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## **Muslim Women of Ajara: Certain Aspects of Their Sociocultural and Sociolinguistic Portrait**

**Abstract:** *The present paper deals with the distinctive aspects of the assimilation process experienced by Muslim women in Ajara while adjusting to new forms of life, which were expressed in sociocultural and sociolinguistic dimensions. The subject of the research is the period between 1920s–1930s distinguished by the establishment of Soviet power in the region of Ajara, which initiated a series of assimilation-driven yet contradictory processes. While the small number of Muslim women in Ajara adapted to new conditions, the majority of Ajarian women hesitated to adapt to change due to fear or timidity. In the countryside, women were still influenced by conservative traditions, particularly within the frameworks of social relations, such as marriage, dowries, work, education and etc. The adherence to traditional lifestyle among these women was largely driven by either the fear of family influence or external aggression. Nonetheless, progressively, over time, social norms in the region evolved as modern influences began to take hold. For instance, the traditional chador was replaced by plainer headscarf (known as “lechaki”), mostly worn by older women. The relationship between women and their families, especially with male members of society gradually became less restrictive. Whereas, women were previously restricted from engaging in conversations or being seen with men, these prohibitions were progressively relaxed. Ajarian women gained access to education, which was unthinkable in the pre-Soviet period. The sociocultural identity of Ajarian women and their process of assimilation into new ways of life have been prominently preserved in folklore, literature and other forms of collective and cultural heritage. The previously mentioned study will be developed based on the text, focusing on the aforementioned aspects. We will examine the unique characteristics of assimilation process experienced by Muslim women in Ajara adapting to new living conditions; moreover, we will engage in sociolinguistic analysis of this process and evaluate the historical, cultural and social factors that led to assimilation of Turkisms into local dialects.*

**Keywords:** *Muslim women; Ajara; Georgia; assimilation; cultural transformation.*

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## Introduction

The present paper deals with the distinctive aspects of the assimilation process experienced by Muslim women in Ajara while adjusting to new forms of life, which were expressed in sociocultural and sociolinguistic dimensions. The subject of the research is the period between 1920s - 1930s distinguished by the establishment of Soviet power in the region of Ajara, which initiated a series of contradictory processes aimed at assimilation. Considering the issue of Ajarian Muslim women of the 1920–1930s, it is necessary to note that the spread of the Muslim religion in Ajara radically changed the sociocultural portrait of the Ajarian woman. The religious factor primarily changed the lives of women.

In the past, Ajarian women led a rather closed lifestyle from a social point of view. The fusion of local Ajarian culture and traditions with Islamic customs played an important role in shaping the lifestyle of Muslim women living in the region. Prior to this period, the severely restricted human rights to contribute and participate as free and equal members of society suppressed Muslim women in Ajara from self-expression and fulfillment. Discrimination against them appeared both in formal and informal settings, particularly within familial and urban societal structures.

Nevertheless, the lives of Muslim women in Ajara began to transform in the 1920s, with the introduction of new societal norms in the region. In the beginning, Muslim women of Ajara managed to successfully establish themselves in the society, by refusing to wear religious attire associated with Islam (such as chador and other head pieces, participating in public and communal activities). It's vital to note that such behavior from women was met with criticism from social conservatives.

While the small number of Muslim women in Ajara adapted to new conditions, the majority of Ajarian women hesitated to adapt to change due to fear or timidity. In the countryside, women were still influenced by conservative traditions, particularly within the frameworks of social relations, such as marriage, dowries, work, education and etc. The adherence to traditional lifestyle among these women was largely driven by either the fear of family influence or external aggression. Nonetheless, progressively, over time, social norms in the region evolved as modern influences began to take hold. For instance, the traditional chador was replaced by plainer headscarf (known as "lechaki"), mostly worn by older women. The relationship between women and

their families, especially with male members of society gradually became more loyal. Whereas, women were previously restricted from engaging in conversations or being seen with men, these prohibitions were progressively relaxed. Ajarian women gained access to education, which was unthinkable in the pre-Soviet period.

### **Methods**

The sociocultural portrait of Ajarian women and the process of their adaptation to new living conditions have been preserved in a very interesting way both in folklore and literary texts, in various layers of collective and cultural memory. The above aspect of the study is developed on the basis of the texts recorded in the mentioned layers, in which we examine the features of the process of adaptation of Ajarian women to new living conditions, as well as its contradictory nature; more detailed attention is paid to the sociolinguistic side of this process, the analysis of historical, cultural and social factors that influenced the penetration of Turkisms into local dialects. Based on the goals and objectives of the work, we have used the descriptive research method, the method of literary text analysis and the comparison-contrast method.

### **Main part**

Soviet propaganda always emphasized the radical changes that began in society immediately after the establishment of the communist regime (Blauvelt, Khatiashvili, 2016; Hoch, Kopeček, 2011; Martin, 2001; Pelkmans, 2006; Suny, 1994). One of the most difficult tasks in the process of transforming society was changing the lifestyle of Muslim women. Much has been written on this topic, mostly in a pathetic tone. „The Soviet government put an end to the slave, disenfranchised position of women, which was further aggravated by the Muslim faith in Ajara. Before the establishment of Soviet power, no government guaranteed women the opportunity to escape their disenfranchised position. Before the establishment of Soviet power, Ajarian women lived in extremely humiliating conditions, were deprived of the right to appear in society and had to spend most of their lives within four walls. Only the October Socialist Revolution granted women equal rights with men, abolishing medieval customs of marriage“ (Davitadze, 1958, p. 115).

This is what Soviet propaganda wrote, and accordingly, how Soviet literature fulfilled the ideological order: there was often created an image of such an oppressed woman, that was supposed to free her for a

new life and raise her to new heights. However, at the same time, in the works of some representatives of Georgian literature, there appears a female image somewhat different from the official one. For example, the writer from Batumi, Parmen Loria, who knew the life of mountainous Ajara very well, depicts a romanticized image of an Ajarian woman in his novel "Dawn in the Gorge".

Parmen Loria's novel "Dawn in the Gorge" is a realistic text inspired by socialist ideology, dedicated to the process of transformation of the Ajara region under the rule of the communist regime. The writer reflects on the establishment of Soviet power in Ajara and the sociopolitical changes associated with it. Using the female images in a particularly expressive way, the author tries to show the contradictory image of the era, the struggle between the traditional and the new.

In general, the novel is a rather impressive gallery of images of Ajarian women. Each of them has her own function in the work; their totality creates a generalized image of an Ajarian Muslim woman. There should be especially highlighted the following characters: Naile Odiladze, Nazime, Nurife. The writer shows them in the traditional framework of life, where women are almost silent figures, they are forbidden even to talk to men, and they are focused only on household chores.

The image of Naile Odiladze is strikingly different from the image of a disenfranchised, oppressed and enslaved woman created by communist propaganda. Naile is a strong, courageous girl. She is brave enough to give a worthy answer to the Khoja who demands a large payment to bring her brother, Deli (Mad) Murad, to his senses, that is, to cast a nuskha (curse) on him. "My sister is more mad than I am. Watch yourself, tear your nuskha (written curse), I don't need it," Murad answered the Khoja (Loria, 1970, p. 17).

Naile, like her brother Murad, is quite independent in both her thoughts and actions. Unlike the women in her village, she thinks relatively broadly. She approaches life issues more philosophically and measures the problems of the world with a universal yardstick. „All evil and wicked people are godless... All people are the same. Men and women are equal, love is based on the will and desire of a person...“ (Loria, 1970, p. 41). In general, such a statement of Naile, against the background of the almost slave position of an Ajarian woman of the 1920s living in the mountains, is a rather bold challenge and atypical for women of the Ajarian region, since, as already mentioned, the role of women in the Muslim community was very belittled, and a young

Ajarian woman of that period would hardly have dared to give such a blasphemous answer to Khoja. Therefore, it can be assumed that the image of Naile acts as a kind of resonant hero, through whom the author expresses his own point of view on the issue under consideration.

The female character created by the writer was at the same time a reflection of the doctrine established by the communist government, which believed that "religion is the opium of the people" and that people must be freed from its influence. Moreover, the character of Naile was created by the author to represent a certain future type of a strong Soviet woman who would overcome the remnants of the past and be able to establish herself in society as a full-fledged member. Thus, the formation of Naile's image was determined by social conditions.

Nazime is a different, more realistic character compared to strong and independent Naile, and is presented as a victim of the outdated customs of her family and society. Nazime was engaged from the cradle to a man she didn't love. This is another fact from the bitter reality - Ajarian women had no choice and no rights. A woman's happiness was determined by her family, her fate was predetermined from childhood, and she could not decide it herself. „We are the unfortunate daughters of the place we live in. We must always follow the will of others, like cattle...” (Loria, 1970, p. 40). The emphasis is again on women's control in matters of religion and society.

By depicting these two female characters, the writer consistently presents the disenfranchised position of women in Ajara. Nazime does not want to get married without love, but she cannot overcome the opposition of her family. Naile, who is relatively brave and progressive in her thinking, and is also free from family pressure (she is an orphan), tries to solve her friend's problem herself and goes to talk to Nazime's fiancé, Jemal. But again, there is a confrontation caused by established customs: a woman could neither talk to a man, nor even approach him. It is precisely because of this inhuman limitation that the author made his resonant character Naile utter a phrase that is an interpretation of one of the most famous statements ("Religion is the opium of the people") of the communist regime: "Faith is something intoxicating, dizzying" (Loria, 1970, p. 45).

Parmen Loria describes the discriminatory position of Ajarian women, who were forbidden to talk or even appear among men. When meeting a foreigner, a woman had to cover her face and even to turn away. This is the picture that the writer depicts in his novel. When the housewife leaves the house in the morning to get water, when she meets

a villager, she covers her face with a dolband (kerchief) and turns her back to him. The writer explains the reason for such a humiliating position of women by the religious factor. Men "do not allow their women to show themselves to strangers, and they, in turn, were deceived by the Khoja..." (Loria, 1970, p. 31). Moreover, they call a non-Muslim who comes to the village "giauri" (godless, unbeliever), thereby emphasizing the religious nature of the confrontation.

Another female character in the novel, Nurife, represents one of the most important aspects of the sociocultural portrait of an Ajarian Muslim woman.

After the adoption of Islam, the chador became part of the culture and everyday life of Ajarian women. The chador was probably brought to Ajara from Turkey and is connected with the violent spread of Islam. Z. Chichinadze considers the clothing of Ajarian women to be a non-Georgian, Ottoman phenomenon. According to Chichinadze, Ajarian women wore the same clothing as women from other parts of Georgia, but after the adoption of Islam, they universally adopted the chador, „they stopped wearing Georgian dresses and put on red and yellow cotton dresses, like Ottoman women“ (Chichinadze, 1913, p. 86). Chichinadze's opinion was met with skepticism among Georgian researchers: „Unfortunately, Z. Chichinadze does not notice the presence of Georgian elements in the Ajarian clothing complex, and mistakenly, without any basis, considers it to be non-Georgian one“ (Samsonia, 2005, p. 11).

In 1921, after the establishment of the communist regime in Georgia, the Soviet government declared war on all religious rites in the country. The fight against women wearing the chador was one of the main areas of struggle in Ajara in the first years of Soviet power.

During the campaign to stop wearing the chador, every woman's decision to remove it was significant and courageous. It was difficult to make such a decision within the strictly established rules, although, in general, these actions were of a formal nature. According to Muslim customs, women were forbidden to attend meetings held in rural areas together with men. Despite the fact that the campaign to remove the chador was actively carried out, in the 1920s and 1930s, women's and men's meetings continued to be held separately in different areas of Ajara.

The scene of removing the chador is also shown in P. Loria's novel. The character of the novel, Nurife, an obedient woman to her husband, is one of the first to remove the chador. The husband is also a

representative of the new government - he is the chairman of the collective farm. However, the author does not explain this bold step solely by the factor of the Party nomenklatura. Before the scene of the wife removing the chador, the author shows the experiences of the husband, who is faced with a dilemma – whether to let his wife remove the chador or to follow the centuries-old custom? Memories of his own youth, very far from orthodox religious fanaticism, convince him that the new life follows new rules, that a woman is a full member of society, equal to a man, and that wearing a chador only diminishes the rights of a woman. Thus, the process of removing the chador, shown in the work, is not a personal decision of the woman in this particular case.

„The only thing that worried Andro most of all was the remnants of old harmful customs that remained in Adjara..., among which the most harmful and degrading to human dignity was the chador, to which some people still clung tightly. The chador prevented the Adjarian woman from entering the public arena“ (Loria, 1970, p. 305). The above thoughts of Andro, one of the main characters of the novel, reflect the reality of Ajara. The Soviet government wanted Ajarian Muslim women to take off the chador and adapt to the demands of the new society. Representatives of the communist regime launched a powerful campaign among women in the villages of Ajara, seeking to involve women in active work on an equal basis with men.

As can be seen from the materials of the Party archive, the women's department of the Ajara Regional Party Committee organized 164 women's meetings in 1922. The meetings were devoted to such issues as: “New Economic Policy”, “Soviet Power and Women”, “Second Congress of Women of Ajara”, “History and Significance of the Press”, “The Status of Women Before the Establishment of Soviet Power”, etc.

During the same period, the women's department held the 19th City Congress of women delegates, where various issues of political and local significance were discussed. Women's conferences were introduced into practice. They contributed to women's self-awareness and their involvement in public activities. Schools of cutting and sewing were created in the regions, where Ajarian women were trained. (Dav-itadze, 1958, p. 116).

The issue of women's emancipation was being resolved in very difficult conditions. It was necessary to fight ignorance, educate the people. Schools, libraries, clubs and other educational institutions were created, but turning an Ajarian woman, isolated from society, into an

active participant in life required great effort and skill. First of all, it was necessary to free women from the oppression of the chador.

The most reliable means of removing the chador was the proven method – agitation-propaganda, persuasion and raising the awareness of women through it. It was decided to create a women's club in Batumi in order to teach Ajarian women sewing and thus to involve them in social activities. On May 12, 1925, there were already 30 Ajarian women in the club which was located on Liebknecht Street. In this club, along with teaching handicrafts, they also worked on the mental development of Ajarian women. As a result of active propaganda, the number of students was increasing every day. Gradually, women got freed from the captivity of darkness and achieved the fact that women, who had been oppressed until recently, were ready to participate in public life (Talakovadze, 1958, p. 151-152).

For a complete picture of the sociocultural and sociolinguistic portrait of a woman in the period under study, it is also necessary to take into account the sociolinguistic image of a woman: in the 1920–1930s, significant changes took place in Georgia and Ajara. This period was marked by intensive cultural and political changes, such as the processes of national self-determination, language and educational reforms.

Ajara is a multinational region, what largely determined the borrowing of words from other languages, especially Turkic ones (due to the sociopolitical circumstances mentioned above). During the period under study, the use of Turkisms was mainly limited to informal relationships: family, friends, neighbors, etc. We have found interesting facts in oral and written texts. As evidence, we can cite the so-called „დედაბრული ხელნაწერები“ ("Women's Manuscripts"), which are one of the varieties of the Georgian Mkhedruli script, common in Guria and Ajara. The name "Women's Manuscripts" is due to the fact that it was distributed mainly among women. Various types of letters were written by women, including many personal letters, in which the attitude of the woman to the addressees, mainly close relatives, is clearly visible - modesty, respect, reverence,

There is given an extract from one of the correspondences below:  
 „ბაშუმ სალოლსუნ (basun sagolsun – Condolences), შენი თავი მიმყოფოს ღმერთმა (May God bless you); ხეირდუას მოგახსენებ: ხეირდუა – (Kheirdua - blessing from the heart);

ბელქი (სპ. Belki – perhaps), you will not like it;

ენიშტე ალა... (eniste – son-in-law); სელამს და სელამეთობით ადრე ადრე მოკითხვას მოგახსენებ. Selamet (Arabic: good, good day), comp. – ამას ბევრი დღე მისცეს ღმერთმა... რომე მოხუელ და გვნახე, მოგვიკითხე, ღმერთმა სალამეთობა მოქცეს (May God grant you many good days of life... May God give you many years of life once you came and visited us) (Putkaradze, 1993, p. 610);

სელამეთით (goodness, safety) მიგიყუანოს ღმერთმა სახლში, სელამეთით გამცხოვროს იქში (May the Lord send peace into your home and may you live there in peace) (Putkaradze, 1993, p. 225).

As BSU professor M. Khakhutaishvili notes in her monograph, the "Women Manuscripts" could have been a sample of "ancient Georgian writing". It can be considered reliable in the sense that the two versions of the "Women's manuscripts" that we have are apocrypha texts containing fragments of the Gospels written by women, which give us reason to assume that the tradition of copying continued even during the Ottoman rule. The necessary attribute of identity linked the scribes (in this case, women) with the past." (Khakhutaishvili, 2017, p. 14).

Historical reality, the circumstances in which copyists had to "disseminate" such books, forced them to encrypt apocryphal texts containing the corresponding Gospels. The significance of these texts is also evidenced by the content of the manuscripts themselves: "...წინაშე თვალთა მისთა ეს ებისტოლე ანგაროზი იახლოს ზეცისა და ქვეყნისა და მისა ხატოვანებითა ევლიასითა..." „გადაარჩინე ამ ავგაროზის ბატონი ყოველისა მარცხისაგან..." (Save the owner of this apocryphal text from any failure, any evil...) (Khakhutaishvili, 2017, p. 14).

Traditional Ajarian culture has been influenced by Islam, although it has retained pre-Islamic Georgian elements. This is reflected in the language, customs, folklore and even some social practices. In one of the folk poems it is written:

„დუნია რომ მოიარო, ვერსად ნახო მისებრ ქალი,  
დიდი ნენე მერიემი, თელი ერგეს ზისა თვალი,  
დედაბრულის წერა იცის, არ გასწირა მისი ძველი,  
ოგი ჯამეს სტუმარია და ქილისეს მასპინძელი” (“If you travel around the world, you will never find a woman like her, Great

Nene Meriam, she knows how to write „women's manuscripts“, she has not sacrificed her old knowledge, She is a guest of the mosque and the hostess of the church") (Davitadze, 1990, p. 99).

The role of the Muslim woman, seemingly invisible, but at the same time an important figure in the preservation of the language and writing, her tolerant nature are clearly visible, she is a guest of the jame (mosque) (an honorary invited guest) and the hostess of the kilise (in Turkish - the church).

Women's speech can be more formal and polite, especially in the context of communication with strangers. This can be expressed in forms of addressing someone. An interesting aspect is the study of the speech of Muslim women and men. Etiquette and forms of address are important, as they show how Ajarian Muslim women addressed men, family members and peers at home. The apparent secondary role and invisibility of women in society affects the social and cultural context, in which women's rights and freedom are often unequal. Such a secondary status is especially evident in women's self-esteem and their role in the family, society and social relations.

The secondary status of women is clearly visible in speech relations with men; they use Turkish etiquette language markers, such as: "Aga", "Effendi", "Bey", "Aga-Effendi" - this is how they addressed even family members, since as men were considered the privileged gender, their socioeconomic dominance was recognized. Mazli (husband's brother), even if he was younger, stood at a higher level in relation to his sister-in-law. Men were considered heads of the family (high social role), so women treated them with shyness and respect.

Later, after the establishment of Soviet power, when the state began to care about the education and socialization of women, they also joined these processes, although gradually and with a lot of difficulties and obstacles.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, the images of Muslim women created by Parmen Loria, despite their artistic conventionality, are completely realistic characters, since they are taken from real life. The images of the women we analyzed were an integral part of the reality of Ajara, what is documented in numerous archival records and historiographic studies. Characterizing the first years of the communist regime, researchers paid great attention to the woman's issue, the problem of the full integration of Ajarian women into the new society. In order to strengthen work among

women, a women's department was created in the 1920s, which carried out extensive mass political work among women, and promoted the involvement of women in public activities.

In Parmen Loria's novel, a woman is not only a thematic figure, but also an ideological symbol – her transformation represents a profound upheaval in society. Woman, hidden in the shadow of the past, begins to act more and more „loudly“ in P. Loria's novel, and her liberation is not only a physical one, but also a metaphysical liberation of voice, personality and vision of the future.

The title of the novel "Dawn in the Gorge" is metaphorical; it does not simply refer to a natural phenomenon. It is a mythologized symbol of a new beginning, a mythologized symbol of the darkness of the gorge, personifying the process of cultural transformation. A woman, as one of the most oppressed figures in the closed and full of frames "gorge", is the main indicator of the dawn.

It should be noted that the analysis of folklore texts and etiquette forms of addressing Muslim women in the 1920s and 1930s reveals not only the specifics of the sociolinguistic representation of the woman's image, but also hidden forms of violence that manifest themselves at the level of language. Mechanisms of patriarchal control, oppression and marginalization are captured through expressions, addresses and folklore clichés; this allows us to consider language as an important tool for maintaining social hierarchy and a normative model of female behavior.

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