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Seasonal migration and symbolic power: the case of Muslim Meskhetians from Nasakirali

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The repatriation and inclusion of Muslim Meskhetians, forcefully displaced by the Soviet government from Georgia to Central Asia during the 1940s, is still ongoing. In 1977, some Meskhetian families settled in the village of Nasakirali in western Georgia. The Soviet Georgian government built houses for the repatriates in a separate district, referred to as the “Island.” The location acquired a symbolic meaning for Meskhetians. After 40 years of repatriation, Meskhetians still remain “islanders:” isolated from the majority population, speaking a different language, practicing a different religion, and facing different employment opportunities. This study explores the coping mechanisms used by Muslim Meskhetians to sustain themselves and their families and improve their social conditions in a strictly Christian post-socialist country where “Islam is taken as a historical other.” The study primarily asks how employment/seasonal migration in Turkey changed the lives of Meskhetians by adapting their social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital and became the only viable solution for overcoming social marginalization. The study explores how informality allows social mobility, changes gender attitudes, and helps “islanders” reach the “mainland” by becoming “*Halal*” – truthful and reliable. The study applies Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of “capital” and “symbolic power” for understanding Meskhetians’ informal economic practices.

Keywords: seasonal migration; informal work; capital; Meskhetians; Nasakirali

Introduction

The repatriation and integration of Muslim Meskhetians forcefully deported to Central Asia by the Soviet regime in 1944 is a historic development that still poses problems for Georgia. In 1999, the country took on the obligation from the Council of Europe to see to the return of deported Meskhetians and their descendants. The government did not pass a law on repatriation until 2007, and even then it included neither sufficient social aid programs nor a viable strategy for the adaption and inclusion of returnees to their new homes and communities.¹

Waves of self-repatriation² began before the law on repatriation was implemented. Most of the returnees came from Azerbaijan, where Meskhetians coming back from Central Asia had settled after 1974, when the Soviet government allowed deported Meskhetians to move anywhere except to Georgia (Trier, Tarkhan-Mouravi, and Kilimnik 2011, 23). In the 1970s and 1980s, small groups of Meskhetians managed to return to Georgia, but their historical land of Meskhethi remained off-limits to them (Darchiashvili 2015, 47).

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In 1977, nine Meskhetian families settled in Nasakirali, a village in western Georgia's Guria region (Trier, Tarkhan-Mouravi, and Kilimnik 2011, 26). Following their return, the Soviet Georgian government built houses for them in a separate district called, for reasons that are not clear, the "Island:" perhaps because the land is near a swamp, or because it was the last settlement in the village surrounded by forest, or because decades ago "strangers" settled there. The area took on a symbolic meaning for Meskhetians.

With the Soviet Union crumbling, a new, nationalist government came to power in Georgia. Its representatives had publicly supported Muslim Meskhetians in the 1970s as a point of criticism of the Soviet government, but by the 1980s, it switched to attacking minorities living in the republic (Darchiashvili 2015, 47; Jones 2013, 79). Upon being elected president in 1991, Zviad Gamsakhurdia declared in one of his meetings that "the power is on our side and we will revenge the traitors and all evil enemies; non-Georgians settled here will be deported."³ The new political order and atmosphere posed a challenge to Georgia's vulnerable and marginalized populations, including the Meskhetians, whose otherness and alienation from the majority population was manifested not only by religion but also by language. Given these pressures, many "non-Georgian" families, including Meskhetians, chose to leave.

In 2011, an interagency governmental committee was established⁴ to develop social aid programs and support the repatriation of those deported in the 1940s. Since then, the committee's aim has been to coordinate institutions working on repatriation issues and support the implementation of initiatives and recommendations. But Georgia's ombudsman has remained critical, saying, "We consider that the committee should make more intensive and efficient effort for solving the problems facing repatriated population."⁵ Even today, many Georgians oppose repatriating a vast number of non-Orthodox Christians who have lived in exile for years. Thus, the ombudsman's office has provided the government with recommendations for raising awareness among both returnees and host communities⁶ in order to improve the social inclusion process for Meskhetians.

After 40 years of ongoing repatriation, Meskhetians remain "islanders:" isolated from the majority population, speaking a different language, practicing a different religion, and facing different employment opportunities. Most Meskhetian men from Nasakirali work seasonally and informally on tea plantations in Turkey.

This study explores the coping mechanisms used by Muslim Meskhetians to sustain themselves and their families and improve their social conditions in a strictly Christian post-socialist country where "Islam is taken as a historical other."⁷ The study primarily asks how informal work in Turkey changed the lives of Meskhetians by using and enhancing their social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital and became the only viable solution for overcoming social marginalization. The study explores how informality allows social mobility, changes gender attitudes, and helps "islanders" reach the "mainland."

First, I explore the history of Meskhetians' involvement in informal work, demonstrating how seasonal migration helps them accrue various forms of capital and symbolic power. I elaborate how capital is converted from one form to another and finally contributes to Meskhetians' upward social mobility. Second, I look at how border regulations affect Meskhetians' working habits. Third, I discuss cases of women's labor migration as a step toward emancipation and empowerment. Fourth, I consider the concept of *halal* as a symbolic means of overcoming marginalization. Finally, this study discusses the role of gained capital in Meskhetians' social and political attachment to the village and host community.

Methodology

The paper is based on an ethnographic study of Muslim Meskhetians living in the village of Nasakirali. The village has a current population of 3159 people (730 households), of whom 2750 are Muslim Adjarian,⁸ 180 are Orthodox Christians, 130 are Muslim Meskhetians, and the rest are ethnic Armenians, Russians, and Yezidis.⁹ I used in-depth interviews, group discussions, and participant observation as methodological tools for studying the target group. Research was carried out in 2015 and 2016 and is still ongoing. It included visits to Nasakirali to carry out interviews and observe the practices, economic conditions, and perspectives of Meskhetians. Furthermore, in August 2016, I visited a summer school attended by young Meskhetians from Nasakirali, where we discussed their plans for employment. In September 2016, I visited Nasakirali again as an invitee to the Meskhetians' Kurban Bayram celebration, during which I spoke with Meskhetian men having returned from seasonal work in Turkey. Some of the most enriching discussions with this study's informants came during mealtimes or drinking tea and while watching television, looking through old photographs, and taking walks. During the fieldwork, I also met with non-Meskhetian residents of Nasakirali, Muslim Adjarian eco-migrants, and representatives of the Christian population. With these non-Meskhetian residents, I discussed their employment perspectives and attitudes toward Meskhetians. I interviewed 22 Meskhetians (15 men and seven women) and eight non-Meskhetians from the village. I also spoke with the head of the Nasakirali self-government and an observer of the Nasakirali intermediary elections. I focused on gaining information from Meskhetians for whom circular migration, in major cases, is the main source of employment. I selected them according to their involvement in seasonal migration or informal work in Turkey. Desk research was also employed for this study, focusing on the literature regarding informal economies.

Framing economic activities

The seasonal work the Meskhetians perform in Turkey is not registered or based on formal contracts but is agreed upon verbally by employers and employees.¹⁰ Informal work is "paid work that is not declared to the state for tax, social security, and labor force purposes" (Williams et al. 2012, 114); however, in all other respects it is legal. The literature on informal economies has rapidly expanded in recent years. In a major ethnographic study in Ghana during the 1970s, anthropologist Keith Hart differentiated between formal (the private and public sectors, as well as state services) and informal sources of income, and divided the informal economy into legal (farming, baking, trading, and photography, among others) and illegal (dealing, bribery, and theft) practices (Hart 1973, 69). If the economic activity involves trading illegal goods, it becomes a case not of the informal but of the criminal economy (Williams and Horodnic 2015, 159).

The post-Soviet space is rich in informal economic practices. However, informality was resilient and ubiquitous during the Soviet period, as well (Knudsen 2015, 72). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many people lost their jobs or received diminished salaries, went unpaid, or lost money in financial crises. Eventually, more people took to working informally (baking, cooking, performing household activities, driving taxis, farming, building, tutoring, etc.) to earn money in parallel to their official employment or in the absence of any official employment at all. This process of economic marginalization took place throughout the post-Soviet and post-Communist space. Survey data collected in Ukraine and Russia over 2005–2006 found that 64% of the population considered informal economic practices "important" or "very important" for household income during the transition period (Round and Williams 2010, 189). In 1994–1995, downward social mobility was a

serious phenomenon in Georgia – the Soviet professional “middle classes” such as artists, doctors, and scholars became involved in the “shadow economy;” young and talented students lost interest in academia (Jones 2013, 143). In a 1996–1997 World Value Survey, 90% of respondents in Georgia reported relying on relatives for economic support (Aliyev 2015b, 56). The same survey found that 96.5% of Georgians believed they lived in worse poverty than they did 10 years earlier. During the transition to a market economy, 50% of the Georgian population relied on informal work as their main source of sustenance (Bemabe 2005, 13). Some literature has shown that only those marginalized from the official economy (unemployed groups, women, etc.) were willing to participate in informal work; thus, engagement in informal economic activities acted as a marker of further marginalization (Williams and Horodnic 2015, 159–160). However, the “marginalization thesis” has been contested with the argument that “necessity is not the only factor driving populations to engage in undeclared work” (Williams and Horodnic 2015, 160). Several studies have even shown that in more affluent societies people are more likely to participate in informality (Williams and Horodnic 2015, 160).

Scholars have argued that during this period, informal networks, including informal economic practices, both supported human security (private safety nets, supporting family, and kinship structures, assisting in finding jobs) and challenged the effective post-socialist transition process by maintaining elitist, exclusionist, and homogeneous structures (Aliyev 2015a, 48). In post-Rose Revolution¹¹ Georgia, tax and banking reform and state property privatization decreased informality within institutions, but individuals and social groups continued to rely on informal economic practices (Aliyev 2015b, 56–59). Although laws, regulations, and institutions were established to develop more transparent and formal economies, informality remains one of the world’s most important social, economic, and cultural phenomena (Morris and Polese 2015, 1).

As Danielsson (2015) puts it, informality has become a “commonsensical social practice;” it is not disputed but is rather taken for granted. In the example of Kosovo, she observes that informality nurtures informality – some agents become engaged in it following the activities of others, who gain higher status in response. By using Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic power,” she problematizes the understanding of informality as merely a coping mechanism and source of welfare, viewing it as involving hierarchization, deepening, and reproducing socioeconomic divisions.

For understanding the meaning of informal seasonal migration in the lives of Meskhetians, I use Bourdieu’s concepts of “capital” as well as “symbolic power.” A Bourdieusian framework enables me to comprehend Meskhetians’ preference for circular migration over other employment opportunities. Bourdieu’s concept of capital allows me to relate Meskhetians’ informal economic practices to their upward social mobility as a symbolic and material means of overcoming marginality. By the concept of symbolic power, I elaborate on circular migration as the largely unquestioned dominant economic strategy. For Bourdieu, capital can be economic (money), cultural (language, education, and knowledge), and social (networks and contacts), and one form of capital can be convertible into another (1986). When socially recognized, capital becomes symbolic. Gained capital(s) can redefine the position of the agent in the field (1986). In other words, the sum of capital determines the agent’s social status and position. The mechanisms that produce notions of commonsense or consensus regarding the social world are what Bourdieu calls symbolic power (1989, 20). In his words, symbolic power is the power of “world-making,” producing and imposing a legitimate vision of the social world (1989, 22). Symbolic power is “making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world ... [an] almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what

is obtained through force (whether physical or economic)” (1991, 170). Symbolic power also affects the relationships between those who exercise it and those who submit to it, expressed as the complicity of dominating and dominated agents (1991, 170). To change the world or resist domination, one must change the current dynamics of world-making, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced (1989, 23).

The logic of seasonal migration to Turkey

I joined Sofia’s family on a visit to their relatives living nearby for a Kurban Bayram celebration in September 2016. As we were driving through Nasakirali from the “Island” to the first district¹² (a roughly 15-minute drive), we encountered the ruins of a building. Sofia’s father, Mikheil, told me they were of a Soviet state-run farm and were the remains of the Nasakirali tea processing plant, where repatriated Meskhetians, along with other villagers, worked and earned enough to support their families. When the plant was closed in 1989, villagers lost not only their jobs but also the “acquaintance networks” they relied on to overcome local problems (Annist 2015, 96). Zoya, Sofia’s mother, told me she also worked in the plant, recalling how they worked for long hours, leaving for work early in the morning and coming home late in the evening.¹³ The surrounding fields contained a tea plantation, which eventually were destroyed and became a cattle pasture. Sofia’s parents also showed me the cafeteria across from the processing plant where workers took their lunch breaks. Only the shell of the building remained. Villagers remember the period right after the plant’s closure as very difficult. “Had the Georgian-Turkish border not opened in the early ‘90s, letting us cross the border and search for jobs there, terrible things would have happened here. Ask anyone from this village,” recalled 39-year-old Giorgi, Sofia’s uncle.¹⁴ The border with Turkey is just 70 kilometers from the village, approximately half an hour’s drive, and tea plantations are often located very near the border. Most Nasakirali Meskhetians who work in Turkey are men. They say they do so because there are more jobs there than in Georgia and the ability to speak Turkish fluently makes finding employment there easier for many Meskhetians.¹⁵ People go en masse for jobs on farms and construction sites, in factories, and elsewhere. Some go for long periods, others for shorter times, but seasonal farm work on tea plantations in Turkey has become an economic tradition for the entire village. But while it provided a source of extra income for some villagers, for Muslim Meskhetians, it was and is the only employment opportunity available.

Most Meskhetian women do not work but rather take care of their families. Only a few women have left for Turkey, mostly those whose husbands have health problems that preclude performing heavy labor.

Meskhetians are Sunni Muslims. The Nasakirali Meskhetian community has a spiritual teacher, *khoja*, who reads Arabic and gathers community members for prayers. During religious celebrations, they go to the Nasakirali mosque with Adjarians and pray together. Meskhetians speak an eastern Anatolian dialect of the Turkish language, the elderly speak Georgian poorly, and the younger people who attend Georgian schools speak the state language better (Trier, Tarkhan-Mouravi, and Kilimnik 2011, 7).

But it is not only their language and religion that have made isolated “islanders.” The physical character of the place in which they live, namely the scarcity of land, deprives them of the opportunity to engage in agricultural activities and further pushes them toward informal employment abroad.

Dato is an Adjarian eco-migrant from from Nasakirali with a large plot of land containing nut and tangerine plantations, produce of which he sells in the winter. He also owns a

minibus business that provides transportation to local residents. Since 2005, he has been involved in seasonal work in Turkey, which he describes as a good source of additional income. Nugzar, an Adjarian man, is a school teacher at a Nasakirali public school. Besides a nut and tangerine business, he has a store in Nasakirali. Nevertheless, since 2008, seasonally he has worked on tea plantations in Turkey. Both Dato and Nugzar consider Meskhetians poorer than members of their community due to their reliance mainly on informal work in Turkey.¹⁶

According to Giorgi, the Meskhetians, unlike the Adjarians, do not invest in agriculture as they own smaller land plots and barely harvest fruits and vegetables for their own use.¹⁷ While historically Meskhetians were famous for their agricultural achievements,¹⁸ they now joke that Nasakirali is like a city for them – they buy everything in shops. While we were cooking *tolma* (in Turkish *dolma*, meaning stuffing vegetables) on the eve of Kurban Bayram, the women complained that even the green peppers were purchased in a market in the nearby town of Ozurgeti. Meskhetians also do not own farm animals due to the lack of space, and few produce their own poultry. Once a stray dog stole a chicken from a courtyard in the “Island,” and a boy asked, “We keep them for special occasions, never eat, even if we would love to, and some dogs come and take them. Wouldn’t it be better if we ate them?”¹⁹ Meskhetians are the village’s most marginalized community due to their economic and social conditions. However, common economic challenges unite the village population and seasonal work in Turkey is never questioned, but rather represents a shared solution. Working informally in Turkey is not a further marginalization marker of Meskhetians in the village, but a shared economic activity among Muslim and Christian communities.

Most men I spoke with have picked tea in Turkey for at least 15 years. To support their families, many young Meskhetian men begin seasonal work in Turkey as young as age 15.

I had an emotional breakdown on my first leave and decided never to do it again, but back home when there’s no alternative, and your family desperately needs the money, you have to continue and get along with the work routine slowly,²⁰

said 17-year-old Iskander, who dropped out of school in ninth grade.

Iskander is one of the many who chose seasonal migration over secondary education, which he explained by saying that in the Meskhetian tradition, a man must pass property on to his descendants:

My grandfather left something to my father; he leaves me more than his dad did. Now it’s my turn to contribute my share. This is my plan for the future. School was less promising in this regard than working in Turkey”

Managing to build a house and make arrangements for the future is an important way to earn symbolic capital for Meskhetian men.

Involvement in seasonal work is an economic tradition that has become the sole means for the village’s Meskhetian men to fulfill their “duty.” As for Iskander, it is worth noting that he did not want to engage in seasonal migration; he always wished to become a wrestler and attended school, but economic circumstances forced him to make a sacrifice. The social world is structured for Meskhetians in such a way that most men expect to be picking tea sooner or later, whether or not they want to. Such a submission to the symbolic power of seasonal migration serves to increase the agent’s symbolic capital, in the form of recognition from his peers and the community in general.

Picking tea in Turkey takes physical strength and endurance. It is viewed as inappropriate for women and thus only healthy Meskhetian men are engaged. The work is performed in summertime, when afternoon temperatures soar. Each worker has a clear task: “pick 300

kilograms of tea leaves no matter if it's windy, rainy or 40-degree temperatures."²¹ The work is even more difficult when certain employers berate their employees and deny them rest.

Thirty-four-year-old Avto describes a day in the field: men wake up at 5 a.m. and start to work at 6 a.m., finishing at 7 p.m. At midday, they take a one-hour break. Usually a four- to five-person team works on one tea plantation. Each man picks 300 kilograms per day or works for *yevmiye*, daily payment. At the end of the day, the men must carry 50-kilogram containers of tea leaves on their backs from the plantation to the vehicle. Two men stand on the vehicle and the other two pass them the containers. It takes roughly one hour to weigh the containers. After a hard day's work, the men go home to bathe, eat, and, without any strength to speak to one another, they go to sleep.

During each season (which lasts from late May to mid-September, with periods of leave in between), the men earn approximately \$1500–\$2000 each. Meskhetians say that is better pay than any work they have previously done. The money is managed according to family needs, the most common being the purchase of firewood for winter. When several men from the same family are involved in seasonal work, they can sometimes manage to save for constructing or renovating a home, or even buying a new one. The state of their homes is markedly better than it was 15 years ago. "Just look how we've improved our living conditions," said 38-year-old Zoya as she looked through old photographs. Speaking of his achievements over years of seasonal work, 65-year-old Rumish said, "I have four sons. Three are married; I managed to purchase houses for them. After my fourth son gets married and has his house I'll retire and never go to Turkey again."²² Another man, 38-year-old Giorgi, recalled that by working one summer in Turkey years ago, he managed to study at the law faculty in Batumi, which his family could not previously afford. The paradox, however, is that Giorgi could obtain a higher degree of education, while Iskander and many other young men who left high school early still work and earn income in the same manner. This fact is often raised by many Meskhetian men when speaking about the future of the youth in Nasakirali, implying that regardless of a young man's level of education, he will eventually end up picking tea: "If I tell them not to go to Turkey, how will they survive? There are no other employment opportunities here."²³ In the evening, while drinking tea, 27-year-old Ramiz spoke up.

I go to Turkey because there's no one who will replace me. Otherwise, I would go and study, develop professional skills. I'm not too lazy to do that, but who will do the work I do, then? How will I survive economically?²⁴

The case of Ramiz shows that even if young men wish to study or continue education, they are obliged to work and earn good money for their families. And when there is a choice to make, they choose work over education. With money he has earned, Ramiz has refurbished his house. Recently, he became engaged and has a wedding planned in the near future.

These stories of things achieved thanks to seasonal work made informal employment in Turkey more attractive than other prospects. These cases show that in recent years, Meskhetians have managed to improve their economic and social conditions through informal economic activities.

Beka is a 19-year-old man who recently got engaged and is trying to save additional funds to pay for an appropriate wedding ceremony. When I spoke with him in 2015, he refused to return to Turkey, despite having earned good money there working informally in a bar. In September 2016, however, when we met outside Nasakirali, he had recently arrived back from seasonal tea picking and his hands were hurt and swollen. September

tends to be the most difficult month for tea picking, as the leaves become rough and harvesting them is a painful process. Beka told me:

I'll tell you why I went. I don't want to see my children doing the work my parents did. I don't want to see my ill father doing this job anymore, or my mother leave us for Turkey for three months. I want to break this tradition and develop something in Nasakirali, a small nuts business, where we all can work and earn more than we do in other people's fields. But I have to start somewhere, holding some amount of money and that's why I went to Turkey again.²⁵

While speaking to me, Beka drew a distinction between his homeland and the place of "others" and viewed the latter as a means to improving his own land. In other words, by gaining capital abroad he seeks to further develop the "Island" and thus contribute to the social mobility of his community.

Beka complains that men put their entire energies into the tea-picking season and do nothing for the rest of the year. He says they are too lazy to invest in their homes, and he hopes to change their views on earning money. Beka is a clear example of resistance against domination and the symbolic power that agents assign to seasonal work. The path the majority follow is tested and proved to be successful. One evening, young Meskhetian men were discussing business ideas with special guests from the city. They calculated a budget for keeping goats (for meat as well as milk products), planting raspberries (which may flourish two to four times a year), or holding a rental space (either a hostel or festive hall). After hours of discussion, the Meskhetians gave up, realizing that such economic activities entail more risks and demand more specific skills and higher dedication than does circular migration. Beka believes that seasonal work allows men to earn a good living relatively quickly, but in the long term, it does nothing for the village's development. While resisting the resilience of informal seasonal migration, Beka does engage in it in order to gain resources for realizing a new vision about the social world.

Beka is not the only person in the village who thinks about strategies for advancing the local community. Some men want to expand their lands, but the spare plots are usually not near their houses, making it difficult to build viable plantations. Some young men recalled an incident when nut bushes ready for harvesting were cut and stolen.²⁶

Border regulation

In 2012, Turkey changed its immigration regulations to limit foreigners' stay in Turkey on a tourist visa to no more than three months at a time (Kocaoglu 2012). The regulation was presented by Turkish officials as a step toward solving problems such as illegal labor and trafficking. When I spoke with Meskhetians about the threat posed by trafficking, they demurred, saying seasonal work has been mutually beneficial for employers and employees, as one side needed cheap labor and the other side was eager to earn money. I met men who had been deceived or mistreated by employers but nevertheless returned to Turkey to work. There has never been a case of trafficking among Meskhetians from Nasakirali, nor had the men heard of any from their acquaintances. Rather, they had heard that several Adjarian eco-migrants from Nasakirali, whose families thought they were in Turkey picking tea, ended up in Syria as soldiers in August 2015.

The amendment in the border regulation modified working habits for long-term migrant workers in Turkey but had little effect on the working habits of seasonal migrants. While the regulations envisaged Georgian citizens getting a permit to work in Turkey, most Meskhetians from Nasakirali simply overstay their tourist visas, on the grounds that "getting a work permit isn't easy. It takes a lot of time and energy. It took six months for my husband to get

the one-year-long work permit. Within these months he was not allowed to cross the border.”²⁷ According to a new regulation, those caught overstaying the 90-day period will be banned from reentering the country for three months to five years.

When I visited Nasakirali in September 2016, most of the men had recently arrived from Turkey, but some were missing; they had not come back after their visas expired. Saida told me it was the fifth month her husband had been away from the family. Returnees were interested in learning whether men who overstayed their visas would be deported or simply fined.

It’s hard to guess what happens. It depends on the character of the customs officer. Once our men violated the regulation and crossed the border and were fined, but then the officer was changed and the rest of people with similar violations were deported.²⁸

The roughly 500 lari fine is dwarfed by what men can earn while they overstay their visas. Some wives were actually happy about the regulation, hoping it would force their husbands to spend less time in Turkey and, if deported, search for work in Georgia, perhaps even for as long as five years. Ibragim, a Meskhetian man who had been deported for overstaying, told me that “some troubles are fortunate.”²⁹ After being kicked out of Turkey, he had started working for a large international construction company in Georgia. He is now a supervisor with a good salary and has secured his son, Bakar, to work with the company.

Women’s perspective

Sisters Zoya and Nasiba are the only two Meskhetian women I met from Nasakirali who have worked abroad. Nasiba is married to a Christian and it was slightly easier for her to leave the country and go abroad. From Nasakirali’s Christian and Adjarian communities, many women are employed in Turkey seasonally as well as during the year. Most Muslim Meskhetian men, by contrast, disapprove of women leaving home to work in Turkey. Saida told me that every time she brought up the opportunity to earn good money in Turkey, her husband or relatives told her to focus on raising the children – which never ended because she became pregnant every time her husband returned from work in Turkey. Her fifth child is four years old. I asked what her plans were. She responded that she has taken measures to prevent getting pregnant again and hopes to work, apparently in Turkey. She once accompanied her husband to Turkey and his acquaintances offered her several jobs.

Zoya says her female neighbors complain that they want to work in Turkey, too, especially in winter, when men are at home and there are no local employment opportunities. Zoya often shares her work experience with them and explains that there is nothing to be afraid of in Turkey; no one there has ever insulted or offended her. She also says there are plenty of jobs available and, if her family consented, she could go with them and help all of them get employed. “My brother’s family left for Turkey and they all have jobs,” she told me. “His son easily changes work places, having no trouble in finding one. My children don’t want to hear about moving to Turkey; they don’t want to leave their homeland.”³⁰

Since 2012, Zoya and Nasiba have been taking turns sharing a job to get around the border regulation. They earned enough money working in a household taking care of a paralyzed man to not only support their families but also to refurbish parts of their houses. Zoya recently replaced the furniture in her kitchen and bought new crockery, all of which her guests have duly admired. Zoya was proud of her purchase and design; she

planned soon to build a tap so the family would no longer wash up in a basin. The women have also made friends abroad, with whom they stay in touch even when they are away from Turkey.

The sisters' perceptions have changed after years of seeing the differences in lifestyle between the Georgian village and the Turkish town where they worked. Sofia, Zoya's daughter, told me her mother cooks meals and cleans the house differently, and her Meskhetian language is now closer to Turkish, with her often mixing up words. Nasiba has changed too:

I don't want mud, dirt, village; I want a good life, car, culture. I like men in shirts, suits, and tie. I love clean spaces. I sold a cow, I sold everything. I want to be free. There is more culture in their villages than in ours. They have both cold and hot water.³¹

Indicative of the gain of cultural capital, Saida told me her husband has changed too: "After Turkey, he became nicer in the sense that he kept offering to drive the child to the kindergarten. Before that we walked, and he was never bothered about this fact, although the school was also not far away."³² Saida thought the different cultural environment changed her husband's understanding about family, women, and other matters.

Although by going to Turkey the women have earned economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, they still seem to feel the need to explain their decision to work abroad. Both sisters say they left for Turkey due to harsh economic conditions and their husbands' poor health; otherwise they would never have left their homes for so long, and their husbands would not have allowed them to leave. Their departures were more of an obligation than a choice. However, through their involvement in economic activity, they have challenged mainstream Meskhetian views about the abilities and obligations of Meskhetian women, representing themselves as strong women within the community.

Halal Meskhetians

Along with economic capital (cash-in-hand) and cultural capital (improvement of Turkish language skills and changing perceptions), Meskhetians accumulate social capital – social trust and networks – by working in Turkey. There are benefits to being a member of a network that go beyond economic capital. I use the term *halal* (in Georgian *alali*, meaning truthful and reliable) for examining the social and symbolic consequences of seasonal work.

"All Meskhetians are *halal*" is a common expression among Meskhetians. *Halal* is a commonly used word that indicates trustworthiness: "You must not be evil, but kind, and you inherit it from your family." It is contrasted with *haram*, "a person who commits *khaltura*" – a Russian word for imitating work, stealing time, or not doing the work properly, and benefiting at the expense of others.³³ The phenomenon of *halal* makes relationships easier among Meskhetians and with non-Meskhetians too; it is an asset for maintaining friendly relationships with neighbors. Becoming *halal* requires social recognition based on different forms of gained capital; thus, *halal* is more a form of symbolic capital. Most *halal* people also bear symbolic power, which gives them influence among their peers, community members, or residents of the village in general, and sometimes even beyond it.

Meskhetians remember a time when they were newly repatriated in Nasakirali, and the host community viewed them with suspicion and fear. Meskhetians eventually demonstrated their trustworthiness by never engaging in any criminal activity and earning money through hard work. Thus, they became *halal* and gained social and symbolic

capital. Being *halal* is one way of overcoming the barriers that keep Meskhetians on the “island.”

Beso, an Adjarian head of the Nasakirali self-government recalled:

At school, in the late 90s, I had a Meskhetian classmate. He couldn't speak Georgian, so how could we become friends? Several years later, when the border between Georgia and Turkey was opened, most men from west Georgia, including our village, went to work in Turkey. It was Meskhetians who made it possible for Georgians to work there peacefully. As they spoke Turkish, they served as translators and friends for non-Meskhetian Georgians.³⁴

Even though Meskhetians' native language was not Georgian and thus served as a marginalization marker for some time, their knowledge of Turkish turned out to be handy when going to Turkey. Many Meskhetians have helped non-Meskhetians find work in Turkey. Some have even helped them with translation when non-Meskhetians had to deal with Turkish employers. Currently, there is a tendency to learn Turkish among non-Meskhetians living in Nasakirali, and often it is the Meskhetians who teach those words and phrases. These dynamics have improved relations between Meskhetians and non-Meskhetians living in Nasakirali, increasing the importance of Meskhetians in the village and supporting their integration into the village and community. Thus, the possession of language skills and networks in Turkey has helped Meskhetians become *halal* among the non-Meskhetians in Nasakirali.

Becoming *halal* among Turkish employers, however, is not easy. It requires completing all work demands fairly and regularly. That being said, it is very important for Meskhetians to gain the trust of their employers, in order to eventually get a job with better conditions.

Along with having to perform taxing physical work, there is another obstacle to becoming *halal* and developing stable work relationships with employers: seasonal workers usually change their workplace after the tea leaves are picked, moving on to different employers. “Even if you happen to work with someone you know, you still have to change workplaces, as you take five tons in five days with a team of four workers,”³⁵ explained one worker. However, some workers, regardless of their changing workplaces, manage to keep in touch with their former employers. A recommendation can smoothen the way in the next job. One *halal* man explained: “You aren't treated as a stranger, watched or shouted at. You're left in the beginning of the day and taken and paid as you finish your work.”³⁶

There is one notable detail about becoming *halal* among Turks that is not always compatible with economic capital and family demands. The wife of a *halal* man mentioned that sometimes her husband does not take as much money as he deserves, or chooses to perform extra work for free, “also for keeping his promise, he may not leave his work, even when his children are sick or something urgent is happening in the family.”³⁷

Turkish employers stay in touch with *halal* Meskhetians, using them as a resource for recruiting workers for seasonal tea picking. For instance, Saida said her husband, Rustam, started working in Turkey when he was 18. Today he is a boss, recruiting men from the village to work there. Turkish employers call Rustam looking for men. “As a *halal*, everyone contacts him. Some of our men make *khaltura*, but he does his job clean and calm and Turks respect him for it. They also trust the men sent by him,” Saida said.

“In Turkey or even in Nasakirali, boys and men come to me asking for jobs. I take them with me,” Rustam said.

Rustam's case indicates that in 15 years of working informally in Turkey, he has earned not only economic capital, with which he has managed to build a house, but also has developed networks (social capital), gained recognition (symbolic capital), and the capacity to cooperate with his former employers and employ acquaintances (symbolic power).

Thirty-eight-year-old Giorgi recalled:

I have worked at the factory quite a while. One day, three men came by. We all call one place in Turkey *kazarma* (a Russian word for military barracks). All Georgians go there together and 60 men may sleep together in one room. Turks know that there are workers there, and when they need a hand they go there and hire some. These men came from *kazarma* looking for someone. When I said hello, they responded saying they were from Ozurgeti (a town near Nasakirali). I asked them if there was any demand for work; they said they worked one day in every three days. I told Beso, one of the men, about the conditions in the factory, that the pay was not as much as in tea picking, but that food was provided by the employers. Two men liked my offer. I said I could negotiate with the boss about hiring them, and I did. We worked well for 25 days. Later one man left, I also went back home, and Beso stayed. Beso was very grateful to me. We met later in Ozurgeti several times.³⁸

Unlike non-Meskhetian Georgians, Meskhetians do not live in *kazarma*, like “islanders” in Turkey. Giorgi and his team seasonally live in an abandoned but fairly sturdy house near the tea plantation. The Turkish people already know him well and trust him, allowing him and his friends access to the house, where the men have separate bedrooms and share a kitchen. Living in this manner makes working in Turkey less stressful for Meskhetian men. Giorgi’s story about helping non-Meskhetians find work in Turkey brought him recognition among the villagers, proving that he has good contacts and a knack for employing people. Most Meskhetian men due to speaking Turkish fluently and working in Turkey for decades live there like “mainlanders” and in many cases help non-Meskhetian Georgians find relatively well-paid and stable jobs.³⁹

By being *halal*, both Meskhetian men and women are marked as reliable and knowledgeable sources for advice or help in finding a job. They have contacts and easily connect those seeking to work abroad with employers, thus earning gratitude from friends and neighbors. Sometimes they take fees from both employees and employers in exchange. Some Meskhetian men work as recruiters after having worked as laborers for many years. There is a certain circularity among different forms of Bourdieusian capital: economic capital may transform into symbolic, social capital into economic, and so forth.

Social capital’s role in local politics

It is widely believed that Meskhetians living in Nasakirali are more integrated with the host community than Meskhetians living elsewhere in Georgia (Sumbadze 2007, 312). Joint involvement in seasonal migration and Meskhetians’ role in it is one of the most significant factors for their integration and inclusion in the village.

On 22 May 2016, there was an intermediary election for the local self-government in Ozurgeti district and in the village of Nasakirali. The opposition party won a rare victory in a Georgian village election. Most Meskhetians voted for the opposition party and supported an Adjarian candidate. Sofia said the winner, named Beso, “seemed more like a family member. During the pre-election period he would stay and drink tea with us and we trusted him. His opponent, a lady, came, gave promises, and left, never caring about breaking down barriers between us.”⁴⁰

Beso told me that Meskhetians have long been marginalized, deprived of water, gas, decent roads, and transportation for children to school. He knows of instances of Meskhetians helping Adjarians find jobs in Turkey and helping them with translations. Now he feels a responsibility to help them be respected. “There is no big difference between Meskhetians and Adjarians in the village. We share the same religion and are similarly involved in seasonal tea picking.”⁴¹ When I visited Nasakirali for the Kurban Bayram celebration,

Beso came to greet the Meskhetians and spent some time talking with them and discussing their problems.

Trust among Meskhetians and Adjarians grew as a result of informal employment practices in Turkey spilling over into local politics. “Meskhetians voted alongside Adjarian youth; some even returned from Turkey to participate in the elections,”⁴² one election observer noted. Although inclusion and civic engagement involve more than just voting, the Meskhetians’ activity in the elections suggests that they perceive themselves as part of the community and have plans and hopes for a better future in the village.

Conclusion

With a Bourdieusian framework, this study revealed seasonal migration to Turkey as a field in which the Meskhetians of Nasakirali gain not only economic but also social, linguistic, and cultural capital, based on which they gain recognition – symbolic capital – and sometimes authority – symbolic power – and legitimacy for making their vision of the social world commonplace.

Seasonal migration helps Meskhetians integrate into the local community. Despite the fact that informality labels Meskhetians, along with members of other groups involved in circular migration, as poor and marginalized in the public discourse, these economic practices help them locally, supporting the “islanders” in their quest to reach the “mainland.” Thus, agents have made seasonal migration to Turkey an a priori and accepted coping mechanism. In this sense, the paper contests the “marginalization thesis,” arguing that the goal of gaining not only economic but also other forms of capital for improving social standing triggers agents’ participation in informal economic activities (Williams and Horodnic 2015). It also shows that less marginalized groups are similarly involved in undeclared work in Turkey. Non-Meskhetian communities from Nasakirali who have other jobs, including formal ones, also engage in circular migration, finding it a good opportunity for earning extra money.

Contrary to findings about the feminization of undeclared work (Hofmann and Buckley 2013), only in the most urgent and crisis situations do Meskhetian women from Nasakirali engage in informality. In all other circumstances, they remain unemployed, staying at home to take care of the family. The above section on women’s perspectives demonstrates that seasonal migration and informal employment in Turkey has changed and challenged men’s and women’s perceptions of the role and abilities of women within and beyond the family. Working in Turkey has contributed to women’s eventual emancipation and empowerment.

The research also contributes to the study of labor migration in general. Both theory and research in this field usually focus on factors and motives of migration rather than its results (De Jong, Chamrathirong, and Tran 2002). In contrast, this study revealed the economic and social consequences of Meskhetians’ temporary migration to Turkey.

Just as Bourdieu connects the concepts of structure and agent (1977, 72), the case of Nasakirali shows that symbolic power is created as a function of agents’ (in this case, seasonal workers) relation to their structure (the field of seasonal migration). Agents use symbolic power not solely to make seasonal migration a dominant economic strategy, although *halal* Meskhetians do influence how agents respond to economic and social challenges. Symbolic power is the *doxa* (taking the ordinary order for granted, accepting tacitly without discussion or examination) that has involved most Meskhetians in seasonal work (Bourdieu 1991). Nevertheless, I met some who symbolically resisted domination and expressed the desire to change the imposed vision of this world, even as, paradoxically,

they engaged in seasonal migration to gain resources for the process of world-making. Other employment opportunities are either not available or unstable. Meskhetians always highlight their lack of relevant education and professional skills for applying for other jobs, especially formal ones. No Meskhetians work in the local municipality, public school, or kindergarten, unlike other residents of the village. When it came to making a choice, Meskhetian men chose informal work over education for the more immediate return. Women usually leave school after ninth grade and most of them remain unemployed. Today, a younger generation, both girls and boys go to school; Suzana and Marina are at high school, Sofia studies at vocational collage, Shako plans to enter vocational school as well, and Khatuna will soon graduate from a religious school. All plan to work for formal institutions.

In line with Danielsson's (2015) problematization of informality, Meskhetians' economic strategy has become so dominant that the younger generation sometimes chooses it over secondary education or other educational prospects. So there is a risk that informal circular migration will perpetuate the social and economic problems Meskhetians face. On the other hand, in contrast to Danielsson's findings, the study shows that gained capital elevate those engaged in seasonal migration or informal work in Turkey to higher social positions and attach them to the village and local communities. Thus, the case of Meskhetians in Nasakirali shows informality providing an outlet for them to exhibit trustworthiness and reliability and position themselves as *halal* in the village, ultimately helping them escape the "island."

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Notes

1. Ombudsman of Georgia, Report 2011, 2015.
2. A process of returning not based on a law on repatriation. This term was coined by nongovernmental organizations working on issues related to Meskhetians.
3. Georgian newspaper *Iveria*, 6 June 1990.
4. Ombudsman of Georgia, Report 2011.
5. Ombudsman of Georgia, Report 2015.
6. Ombudsmen of Georgia, Report 2015.
7. Lecture by Stephen Jones at the Ilia State University, Georgia, 21 September 2016.
8. The Muslim Adjarians are migrants from mountainous Adjara who settled in Nasakirali beginning in the early 1970s following a landslide and scarcity of land. For more information on Muslim Adjarians see Pelkmans 2006.
9. Information was obtained from the local government of Nasakirali, 19 January 2017.
10. Interview with Giorgi, a Meskhetian man, October 2015.
11. The Rose Revolution was a peaceful change of power in Georgia in November 2003. It was preceded by massive protests following parliamentary elections that year.
12. Approximately 10 Meskhetian families live in the first district of village Nasakirali. Their lifestyle is almost identical to those Meskhetians who live on the "Island" settlement.
13. Interview with Zoya, a Meskhetian woman, September 2016.
14. Interview with Giorgi, a Meskhetian man, October 2015.

15. I base my conclusion on interviews with Meskhetians from various age groups.
16. Interview with an Adjarian Dato, September 2016.
17. Interview with Giorgi, a Meskhetian man, October 2015.
18. Their historical residence, the region of Meskheta, was famous for its terrace viticulture.
19. Interview with Irakli, a Meskhetian boy, September 2016.
20. Interview with Iskander, a young Meskhetian man, October 2015.
21. Interview with Avto, a Meskhetian man, October 2015.
22. Interview with Rumish, a Meskhetian man, October 2015.
23. Interview with Giorgi, a Meskhetian man, October 2015.
24. Interview with Ramiz, a Meskhetian man, September 2016.
25. Interviews with Beka, a young Meskhetian man, September 2016.
26. Interview with Meskhetian men, October 2015.
27. Interview with Saida, a Meskhetian woman, September 2016.
28. Interview with Zoya, a Meskhetian woman, September 2016.
29. Interview with Ibragim, a Meskhetian man, September 2016.
30. Interview with Zoya, a Meskhetian woman, September 2016.
31. Interview with Nasiba, a Meskhetian woman, October 2015.
32. Interview with Saida, a Meskhetian woman, October 2015.
33. On *khaltura*, see Gurchiani (2017).
34. Interview with an Adjarian Beso, September 2016.
35. Interview with a Meskhetian man, October 2015.
36. Interview with a Meskhetian man, October 2015.
37. Interview with Saida, a Meskhetian woman, September 2016.
38. Interview with Giorgi, a Meskhetian man, October 2015.
39. Discussion with non-Meskhetian residents of Nasakirali, September 2016.
40. Interview with Sofia, a young Meskhetian woman, May 2016.
41. Interview with Beso, head of self-government in Nasakirali, April 2016.
42. Interview with the observer of local government elections in Nasakirali, May 2016.

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