneously as motivators for resistance and as factors shaping a flexible, transterritorial model of identity.

**Trauma as Processed Memory.** The experience of deportation and displacement, within the collective memory of Muslim Meskhetians, has evolved into more than a recollection of historical events. It has become an emotional and symbolic axis – a foundational element that shapes group self-awareness and informs social practices.

This traumatic memory has been transformed into several distinct components: An emotional core of collective memory, which unites generations around a shared historical experience.

In addition, Hirsch's (2012) framework offers a valuable perspective on postmemory practices – the mechanisms through which trauma is transmitted across generations, often to those who did not experience the events directly. While Caruth (1996) conceives of trauma as a temporal rupture, one that resists straightforward articulation in language, Hirsch frames it as a narrative form governed by postmemory, culturally processed and shared by descendants.

Hirsch's concept of postmemory (2012) is particularly relevant to the second generation – those who did not personally endure historical trauma but have nonetheless inherited its emotional charge, silences, and anxieties. For this generation, the transmission of trauma often occurs through fragmented and linguistically incomplete forms. Rather than articulated stories, it is conveyed through emotional cues, gestures, silences, and rituals. These forms of transmission contribute to the ambivalent and conflictual nature of identity – a state of oscillation between memory and forgetting, belonging and estrangement.

***The foundation of transnational identity***, integrating diverse cultural spaces and emotional connections.

*Synthesis of the Components of Traumatic Identity.* The traumatic identity of Muslim Meskhetians is closely linked to the following components:

- Emotional ties to historical roots.
- Religious and cultural transformations fostering hybrid identity strategies.
- Traumatic memory and transnational adaptation as survival mechanisms.
- Community solidarity and internal divisions (segregation), outcomes of traumatic experiences and social strategies.
- Personified symbols of Stalin and Beria as concentrated markers of violent history.
- Stigmatizing policies and official neglect by the Georgian state.
- Broader social exclusion as a continuation of historical marginalization.

All these factors converge within a flexible and dynamic structure of **Transterritorial Traumatic Identity (TTI)**, which continues to shape the social and cultural self-awareness of Muslim Meskhetians.

## **4.2 Intergenerational Memory Transmission and Generational Differences**

### **4.2.1 Postmemory and the Transmission of Trauma**

The traumatic experience of Muslim Meskhetians is not simply passed down from generation to generation as factual history. Instead, this knowledge is transformed into emotional and symbolic constructs, aligning with Marianne Hirsch's (2012) theory of *postmemory*. According to this concept, the second and third generations absorb traumatic experiences that they did not personally endure, but have inherited through emotional and cultural channels from older generations.

***Primary channels of trauma transmission include:***

1. ***Family narratives and oral histories.*** Stories of deportation and displacement circulate within families and community networks. Elders recount their experiences of

harmonious life in Georgia, the deportation, and subsequent emigration to their children and grandchildren. These narratives create networks of traumatic memory and serve as crucial resources for self-identification among younger members who did not personally witness the historical trauma.

*“My grandfather always told us how they took us away and how people died along the way. No one would have allowed us to return – it was under the commandant’s rule – but we always knew where we came from.”* (Interview, woman, 42, 2025)

2. **Rituals and religious practices.** Religious celebrations, prayers, and family gatherings function as emotional bridges between the past and present. These rituals help maintain cultural memory, foster community solidarity, and serve as collective strategies for processing traumatic memory.
3. **Language and cultural codes.** The preservation of the Turkish language and elements of Ottoman and Georgian cultures represents not only a means of communication but also a memory strategy that facilitates the transmission of trauma (Fishman, 1991).
4. **Construction of a symbolic homeland.** Akhaltsikhe and its surrounding areas have become imagined emotional spaces central to generational identity (Nora, 1989; Proshansky et al., 1983). According to Proshansky et al. (1983), space is not merely a geographic category – it acquires emotional and symbolic meanings.

*“My grandfather knew every village where our ancestors had lived. I’ve never been there myself, but I know that’s where I’m from.”* (Interview, man, 25, 2025)

5. **Shifts in generational perspectives.** The traumatic events of 1944 deportation and the 1989 Fergana crisis are transmitted not as static knowledge but as a living emotional system. This memory transforms into social narratives that define group identity and adaptation strategies.

As Caruth (1996) and Hirsch (2012) emphasize, trauma is transformed into social practice through postmemory. In the case of Muslim Meskhetians, the pain of deportation and migration retains a powerful emotional weight and is transmitted across generations through key mechanisms of trauma transmission.

#### 4.2.2 Generationally Distinct Strategies

Distinct approaches to traumatic memory and identity formation are evident across generations. Older generations emphasize the desire to return to the lost homeland and to restore collective dignity. Younger generations, however, view their identities as hybrid, adapting to new social and cultural environments while maintaining emotional ties to their ancestors’ traumatic experiences.

*“I was born in Uzbekistan, grew up in Russia, and now I’m in America. They told me I’m Georgian, but my passport says Turk. I’m trying to understand who I am.”* (Interview, man, 29, 2025)

According to Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity, such identity negotiation creates a "third space" where different cultural practices intersect, producing new meanings.

#### **4.2.3 Generational Dissonance and Dialogue**

Generational differences sometimes lead to *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, 1957), especially when younger generations must reconcile the lost geographic homeland with their new social realities. Despite these differences, an open dialogue exists between generations, facilitating the maintenance of collective memory and the contemporary reinterpretation of traumatic experiences.

*"I've never seen the villages where we came from, but I always knew our family was from there – and that's enough for me."* (Interview, woman, 24, 2025)

**Intergenerational memory transmission** among Muslim Meskhetians emerges as a complex process: it is not merely the transfer of factual knowledge about the past but an emotional, symbolic, and cultural construction that comes alive in daily practices, language, and family histories. Generational differences reflect diverse adaptation strategies – elders emphasize the preservation of traditional values, while younger individuals focus on hybrid identities and adjusting to new environments. Despite these contrasts, generational dialogue ensures the continuity of traumatic memory and its dynamic evolution across transnational spaces.

#### **4.3 Mobility and Multi-Local (Multi-Spatial) Self-Identification**

The identity of Muslim Meskhetians has historically been linked to movement and mobility, yet the forced deportation orchestrated by the Soviet Union transformed this mobility into a trans-territorial and emotional identity system.

In contemporary contexts, their identity can no longer be rooted in a single geographic space. Instead, it emerges across multiple locations and within networks of emotional ties. As a result of the deportation, the collective self-awareness of Muslim Meskhetians has become anchored in dispersed spaces and built upon emotional and symbolic connections rather than fixed physical locations.

##### **Key phases of displacement include:**

*First wave (1944)* – Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan);

*Second wave (1989–1991)* – Russia (particularly the Krasnodar region) and Azerbaijan;

*Third wave (2005–present)* – the United States.

Today, Muslim Meskhetians reside across various regions of Georgia, post-Soviet republics, Turkey, and the United States. Their identities have developed within multi-local and transnational contexts, where emotional bonds often surpass the importance of specific physical spaces.

*"My roots come from Georgia, but life has taken me through many countries. Who am I? Our people are everywhere now and belong fully to none."* (Man, 47, interview, 2025).

### 4.3.1 Trauma and Postmemory

The Stalin-era deportation and the 1989 Fergana conflict represent not only individual traumatic experiences, but also key foundations of intergenerational memory and cultural transmission within the Muslim Meskhetian collective memory.

Hirsch (2012) and Alexander (2004) emphasize that traumatic experiences are transformed through *postmemory* – new generations perceive these not solely as historical facts but as emotional and symbolic realities that play crucial roles in shaping their identities.

Within the Muslim Meskhetian community, this process fosters group identity consolidation and maintains social solidarity across transnational and multi-local contexts. Trauma does not remain a static recollection; it passes between generations and is reconstituted in new social spaces, enriched with emotional and cultural significance.

### 4.3.2 Cultural Resistance and Adaptation

In parallel with their traumatic history, Muslim Meskhetians have successfully developed flexible models of cultural resistance and adaptation that both preserve collective identity and enable integration into new socio-cultural environments.

#### **Key strategies include:**

**Linguistic approaches** – Nearly all families strive to preserve the Turkish language at home as a form of historical memory and resistance. Others acquire Georgian, English, or the dominant languages of their new residences.

**Religious practice** – Islamic rituals have historically served as forms of resistance and identity preservation amid Soviet repression and stigmatization. In the current context, where Muslim Meskhetians enjoy greater religious freedom, these practices have evolved into open and reinforced expressions of cultural distinctiveness, strengthening both faith and social solidarity.

**Social networks** – Community and family connections have become robust systems of social support that provide both emotional and practical assistance in transnational contexts. These networks extend beyond local spaces and are reinforced trans-territorially, particularly through marriage chains. Muslim Meskhetian families, adhering to cultural and social norms, rarely marry outside the community, strengthening internal networks and maintaining group solidarity.

Marriage ties function as structural units within social networks, stretching across geographic spaces – from Kazakhstan to the United States, Kyrgyzstan to Azerbaijan, Turkey to Western Europe, and beyond. These connections often regulate not only family relationships but also determine social support, mobility opportunities, and identity maintenance strategies. In practice, these networks “know no borders” and operate as mechanisms for emotional, economic, and identity transmission across transnational realms.

*“My mother’s cousin came from Kazakhstan and married my brother. I am in America now, and I also have relatives from our community here. We always find each other because we know we can only rely on ourselves.”*(Woman, 30, interview, 2025)

**Cultural resistance and adaptation** within Muslim Meskhetian identity do not function as opposing forces but as interrelated processes. Together, they create a hybrid identity space that ensures both the preservation of cultural heritage and adaptation to the demands of new social environments.

Despite social and political discrimination, the group has preserved a heritage of language, religious rituals, and community solidarity. Scott (1990) and Fishman (1991) note that marginalized groups under social pressure develop unique forms of resistance. In such strategies, maintaining linguistic and cultural traditions serves not only as a defensive mechanism but also as an active tool for cultural resistance, survival, and the transmission of self-identity. In the Muslim Meskhetian case, these forms of resistance – alongside hybrid strategies – ensure the preservation of cultural distinctiveness and adaptation within evolving transnational environments.

#### **4.3.3 Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity as a Flexible System**

All the components discussed above – border crossing, trauma, cultural resistance, hybridity, and the construction of symbolic homelands – collectively shape the flexible and multi-layered system of **Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI)**.

**This identity is characterized by:**

- The preservation of emotional layers of historical trauma;
- The development of hybrid adaptation models;
- The use of transnational connections as sources of social and emotional capital;
- The construction of symbolic and emotional links to the lost physical locations.

Ultimately, trans-territorial traumatic identity becomes not only a survival strategy, but also a form of social innovation that integrates the past and present across multiple geographic and emotional spaces (Pirtskhalava, 2014; 2016; 2018; Pirtskhalava & Burova, 2018; Pirtskhalava et al., 2023).

#### **4.4. Gender Differences in Memory Practices and Identity Formation**

The analysis of the collected interviews revealed that the transmission of traumatic memory, participation in rituals, and perceptions of symbolic space are gender-differentiated practices, reflected both in the content and in the narrative style.

In women's narratives, particular emphasis is placed on family histories and engagement in religious practices. Women, often positioned as custodians of memory within the family, tend to recount traumatic experiences through emotionally charged, everyday, and domestic contexts:

*"My grandmother often told us how her father was taken away in the middle of the night... As a child, I didn't understand why she cried during prayers."* (Woman, 38, interview, 2023)

*"Every holiday was special in our home – it wasn't just religious, it was about remembering my grandfather's homeland... Akhaltsikhe was never just a city for us."* (Woman, 41, interview, 2025)

In contrast, men's narratives more frequently frame trauma within political and historical contexts. Their accounts often express enduring feelings of exclusion, failed return, and a desire for the restoration of dignity:

*"My grandfather died dreaming of returning to Akhaltsikhe, but he never made it. I'll never forgive the Georgian government – or history – for that."* (Man, 54, interview, 2021)

*"I don't expect anything anymore. My childhood was left in Fergana. Now I live in the U.S., but people still see me as Turkish. Women can adapt a little differently."* (Man, 35, interview, 2023)

Gender differences also emerge in forms of ritual participation and emotional expression. Women are actively involved in religious ceremonies and family gatherings – often interpreted as practices of memory preservation. In the case of men, silence, internalized tension, and a focus on political narratives indicate a different structuring of emotional memory.

Based on these divergent narrative strategies, the study demonstrates that traumatic memory and identity construction are gender-specific processes, shaped by cultural roles and social expectations. Women tend to produce emotionally textured, intimate, and familial narratives, while men more commonly frame trauma as a collective historical injustice and articulate a demand for political recognition.

These gendered narrative distinctions not only influence how trauma is transmitted, but also give rise to distinct architectures of identity within the contexts of migration, diaspora, and transnational life.

### **Differentiation of Generational Strategies and the Resilience of Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity.**

**The differences between generations clearly demonstrate that the processes of traumatic memory and identity formation among Muslim Meskhetians are dynamic and evolve over time. The older generation strives to preserve a traditional identity and transmit traumatic memory intact, while middle and younger generations adapt these experiences in response to new social and cultural realities. These strategies are grounded both in emotional values and practical necessities, highlighting the flexibility of the Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI) model.**

In line with Bhabha's (1994) *theory of the "third space,"* these differences are not inherently conflictual or contradictory. Rather, they ensure the resilience of identity and enhance adaptive capacities. Generational diversity does not fragment the collective identity but reinforces its dynamism and responsiveness to change.

The tables presented below detail the varying strategies employed by different generations and confirm that the synthesis of traumatic memory and hybrid adaptation forms the central structural axis of **Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI)**.

**Table 2. Comparison of Generational Strategies among Muslim Meskhetians**

Aspect	Older Generation	Younger Generation
<b>Perception of Traumatic Memory</b>	Based on direct experience; personal and collective pain	Transmitted narratives and symbolic memory
<b>Identity Strategy</b>	Preservation of traditional identity	Formation of hybrid identities
<b>Language and Culture</b>	Acknowledgment of Georgian origins; preservation of Turkish language and Islamic traditions	Multilingual communication; cultural synthesis
<b>Perception of Homeland</b>	Symbolic homeland – Akhaltsikhe	Symbolic and transnational spaces
<b>Adaptation Strategies</b>	Maintenance of social cohesion and ritual practices	Interaction with global and local cultures

Intergenerational differences among Muslim Meskhetians demonstrate that the transmission of traumatic memory and the formation of identity constitute a dynamic and flexible process. The older generation continues to transmit traditional identity and traumatic memory, while the younger generation adapts this experience to new social and cultural contexts.

**Table 3. Generational Differences in Strategies Among Muslim Meskhetians**

Generation	Perception of Trauma	Identity Strategy	Cultural Adaptation
<b>Older Generation</b> (born 1940–1970)	Strong emotional attachment to the memory of the 1944 deportation	Preservation of traditional identity; hope for symbolic homeland restoration	Maximum retention of native language and religious rituals
<b>Middle Generation</b> (1970–2000)	Incorporation of trauma into daily narratives; transmission of traumatic memory to children	Mixed strategies – blending traditional and new identities	Partial adaptation: integrating cultural standards into daily practices
<b>Younger Generation</b> (born after 2000)	Indirect knowledge of trauma; emotional yet distanced relationship	Hybrid identity; integration into new environments while maintaining an emotional connection to the symbolic homeland	Linguistic and cultural hybridity; formation of a global identity

This process clearly confirms the central principle of the Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI) model – the synthesis of historical trauma and hybrid adaptation. Generational strategies integrate emotional values inherited from the past with the ability to respond to the challenges of new environments, ensuring the resilience of group identity in conditions of global mobility.



## 5. Discussion

### Alignment of Findings with Theoretical Frameworks

The findings confirm that the traumatic memory and identity transformation of Muslim Meskhetians correspond closely with the theories of traumatic memory (Alexander, 2004; Hirsch, 2012) and collective trauma (Eyerman, 2001). Both individual and intergenerational experiences have been transformed into public narratives, which have become core components of identity construction. Mechanisms of postmemory were clearly observed in family histories, rituals, language, and symbolic practices, fully supporting the theoretical models proposed by Hirsch (2012) and Eyerman (2001).

### Hybridity and Adaptation Strategies

Bhabha's (1994) theory of the "third space" and Gamsakhurdia's (2019) concept of proculturation were clearly reflected in the hybrid adaptation strategies of Muslim Meskhetians. Younger generations are forming identity models that combine the emotional legacy of historical trauma with the need to adapt to modern cultural realities. These strategies have enabled the recontextualization of traumatic experiences and the establishment of social agency both in Georgia and in global transnational spaces.

### Transnationalism and Emotional Spaces

Following the theories of transnationalism by Vertovec (2009) and Levitt & Glick Schiller (2004), Muslim Meskhetians have developed transnational social networks that serve not only as sources of economic capital, but also as emotional and social capital. Despite geographic dispersion, their identity has not fragmented; rather, it has been reinforced through the construction of symbolic places (Nora, 1989; Proshansky et al., 1983). The Akhaltsikhe Pashalik and other symbolic locations remain the emotional core of identity.

### Comparative Perspectives with Other Groups

The study findings align with the experiences of other ethnic and religious groups that have navigated traumatic memory and hybrid identity adaptation, including:

**Roma (Hancock, 2002)** – a historically persecuted group that has maintained collective trauma narratives and the concept of an imagined "Romanistan." **TTI Parallel:** Symbolic homeland and intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory.

**Palestinian Refugees (Sayigh, 2007)** – have preserved the symbolic idea of homeland and national identity through generational memory since the Nakba. **TTI Parallel:** Social narrative of trauma and transnational self-identification.

**Bosnian Muslims (Eastmond, 2006)** – developed hybrid identities in Western diasporas following the trauma of Srebrenica. **TTI Parallel:** Hybrid adaptation strategies and emotional spaces.

***Siddi in India (Gupta, 2009)*** – an African-origin group that maintained cultural elements despite centuries of marginalization. ***TTI Parallel:*** Cultural resistance and symbolic self-assertion.

***Haredi Jews (Heilman, 1994)*** – formed survival strategies based on traumatic memories, social isolation, and transnational solidarity networks following the Holocaust and other persecutions. ***TTI Parallel:*** Traumatic memory and transnational solidarity networks.

### ***Integration with Previous Research***

This study builds upon empirical data accumulated by the author over many years and themes addressed in earlier publications:

**Changes in Marriage and Family Structures** – the effects of migration and new social environments on family roles and marriage traditions (Pirtskhalava, 2014, 2015);

**Identity Reconstruction in New Environments** – the adaptation and formation of hybrid identities among migrants (Pirtskhalava, 2016, 2018);

**Social and Spatial Identity in Georgia** – the importance of emotional and symbolic spaces in shaping cultural self-awareness (Pirtskhalava & Burova, 2018);

**Acculturation Strategies** – diverse models of adaptation in transnational settings (Pirtskhalava & Chechelashvili, 2014; Pirtskhalava & Gvetadze, 2018);

**Gender Changes and Role Transformations** – the impact of traumatic experiences on family and social roles (Pirtskhalava & Surmanidze, 2015; Pirtskhalava & Shanava, 2019).

The present study enabled the integration of these data, solidifying the theoretical model of Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI) as both empirically validated and analytically robust.

### **Expansion of the New Theoretical Model**

The study has demonstrated that trauma, cultural resistance, and hybrid adaptation are not isolated processes. On the contrary, they are interconnected and collectively form the flexible and dynamic model of **Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI)**.

The TTI model incorporates the following core components: The emotional and symbolic layers of traumatic memory; Hybrid adaptation strategies and mechanisms for managing cognitive dissonance; Transnational social and emotional capital; Multilocal spaces and emotional connections; Generationally differentiated adaptive practices.

The TTI model transcends the specific experience of Muslim Meskhetians and provides a broader theoretical framework applicable to understanding the identities of other forcibly displaced and trauma-affected groups.

### **Conclusion**

The case of the Muslim Meskhetians clearly illustrates that traumatic identity is not merely an archived form of past suffering. Rather, it is a living and dynamic process that

continues to shape the group's contemporary social and cultural self-awareness strategies. Their history – spanning from the Ottoman period, through Soviet deportation, to modern transnational experiences – has forged a **Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI)** based on the transmission of traumatic memory, hybrid adaptation, and emotional symbolism.

**Key findings:**

Traumatic memory is transformed into a social narrative through intergenerational transmission, becoming a central construct of collective identity.

Changes in nomenclature and stigma functioned not only as mechanisms of political classification but also as significant components of social trauma, leading to identity destabilization and the evolution of hybrid strategies.

Generational differences reflect diverse models of hybridity and adaptation: the older generation maintains traditional memories and connections, while younger cohorts reconstruct their place within transnational and culturally hybrid spaces.

The symbolic homeland and emotional spaces provide a durable foundation for the sense of belonging, especially when physical return to historical territories is practically impossible.

Transnational social capital and cultural resistance, combined with hybrid adaptation strategies, generate a flexible identity that reconciles the legacy of historical trauma with the challenges of global migration.

**Theoretical Contribution:** The study develops and consolidates the **Trans-Territorial Traumatic Identity (TTI)** model, integrating trauma theory with the paradigms of hybridity and transnationalism. This theoretical framework offers a broad analytical capacity for examining groups shaped by the complex processes of historical trauma and global displacement.

**Practical Relevance:** Understanding the TTI model is valuable for both academic research and policy development. It assists policymakers in better comprehending the social, cultural, and psychological needs of displaced and diasporic groups, thus informing the design of effective support mechanisms.

The traumatic narrative and trans-territorial identity of Muslim Meskhetians clearly demonstrate how historical suffering can be transformed into innovative, flexible, and resilient identity strategies within the contemporary global space.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The study's limitations include the subjectivity inherent to the narrative method, as well as constraints in geographic and generational representation. Future research should explore gender roles, the influence of transnational networks and digital memory, and conduct comparative analyses applying the TTI model to other communities (e.g., Yazidis, Bosniaks, and others).

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