

**Thesis Booklet**

**MULTICULTURAL DYNAMICS AND ETHNIC INTERACTIONS  
IN THE TURKESTAN REGION**

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## **Thesis Booklet of the PhD Dissertation**

# **MULTICULTURAL DYNAMICS AND ETHNIC INTERACTIONS IN THE TURKESTAN REGION**

### **Antecedents and objectives of the dissertation**

Kazakhstan's complex ethnodemographic landscape has been shaped by its vast geography and deeply transformative history. As the ninth-largest country in the world, Kazakhstan is home to over 130 ethnic groups, the result of significant historical processes such as forced deportations, famine, political repressions, and extensive Soviet-era campaigns like the Virgin Lands initiative. These events not only altered the country's demographic composition but also profoundly impacted inter-ethnic dynamics and cultural interactions throughout the republic.

Among the social phenomena reflecting these shifts are inter-ethnic marriages, which serve as critical indicators of cultural integration, identity negotiation, and the transformation of ethnic boundaries. These unions are not merely personal or familial decisions; rather, they are situated within the broader historical and political contexts of migration, assimilation, and multicultural coexistence. In this regard, inter-ethnic marriages offer a unique perspective through which to examine the evolution of Kazakhstan's multiethnic society.

This dissertation builds upon an extensive foundation of research into Kazakhstan's ethnodemographic and cultural history, narrowing its focus to the southern part of the country, specifically five ethnically diverse villages within the Turkestan Region. These communities offer a compelling microcosm for studying inter-ethnic marriages, viewed here as vehicles for cultural exchange, social integration, and identity negotiation. These unions, involving Kazakhs and minority groups such as Uzbeks, Russians, Tatars, Azerbaijanis, and Meskhetian Turks, are more than private relationships—they reflect broader processes of cultural blending, identity transformation, and negotiation of national values.

The research is grounded in the insights of both local and international scholars, including V. Kozlov and O. Komarova, whose work on Soviet-era ethnic policies reveals the enduring complexity of inter-ethnic dynamics in Kazakhstan. Their studies underscore the intersection of language, religious tradition, and societal roles within mixed families, particularly about shifting ideas of ethnic and national identity. These scholarly perspectives are complemented by a theoretical framework drawing on Joseph Fichter's concept of

reciprocal assimilation, Milton Gordon's structural models, John W. Berry's bidimensional theory of acculturation, and Ralph Linton and John Milton Yinger's formulation of dissimilation. These theories help explain how inter-ethnic marriages simultaneously preserve, adapt, or transform cultural values.

My motivation to explore this topic stems from personal experience and academic interest. Born in the culturally rich Shymkent region, though outside the current administrative boundaries of Turkestan, I was raised within a Kazakh-Muslim tradition but was also exposed to traces of other cultural and religious systems. These early encounters with cultural plurality left a lasting impression, primarily through family stories and symbols from different faiths and ethnic groups. They fostered an appreciation for the diversity within seemingly homogenous communities and sparked my curiosity about how identities are shaped in multicultural environments.

The Turkestan Region itself provides a unique socio-historical setting. As a region with deep spiritual and cultural roots, it has long been a meeting point for different ethnicities, faiths, and traditions. In this context, inter-ethnic marriages offer a rich field for examining the lived realities of cultural hybridity. The study situates these marriages within broader social forces such as national identity formation, language policy, religious pluralism, and post-Soviet transformation. It integrates classical theories with newer frameworks such as Bourdieu's cultural capital, Stuart Hall's cultural hybridity, Barth's ethnic boundary theory, and Nancy Ammerman's concept of lived religion. These perspectives allow for a more holistic interpretation of how identity is experienced, negotiated, and transmitted across generations.

This research aims to explore how inter-ethnic marriages in Turkestan reflect and respond to larger cultural, linguistic, and religious dynamics. By bridging ethnographic fieldwork with sociocultural theory, the study reveals how families manage identity across ethnic lines and how traditions are either preserved or reshaped. It focuses on family practices, religious observances, and language use as core mechanisms to express and contest these dynamics. The following research questions guide the study: (1) How do individuals from diverse ethnic groups coexist peacefully within Kazakhstan's multiethnic society? (2) How do spouses in inter-ethnic marriages negotiate and navigate cultural and religious differences in their daily lives? (3) How are inter-ethnic dynamics shaped within the Turkestan context, especially regarding dominant cultural norms?

To address these questions, the research is structured around four central hypotheses: Hypothesis 1: In the multicultural context of the Turkestan region, assimilation and acculturation coexist and significantly influence interethnic family dynamics, particularly

through the adaptation and integration of traditions, customs, and rituals; Hypothesis 2: Inter-ethnic marriage can lead to the erosion of an ethnic group's core values and cultural identity (dissimilation), particularly in unions where one partner distances themselves from their ethnic heritage; Hypothesis 3: Language functions as both a practical communication tool and a symbolic marker of ethnic identity, with dominant language choices shaped by factors such as education, gender roles, and sociopolitical influence; Hypothesis 4: Religious practices and ethnic values are critical in shaping family life within inter-ethnic marriages. Couples adapt and blend religious traditions, navigating them to create stability, unity, and a shared moral framework.

These questions aim to uncover how interethnic couples and communities deal with cultural differences, find ways to live harmoniously, and define their identities. For example, the question about peaceful coexistence in a diverse society ties closely to the ideas of cultural adaptation and integration (Hypothesis 1). Similarly, questions about how couples manage cultural differences in daily life connect directly to the roles of language (Hypothesis 3) and religion (Hypothesis 4) in shaping their shared lives. Together, the hypotheses and questions create a thoughtful and human-centred approach to understanding the complexities of interethnic marriages.

All information presented in the dissertation without explicit citations is derived from findings obtained through fieldwork and participant observation conducted during the study.

This dissertation contributes to broader academic debates by offering a localised yet theoretically informed analysis of inter-ethnic unions in Central Asia. It provides a grounded understanding of how families function within and against the pressures of national integration, linguistic standardisation, and religious tradition. By situating inter-ethnic marriages within the specific cultural landscape of Turkestan, this study enhances our understanding of multiculturalism, identity, and social cohesion in a post-Soviet society increasingly shaped by globalisation and tradition.

### **Overview of the methods used**

This dissertation adopts an interdisciplinary and in-depth qualitative ethnographic methodology, supported by selected quantitative instruments, to investigate the sociocultural dynamics of inter-ethnic marriages in the Turkestan region of Southern Kazakhstan. Specifically, the research analyses how language use, religious affiliation, gender roles, kinship systems, and national value systems intersect with broader anthropological frameworks—most

notably, theories of assimilation, acculturation, dissimilation, and cultural hybridity—in shaping everyday life and identity formation within mixed-ethnicity families.

Field research was carried out across five rural settlements—Zhana Iqan, Shornak, Turki Poselkasy, Kentau-Hantagy, and Sayram—each selected for its distinct ethnic makeup, sociohistorical character, and proximity to urban centres. These sites represent a microcosm of Kazakhstan’s ethnocultural diversity and were chosen to reflect various forms of inter-ethnic coexistence. Although the researcher originates from the southern region, each village revealed unique local mentalities, customary practices, and social dynamics, requiring careful cultural navigation.

The fieldwork was executed in two main phases. The first phase took place during the summer of 2022, coinciding with peak seasonal heat and holiday activity. This period primarily emphasised community immersion, informal observation, and establishing trust with residents. Initial engagement was met with suspicion and hesitation, as many villagers were wary of external inquiries, particularly those involving sensitive themes such as ethnicity, religion, or family structure. To overcome these obstacles, the researcher leveraged local social capital, drawing on ties to respected elders and acquaintances known to the researcher's family. Their introductions, combined with the assistance of village administrators, enabled access to internal demographic data (via local “village passports”) and facilitated the identification of potential interviewees.

Approximately 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted in this first stage, alongside direct observation of over 30 families in naturalistic settings such as household gatherings, markets, and public celebrations. This phase allowed for the development of rapport and a clearer understanding of the internal cultural codes that govern social behaviour. The second phase, which spanned from November 2023 to January 2024, focused on deeper data collection, particularly among communities traditionally cautious toward outside scrutiny. These included Azerbaijani and Meskhetian Turk families in the Kentau area, where interviews were frequently conducted without voice recorders or written notes due to cultural sensitivities. In such instances, the researcher relied on immediate post-interview documentation, memory recall, and observational cues to record responses as ethically and accurately as possible.

The primary data collection technique consisted of semi-structured interviews, offering a structured yet adaptable format to elicit rich personal narratives. The interview protocol was

designed to ensure consistency across respondents while allowing the flexibility to delve deeper into emergent themes. Key domains of inquiry included language practices within the household, religious observance and syncretism, transmission of national and ethnic values, cultural rites of passage, and the influence of gender on familial roles and authority structures. In total, 85 families participated, encompassing both monoethnic and mixed-ethnicity unions, and representing the region's primary ethnonational groups: Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tatars, Russians, Azerbaijanis, and Meskhetian Turks.

To triangulate findings and extend the depth of analysis, the study incorporated participant observation as a core ethnographic method. The researcher took part in family ceremonies, religious holidays, informal social gatherings, and daily household activities, thus gaining access to embodied forms of cultural expression that are often unspoken or implicit. This method offered crucial insight into the performative and symbolic aspects of identity negotiation, such as bodily comportment, spatial organisation of homes, and intergenerational behaviour during rituals and festive events.

Complementing the qualitative data, a structured quantitative component was introduced via short surveys administered to a subset of 20 families. These instruments captured demographic information—such as age, education level, and employment status—and included frequency-based questions on topics like language preference in different contexts, religious practices, cultural adaptation, and generational shifts in norms. This mixed-methods design allowed for statistical profiling while preserving the depth of personal accounts.

Gendered dimensions of cultural transmission were a recurring analytical lens. Female respondents often emerged as central figures in maintaining household traditions, child-rearing practices, and ritual observance. Women provided particularly detailed accounts concerning food preparation, holiday planning, and moral instruction, underscoring their pivotal role in intergenerational continuity. These insights were interpreted through theoretical frameworks developed by Berry (2005), Gordon (1964), Rubin (2012), and Seidman (2013), which facilitated a layered understanding of cultural retention, adaptation, and selective transformation.

Transcripts from the interviews were systematically coded and analysed thematically using qualitative analysis software and manual coding strategies. Recurrent patterns were identified in areas such as linguistic accommodation, religious flexibility, interethnic tension, and cultural

compromise. Even where direct transcription was impossible, field notes and ethnographic descriptions enabled the preservation of key narrative elements and contextual depth. This coding process also allowed for comparative analysis between mixed and monoethnic households, shedding light on how cultural boundaries are navigated and reshaped in lived experience.

In sum, the methodology of this study is not only empirically rigorous but also ethically responsive and culturally attuned. It reflects a sustained commitment to understanding interethnic marriage not as a mere statistical occurrence but as a lived social process embedded within broader structures of tradition, modernity, and identity. The result is a multidimensional portrait of how diverse families in Southern Kazakhstan negotiate belonging, difference, and continuity within the complex realities of post-Soviet society.

### **New contributions to academic knowledge**

1. This dissertation makes a significant and original contribution to the academic study of interethnic marriage by situating the analysis within a largely understudied sociocultural context: the rural communities of Southern Kazakhstan. Unlike existing research, which often remains confined to macro-level demographic surveys or general sociological trends, this study delves into the lived experiences of mixed-ethnicity families, providing an anthropologically rich and fine-grained account of identity negotiation, cultural exchange, and social adaptation within the domestic sphere.

2. Conducted through sustained fieldwork across five ethnically diverse villages in the Turkestan region, the research generates a robust empirical foundation grounded in qualitative methods, particularly in-depth semi-structured interviews and immersive participant observation. The data reveal how interethnic families navigate complex cultural terrains shaped by overlapping domains of religion, language, gender norms, and kinship structures. Noteworthy are the findings on the adaptive use of Islamic rituals as tools of cultural mediation, the prominent symbolic role of the Kazakh language within multilingual households, and the understated yet powerful gendered mechanisms through which traditions are maintained, reinterpreted, or selectively transformed over time.

3. A particularly innovative aspect of the study lies in its theoretical and methodological integration. Rather than adhering to a singular conceptual model, the dissertation weaves together diverse anthropological and sociological frameworks—assimilation, acculturation, dissimilation, and cultural hybridity—to more accurately capture

the non-linear and fluid nature of identity formation in interethnic contexts. These frameworks are not only referenced but critically operationalised through ethnographic case studies, illustrating how interethnic couples balance cultural retention with transformation in real-life domestic negotiations. In doing so, the dissertation challenges binary and static interpretations of culture, offering a more dynamic, processual account of intercultural interaction.

4. The research also expands the scope of international academic discourse by making the sociocultural dynamics of Southern Kazakhstan accessible to a global readership. By presenting its findings in English, the dissertation addresses a longstanding linguistic and geographic gap that has hindered the inclusion of Central Asian ethnographies in broader comparative studies. It contributes to multidisciplinary conversations in cultural anthropology, migration studies, ethnodemography, and post-Soviet identity politics, situating the Turkestan region within wider debates on multicultural integration and social cohesion in plural societies.

5. Beyond methodological and geographic innovation, the dissertation introduces previously undocumented correlations between interethnic marital dynamics and cultural reproduction. In contrast to earlier scholarship that has predominantly centred on macro-level analyses, such as tribal affiliations, ethnic hierarchy, or state policy, this research turns attention to the micro-politics of everyday life. It highlights how couples manage linguistic asymmetries, religious pluralism, generational divides, and shifting expectations around gender and authority. These lived experiences offer critical insights into the intimate domains where cultural continuity and change are negotiated most acutely.

6. Equally important is the study's engagement with other scholars working on Central Asian ethnography. Through academic conferences and scholarly dialogue, the dissertation critically differentiates between broader ethnological frameworks and the nuanced sociocultural realities of interethnic unions. This intellectual exchange sharpened the dissertation's analytical lens, helping clarify how structural forces intersect with individual agency in the lived negotiation of identity and belonging.

7. Ultimately, this dissertation provides a compelling ethnographic account that humanises the concept of interethnic marriage. It reframes these unions not merely as demographic phenomena but as dynamic social arrangements embedded within historical memory, local norms, and cross-cultural dialogue. Its findings enrich Central Asian studies and offer valuable comparative insights for understanding intercultural marriages in other multiethnic societies facing the pressures of globalisation, migration, and identity

reconfiguration. Through its empirical depth and theoretical breadth, the study serves as both a scholarly contribution and a foundation for further research and policy reflection.

### **Publications related to the dissertation**

1. Abdinassir, N. N. (2022/1). Multicultural Way of Life of Various Nationalities in Turkestan. *Különleges Bánásmód: Interdiszciplináris S.*, 2022/1. DOI: 10.18458/KB.2022.1.1
2. Abdinassir, N. N. (2023/1). Language Use in Inter-Ethnic Marriages in Turkestan. *Különleges Bánásmód*, 2023/1. DOI: 10.18458/KB.2023.1.1
3. Abdinassir, N. N. (2024/Special Issue). Assimilation and Acculturation Processes in the Study of Inter-Ethnic Marriages. *Különleges Bánásmód*, 2024/Special Issue. DOI: 10.18458/KB. 2024.SI.1
4. Abdinassir, N. N. (26). The Concept of Dissimilation in the Study of Inter-Ethnic Marriages within Homogeneous Meskhetian Turkish, Azerbaijani Marriages in Turkestan. *Ethnographica et Folkloristica Carpathica*, 26. DOI: 10.47516/ethnographica/26/2024/
5. Abdinassir, N. N. (2024). Working Paper No. 60: Vivre le multiculturalisme au Turkestan. IFEAC, 2024. Published: December 16, 2024
6. Abdinassir, N. N. (2025). The Role of Religion in Inter-Ethnic Marriages in Turkestan. *Special Treatment*, Vol. XI, Issue 1, 2025.
7. Abdinassir, N. N. (45–58). The Role of National Values in Interethnic Marriages in Turkestan. *Különleges Bánásmód*, 11(1), 45–58. DOI: 10.18458/KB.2025.1.45