

Tamila Davitadze
Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Batumi, Georgia
[tamila.davitadze@bsu.edu.ge]

Nana Mazmishvili
Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Batumi, Georgia
[nana.mazmishvili@bsu.edu.ge]

Religion and Women in Adjara

Abstract: *The attitude of Islam towards women's issues is not at all uniform. Two tendencies can be observed in it: the first, reactionary or conservative, which implies the aspiration that women's emancipation be limited to the framework of Islam, the second – radical, which tries to prove that the liberation of women in the Muslim world, the improvement of their socio-economic conditions, their inclusion in public and political life, do not at all contradict the norms of Islam. From this point of view, the issue of the relationship between religion and women in Adjara is very interesting, which we would like to discuss extensively in the presented work, especially since there is a lack of research on Georgian Muslim women in Adjara and their experiences in gender studies in Georgia. The presented research aims to discuss and familiarize the society with the experience of Georgian, Muslim women in Adjara. Although not all women follow permanent religious practices, Islam still remains an important part of their identity. Being a Muslim, along with identity, is a very intimate and personal inner spiritual state for Adjarian women and is not expressed in rituals or external attributes. Today, there is a relatively safe space for “revealing” Muslim identity in our Christian country, which we cannot forget about the early period. However, young people, including students, who have moved to the capital - Tbilisi from Adjara or other parts of the country, first test the waters and then talk about their religious identity, which is followed by mixed reactions.*

Keywords: *Adjara; women; religion; identity; politics.*

The Autonomous Republic of Adjara, located in the southeastern part of Georgia, along the Turkish border, has undergone a remarkable religious transformation in recent decades. Since the 1990s, the Islamic identity in Adjara has gradually begun to weaken. Namely, a large part of the traditionally Muslim population of Adjara has converted to Christianity in a fairly short period of time. While by the time the Soviet Union collapsed, the majority of the population of this region was Muslim, at least that was what was considered to be the case after seventy years of Soviet atheism. According to new data, approximately 65% of

the population of Adjara is Christian, and 30% is Muslim. Today, Islam has firmly established roots in the eastern mountainous regions of the republic (Upper Adjara), especially in the Khulo district, and to a lesser extent in the villages of the Shuakhevi and Keda districts, which is due to a number of subjective and objective reasons.

Is it appropriate to say a few words about when Islam became the faith of the Adjara population?! The history of Adjara under the Ottoman Empire is often described in three words: “Three hundred years of Ottoman rule” (Abashidze, 1993), this is how an Adjarian calls this period of history in their everyday vocabulary, and this is how we find it in historiography as well (Chavchavadze, 1877, Chavchavadze, 1880). Until the 1770s, the Adjarians were mostly Christians, and until the 19th century, the process of Islamization was relatively mild (Sanikidze, 1999, 12; Baramidze, 2010, 11). Before the Tanzimat (Arabic for order, a period of moderate progressive reforms in the Ottoman Empire from 1839 to the 1970s), 49 out of 54 villages in Adjara paid the “Mura-khasie” tax imposed on Christian clergy, which indicates the existence of Christianity during this period. Islam was adopted first by the nobility, and it spread more slowly among the lower classes. In Adjara, Islam first spread to Lazistan, the Chorokhi and Adjaristskali valleys, and most recently to Kobuleti (Akhvlediani, 1978; Baramidze, 2010; Shashikadze, 2002). The strengthening of Islamization in Adjara since the 1820s is associated with the introduction of social and tax systems by the Ottomans. It is precisely the new reforms – “Tanzimat” that most researchers associate with the further spread of Islam and the Turkish language in Adjara (Baramidze, 2010, 11; Akhvlediani, 1978).

It can be assumed that the most active period of administrative and cultural rapprochement is the first half of the 19th century (Akhvlediani, 1978). At this time, the Adjarian wealthy society are motivated to see more benefits at the Sultan's court and are active in implementing new reforms (Kazbegi 1977). Many Adjarians fought on the side of the Ottomans in the Crimean War of 1855. This period coincides with the further tightening of the Ottoman Empire's policy in Adjara, in particular, the banning of the Georgian language and Christianity (Sanikidze, 1999, p. 12). The oldest wooden mosques in Adjara date back to the 19th century. In 1871–1873, there were 141 mosques and 65 madrasahs in the Batumi, Upper and Lower Adjara, Churuksu (Kobuleti) and Gonio regions (Baramidze, 2010, p. 11). The growth of mosques and the representation of Ottoman culture in the coastal areas in the 19th

century can be attributed to the presence of the Ottoman army (Sanikidze, 1999, p. 12), as well as the plan to build a new city in the north-western part of the Batumi port of the Trabzon province during the reign of Sultan Abdulaziz (Baramidze, 2019, p. 11). In the 1960s, there were 3 mosques in Batumi. Of these, 1 was considered an Ottoman and 2 were Georgian (Sanikidze, 1999, p. 13).

According to sources, prayers in the Thalia mosque were held in Arabic, but the language was foreign to the Adjarians. Worshipers, as well as students, learned parts of the prayer in Arabic by heart in the madrasa, but did not understand the content (Sanikidze, 1999, p. 12; Chichinadze, 1913). Turkish words entered the Georgian spoken language of Adjara, but they could not replace the native language. For centuries, the Georgian language has been a medium of daily communication, storytelling, and oral memory (Komakhidze, 2001). Language has been a mnemonic medium for the Adjarians to preserve their connection to “Georgian” in general. Language is the string of memory, by “sounding” it becomes possible to feel a sense of community and to grasp the idea of unity. We deliberately avoid a detailed review of the history of Adjara and touch only on the part that is related to the reasons for the spread of religion, in particular, Islam.

Based on the research topic, we will focus mainly on issues that concern the self-identification of modern Georgian Muslim women and their attitude towards existing dominant perceptions. In this regard, the first thing we will touch on is the significance of the current modernization of Islam in relation to women. It is very difficult to be a woman in the Muslim world, especially in the early period, when the inequality of women with men in Muslim society was reinforced by the Quran and Sharia (Gelovani, 2005, p. 79-91).

The process of modernization of religion was inevitable and was conditioned by the fundamental changes taking place in public life. Some Muslim ideologues share old, traditional views, while modernists condemn women's lack of rights, confinement, and the necessity of wearing the veil. However, traditionalists and modernists have in common that they consider the requirements of the Quran and Sharia to be obligatory and recognize Islam as an ideology for all times. Here, we will note that it is difficult to find a book or an author that deals with this ideology and belief in a crude, uninformed, or categorical manner. It is enough to recall the modern American writer, Jean Sesson, and her series of books “The Diaries of an Arabian Princess,” where the author tells us about the difficult situation of women, following the example

of generations, and consciously refrains from subjectively discussing Islam or its ideology, while, to some extent, the novel reveals an attempt to use religion as a weapon (Davitadze, Mazmishvili, 2023). Both traditionalists and modernists believe that national identity can be preserved by adhering to Islamic dogmas regarding women (Shaydullina, 1978, p. 9). So, what do modernists prefer regarding women's issues? It mainly concerns issues of marriage and divorce, wearing the hijab, family law, and the participation of Muslim women in socio-economic and public life (Esposito, 1982, p. 138).

One of the greatest representatives of the Muslim Reformation is Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897), who reinterpreted Islamic dogmas, including those regarding women. He recognized that all Muslims had the right to freely interpret the Quran, and that the cause of a nation's backwardness could be religious fanaticism and tyranny. For the equality of men and women, the liberation of women from the veil and the appearance of a woman's face are paramount, and do not necessarily mean a decline in morality (Saadawi, 1980, p. 170).

In the modern community, in the conditions of scientific and technical progress, Muslim women have actively participated in public life. It is noteworthy that some Muslim ideologists consider the problem of women at the modern stage absurd, and Muslim ideologists point to several surahs of the Quran (4:1,126; 66;10, 11; 33:35) and argue that the equality of women and men in public life was recognized precisely by the Quran. In addition, in their opinion, the social status of a woman in society is determined by the fact that she is a mother and a wife, that a woman has the right to participate in public activities, but only if this does not prevent her from fulfilling her main function. We believe that education is the force that leads society towards progress. Writers undoubtedly play a major role in all problems, and in this case, in the issue of women's emancipation. We cannot help but recall the Egyptian writer Kassym Amin (1863–1908), of Kurdish origin, who said: "A nation cannot be free if women are oppressed in it"! (Saadawi, 1980, p.171) Women's education was a top priority for him. It is the issue and role of education that is one of the central issues of our research in the society of Adjarian Muslim women, along with the modernization of Islam. We studied and got acquainted with the situation of Muslim women of different ages and experiences living in Adjara. Direct conversations and sociological surveys revealed that Islam, as a religion and a way of life, occupied a large place for them and continues to do so today. Not all women follow permanent religious practices, but Islam

still remains an important part of their identity. Being a Muslim, along with identity, is a very intimate and personal inner spiritual state for Adjara women and is not expressed in rituals or external attributes.

Islam has long been silent and hidden in Adjara, because of the Islamic faith, Adjarians needed to prove their being Georgians as well as their loyalty. Today, compared to earlier times, there is a relatively safe space for “revealing” Muslim identity in our Christian country, however, young people, including students, who have moved from Adjara or other parts of the country to the capital, Tbilisi, first test the waters and then talk about their religious identity, which is followed by mixed reactions. In the recent past, young or old people from Adjara were often called “Tatars”, which is why they had to constantly prove their identity. Even today, looking at a woman wearing a headscarf expresses surprise and mixed reactions.

The objects of our study were both women living in rural areas and city dwellers, including students. In the reality of Adjara, in the highland villages, where women's education was considered a low priority, teachers played a great role in convincing the girls' parents of new perspectives on knowledge and education. Thus, the appearance of the "new woman" both in literature and in real life was not long in coming. Before we discuss the issue of education of Adjarian Muslim women, we consider it appropriate to say a few words about religious education in general. In terms of religious education, we can distinguish three main models – confessional teaching in religion, teaching about religion, and public education without a religious subject (Flensner, 2017, p. 18-20). In Georgia, since 2012, initiatives have been emerging to establish interreligious teaching and teaching the history of religion in public schools, however, “the introduction of a confessional teaching model into the Georgian reality necessarily implies placing a number of religious groups in a marginalized position. Given the public and political climate, under the implementation of this model, it is expected that even the second largest religious group – the Muslim community – will not be able to obtain institutional support from the state to create opportunities for confessional Islamic education in public schools. “The introduction of a confessional model in Georgia means not only promoting dialogue between religious groups, but also further alienating them in the social and political sphere” (Mikeladze, 2021, p. 111). Given that the disclosure of religious identity is still sensitive in Georgia, when choosing a specific form of scientific teaching about religion in the

Georgian context, more emphasis is placed on the role of the teacher as a neutral facilitator of dialogue.

The stories of elderly women in the rural population of Adjara are similar, how they were unable to continue their education after graduating from school, the main reason for which is the religiosity of their fathers. The barrier created by religious or non-religious views is not foreign to the life of the women in today. This problem is different in different regions and villages of Adjara. As surprising as it may be, parents of girls who want to continue their education in the capital of the country are more likely to send their children to study in neighboring Turkey than in the capital. We are less familiar with the motivations for going to Turkey for education, as well as the programs offered by the Turkish state itself, and we believe that the issue of receiving education (including religious) there is deeply complex and multi-layered, with a political and social character. We assume that this may be related to the desire to receive a thorough religious education and Turkey's policy regarding preferential study conditions, which include language study along with professional study. In any case, getting an education is a way of emancipation for some girls, however, in a Muslim environment, a kind of impact or result of getting an education, later, is often wearing the hijab, which is perceived by society in different ways. But behind the cultural image of a woman wearing the hijab, society needs to see the new practice that has already emerged. In particular, with religious education, young people have acquired a kind of independence, a higher social status, even within the family. Are Muslim women wearing headscarves alienated from members of Georgian society today? Many people think that the religious symbol for a woman – the hijab, a headscarf – is a yoke imposed by her husband and is an expression of slavery and submission. We were interested in what Muslim women in Adjara themselves think about this issue? Regarding this and other issues of interest to us, we got to know and studied the views of several women, the existing problems and challenges related to their religiosity. We will introduce you to the views of 60-year-old Guliko Zoidze, a resident of Upper Adjara, 43-year-old businesswoman Eka Shantadze (Ananidze), a resident of Batumi, and 20-year-old Salome Artmeladze, a student of English Philology at BSU, on the following issues, which we have formulated in the form of questions:

1. What does Islam mean to you? And what problems do you think Muslim women in Adjara face?

2. What is your attitude towards the headscarf (hijab) itself and what is the reaction of society to wearing it?
3. How accessible was education for you and what path did you take to get it?
4. Do you feel like a “stranger” among the people around you, as you did in the recent past?
5. Do you feel safe and do you have religious freedom?
6. What problems and challenges do you face on a daily basis or in the long term?

Guliko Zoidze, a resident of Upper Mountainous Adjara:

‘I know the past and history, but Islam is my faith today, my religion, I serve it faithfully, I observe all the rules and perform prayers. I was raised in Muslim traditions and I don’t even remember at what age I started to wear a headscarf. Therefore, it has been my inseparable attribute for as long as I can remember. I also went through Soviet collectivization and restrictions because of religion. Where I live, there are fewer people around me who react to wearing a Hiaajp, but in the cities my traditional dress and headscarf often become the subject of unnecessary attention, I would also like to note that my adopted Christian relatives treat my service and love of religion with respect. I felt alienation and excessive scrutiny more in my early years, especially when I was in the capital. At such times, my native village was a place of freedom and relief, where many, like me, served Islam; I did not get an education, of course I wanted to, but our generation obeyed our parents, and there was poverty before, our parents taught us more about handicrafts, and we were also satisfied with our fate; Today I really have a feeling of religious freedom than in my early years, I am happy with the fact that they no longer look at me as a stranger and there is a tendency to accept people like me, although I would like to be accepted as a full member and not be subject to judgment at all; I have already gone more than half of my life, I have endured enough difficulties, hardships, and the burden of family, during the difficulties of life in the countryside, faith and service made me strong, capable and gave me hope. I am grateful to the world for my five children and I wish everyone happiness!’



Businesswoman from Batumi - Eka Shantadze (Ananidze)

‘I started serving Islam late, despite the fact that my family was a believer. My life changed after I decided that I should start a family at the age of 17, which was connected with the decision of my parents. The opinion of my parents was important to us and their decision rarely changed, because we believed that the family wanted our well-being, however, I must admit that when I learned that the family with which I was connected by fate were believing Muslims and, of course, I had to share the family tradition and rules, I had some unpleasant thoughts about how much I would be able to give up and change my lifestyle. I was not given the opportunity to continue my studies at the beginning, as I have already said, I started a family early, I was 17 when I got married. I have no secondary education. I am a mother by profession.

After raising five children, I wanted to do something and started my own business. My husband’s support was immense, I express my gratitude to my family for their support. It is necessary to work a lot on yourself. Our main problem is that I am a housewife and that’s it, we no longer work on ourselves, we just do ignore it. When we get married, we stop there and stop developing ourselves. I also raised five children and then started working on myself. I have a lot of plans and interesting

ideas. It's not working out perfectly yet, but I have to fight for development until the last minute. I have to do everything, so I won't stop. I think every woman should be active and definitely create something. Since I opened the store, I have become more spiritually uplifted and more confident. This has doubled since I became a student at Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University and got a degree in vocational education in beekeeping. I can admit that studying at the university was also a challenge for me. Whether it was the gossip of my peers about my dress and headscarf, or the views of acquaintances and friends about my choice and religious service. I would tell women like me who wear the headscarf to be themselves, stay confident and strong. First of all, they should be educated, nothing will work out without education. This has been an obstacle and a source of fear for me my whole life, so I could never stand up for and defend my faith, my headscarf and my clothes. If I had had the appropriate education, I would have defended myself better. I want us to have many educated and successful Muslim women. Not just those who stay at home, but those who are busy with their own business, active. Moreover, I really want to see Muslim women in politics as well. Nowadays, I can boldly say that I have overcome all the difficulties of adapting to a new life and have coped with all complications. I feel safe and have freedom in terms of religion. The only challenges for me are the social situation and rights of women in the upper mountainous regions, the severity of their work, and the lack of access to education'.



Salome Artmeladze, a student of English Philology at Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

‘Islam is not just a religion for me, it encompasses a deep worldview, cultural, and social system that has been formed over the centuries on the basis of divine revelations. Accordingly, Islam is not limited to a specific belief, but plays an important role in shaping human relationships and instilling respect for each other. It is on the basis of these values that we try to understand what the purpose of human existence in this world is and what the purpose of our existence is. Islam is based on five fundamental principles: faith (Shahada), prayer (Salat), fasting (Ramadan), charity (Zakat), and pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj). These principles determine not only the spiritual life of the believer, but also their social responsibilities; the headscarf is an important part of Islamic culture and religion, expressing a woman's modesty, identity, and faith. However, in modern society it is often perceived as a symbol of oppression or restriction of women's rights, which, in my opinion, is not true. Many Muslim women choose to wear the headscarf, considering it a manifestation of personal freedom, dignity, and faith. I wear a headscarf, and in my opinion, the headscarf is not a barrier to illiteracy or failure and a symbol of limiting women's rights, but rather gives me greater inner confidence, which can later become a kind of guarantee of success; As for my education, I can boldly say that I am completely free in this matter, and nothing has hindered me from receiving an education, as evidenced by the fact that today I am a second-year student of English Philology at the Faculty of Humanities. I have plans and ambitions regarding my career, and I will put all my effort to make my goals a reality; As I have already mentioned, there is at least a partial stereotype regarding clothing, especially the color black, why should a Muslim woman wear black? And of course, I have also been the object of this “misunderstanding” many times, why I am a young girl dressed like this and have there been any facts of violence against me? I believe that others should respect my choice and I am glad that society is gradually becoming more tolerant and less interested in other people’s personal lives; I would like to note that I consider myself quite safe, because I am not a victim of any violence. On the contrary, the Islamic religion, serving it, is my free choice, and I can confirm that I have absolute religious freedom; As for the long-term prospects, I can't say anything yet, because it's a matter of the future, although I have positive expectations that whatever stereotypes remain towards Muslim women, will slowly disappear completely, and I and those like me will no longer feel

alienated from society and will be full and equal members of society like everyone else’.



Solidarity, mutual assistance and support of all Muslim women during obstacles and difficulties have always been making things easier. They still have to deal with challenges, for example, some Muslim women live with a dual identity, for example, in schools, both students and teachers still have dual roles, school textbooks focus on devastating battles and invasions in relation to Muslim countries, the image of Muslims as enemies is formed, and the history of Georgian Muslims is completely ignored in them. It is precisely the feeling of shame and neglect caused by this that is associated with living with a dual identity.

Along with women's religious issues, we must also consider their social situation: the life of women in rural areas, especially in the upper mountainous regions, is quite difficult, family obligations and physical (sometimes hard) labor do not leave time for development and self-care. It is even less worth talking about their involvement in politics, because in villages, towns, and cities there is a widespread perception that politics is more a matter for men than for women. In reality, there are few mechanisms that would ensure women's involvement (Gaprindshvili 2014). From this perspective, the existence of the “Solidarity Community” in Adjara, which represents civil society and whose mission is to increase awareness of the region (Adjara), present cultural heritage, strengthen social and civic engagement, support the self-organization of the Muslim community, and promote the establishment of solidarity practices, is very important. The organization’s goals are: to research the religious identity, rights issues, and history of Georgian Muslims; to study and protect the rights of women and eco-migrants; to protect and promote cultural heritage; and to promote regional and community development. The organization is focused on building a solidary, just, and inclusive civil society, where representatives of all social groups will be able to protect their rights and live a dignified and safe life.

Religious diversity can truly be considered a historical and cultural wealth of Adjara. Religious tolerance is also evidenced by the fact that most families have representatives of both religions (Christians and Muslims). They celebrate both Easter and Bayram, and even visit the graves of the deceased during both holidays. Families prepare festive meals characteristic of both religions. In the villages of Upper Adjara, Christian and Muslim shrines function side by side and create a different local color. Nevertheless, the society does not go unnoticed by a certain tendency towards Islamization in the region, which part of the society perceives sharply and confirms its unyielding position with public speeches, especially opposing the construction of mosques, while others devote extensive letters to the impending dangers.



Protest against the Al-Aziz Mosque. March 31, 2012.
<https://netgazeti.ge/news/13488/>

Thus, the attitude towards women in Adjara in terms of religion is not uniform and two tendencies are observed: the first, conservative, implies the aspiration that women's emancipation be limited to the framework of Islam, which is more noticeable in the highland regions of Adjara; the second - different from conservative, tries to prove that

in the Muslim world of women, the improvement of women's socio-economic conditions, their inclusion in public and political life, does not at all contradict the norms of Islam. And the challenges remain: religious nationalism; socio-economic problems; lack of employment and entertainment due to housework, the lack of long-term programs against violent environments; fewer opportunities to engage in politics; the lack of access to education due to financial problems or early marriage; it should be emphasized that the named problem or challenge is defined by class, gender, and ethnic or religious characteristics.

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