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Visual Representation of Women's Social and Cultural Transformation in 20th-century Adjara: Photography as a Sociocultural Text

Abstract: *This article examines the social and cultural transformation of Muslim women in twentieth-century Adjara through the analysis of family and archival photographs. Drawing on approaches from visual anthropology, cultural memory studies, and the sociology of photography, the study treats photographs not merely as illustrations of the past but as historical sources that reveal changing forms of female identity, social roles, and visual representation. The analysis focuses on three chronological periods: the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the era of Soviet modernization, and the late Soviet period. Particular attention is paid to clothing, bodily posture, visual self-presentation, and the relationship between women and public space. The photographic material reflects a gradual transformation from traditionally regulated forms of female visibility toward new modes of social participation and self-representation. At the same time, the images reveal the coexistence of continuity and change, showing how religious and cultural traditions persisted alongside processes of modernization. The article argues that photography provides valuable evidence for reconstructing women's everyday experiences and for understanding the broader social and cultural transformations that shaped twentieth-century Adjara.*

Keywords: *photography; Muslim women of Adjara; cultural memory; visual studies.*

Introduction

The social and cultural transformation of women has become an important subject in gender studies, visual anthropology, and cultural history. Photography offers a particularly valuable source for examining these processes because it preserves not only visual appearances but also social norms, cultural expectations, and changing forms of self-representation. In regions undergoing rapid political and social change,

photographs provide unique evidence of how gender identities were negotiated and transformed across generations.

Adjara provides a particularly interesting case for examining these processes because the region experienced profound social, political, and cultural transformations throughout the twentieth century. In Adjara – a region defined by its distinct religious, ethnic, and cultural characteristics – the transformation of women's status was conditioned both by traditional models of Muslim life and by the processes of Soviet modernization, which substantially altered women's social roles, their participation in education and labor, the norms governing everyday conduct, and the forms of visual self-representation.

These changes are clearly reflected in photographic material, which constitutes a unique source for the study of the evolution of women's social identity. Women's attire, hairstyle, bodily posture, gaze, and positioning within domestic or public space enable the reconstruction of how Adjarian women's self-perception and social function changed across different historical periods.

Despite the growing body of research on Adjara's social and cultural history, the visual representation of women has received only limited scholarly attention. Existing studies have primarily focused on ethnographic, religious, and social issues, while photography as a source for examining gendered experiences and cultural change remains largely unexplored. Studies in this area have predominantly focused on ethnographic description and on religious and social issues, while the dimension of visual culture has received comparatively little analytical consideration.

By examining photographs as sociocultural texts, this article contributes both to the study of Adjara's cultural heritage and to broader debates in gender studies, visual anthropology, and memory studies. It demonstrates how photographic images can illuminate the complex relationship between tradition, modernization, and changing forms of female identity in twentieth-century Adjara.

Photography as a Sociocultural Text: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

The study employs a combination of visual analysis and iconographic method, which allows, on the one hand, for the examination of the formal characteristics of photographic images -composition, posture, gaze, and attire - and, on the other hand, for the identification of the social, cultural, and symbolic meanings embedded within them.

The theoretical and methodological framework of the study is grounded in an interdisciplinary understanding of photography as a sociocultural text and a form of visual representation. One of its principal theoretical foundations is Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach, according to which photography should not be understood as a neutral reflection of reality but as a socially embedded practice shaped by cultural values, behavioral norms, and collective experience (Bourdieu, 1990). Photography participates in the construction of social memory and contributes to the symbolic reproduction of social relations.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the study of women's social and cultural transformation in twentieth-century Adjara. Photographic images provide evidence of changing forms of female visibility, sartorial culture, family and social roles, as well as the coexistence of traditional and modern cultural patterns. Within this framework, photographs are treated not merely as historical documents but as symbolic texts through which broader social and cultural transformations become visible.

The study also draws upon Roland Barthes' semiotic understanding of photography as a system of signs and meanings produced through visual codes, gestures, attire, spatial arrangements, and modes of representation (Barthes, 1981). From this perspective, photographs of Adjarian women may be interpreted as culturally constructed texts that communicate social values and perceptions of gender roles within specific historical contexts.

A further theoretical point of reference is Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which emphasizes that visual images do not simply mirror reality but actively participate in the production of meaning (Hall, 1997). Hall's approach allows the photographic record of twentieth-century Adjara to be examined as a representation of changing identities and social roles, revealing the complex interaction between tradition and modernization, religious heritage and Soviet cultural policies.

The study is based on family and archival photographs, supplemented by interviews and personal recollections. The photographic corpus covers different historical periods and allows a comparative analysis of changing forms of female representation and social identity. Oral testimonies provide additional contextual information that facilitates the interpretation of visual material and helps situate individual photographs within broader social and historical processes.

Visualizing Social Change: Women in Twentieth-Century Adjara

In conceptualizing photography as a sociocultural text, particular importance is attributed to Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, in which photography is understood not simply as a mechanical reproduction of reality but as a medium through which meanings are produced and communicated. Barthes emphasizes the unique relationship between photography and time, arguing that every photograph testifies to the actual existence of what it depicts. As he famously observes, "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once" (Barthes, 1981, p. 4). This understanding is especially relevant to the present study, as the photographs examined here constitute visual traces of women's lives and experiences in twentieth-century Adjara, preserving moments through which broader social and cultural transformations may be explored.

Barthes further explains the perception of photography through the concepts of *studium* and *punctum*. *Studium* refers to the cultural, historical, and social meanings through which a photograph can be interpreted, while *punctum* designates the particular detail that attracts the viewer's attention and evokes a personal emotional response. As Barthes notes, "A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes, 1981, p. 27).

These concepts are particularly useful for the present study. The photographs of Adjarian women can be examined not only as historical documents that provide information about dress, social roles, and everyday life (*studium*), but also as images that convey individual experiences and emotional dimensions of the past (*punctum*). This perspective makes it possible to approach photographic material simultaneously as historical evidence and as a medium through which personal and collective memories are preserved and communicated.

This theoretical framework provides an important methodological foundation for the study of women's visual representation in twentieth-century Adjara, rendering possible the analysis of photographic material as a text reflecting social and cultural identity.

An equally important theoretical perspective is provided by Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of photography as a social practice. In *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, Bourdieu argues that photographic activity is shaped by cultural norms, family traditions, and social hierarchies rather than by purely individual aesthetic choices (Bourdieu, 1990). As

he observes, “photographers see the recording of family life as the primary function of photography” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 30). From this perspective, family photographs may be interpreted not only as repositories of personal memory but also as visual expressions of social values and cultural expectations.

This approach is particularly relevant to the study of twentieth-century Adjara. The ways in which women are dressed, positioned, and represented within domestic and public settings reveal prevailing social norms and gender roles. At the same time, changes visible in photographic practices across different historical periods provide important evidence of broader processes of social and cultural transformation. Photographs therefore offer insight not only into individual lives but also into the changing structures of family, community, and gender relations.

A further theoretical point of reference is Stuart Hall’s theory of representation. Hall argues that visual images do not simply reflect social reality but actively participate in the production of meaning within specific historical, cultural, and ideological contexts (Hall, 1997). From this perspective, photographs may be understood as representations that both reflect and shape social perceptions of identity, gender, and cultural belonging.

This approach is particularly useful for the analysis of photographic material from twentieth-century Adjara. The images examined in this study may be read not only as records of women's lives but also as representations through which changing social roles and cultural values became visible. In this way, photography provides insight into the complex relationship between tradition and modernization, religious heritage and Soviet cultural policies, as well as continuity and change in women's everyday experiences.

The sociocultural status of women in Adjara underwent profound transformation throughout the twentieth century. Processes of modernization, expanding access to education, and women's increasing participation in public life gradually reshaped traditional gender roles and patterns of social behavior. The photographic material examined in this study makes it possible to trace these changes across different historical periods and to explore the evolving visual representations of Adjarian Muslim women.

For analytical purposes, the photographs have been grouped into three chronological periods: (1) the late nineteenth century to the 1920s; (2) 1930–1950; and (3) 1960–1980, corresponding to the late Soviet

period. Together, these images provide valuable evidence of everyday life, cultural norms, social expectations, and changing forms of female identity in Adjara.

Women and Everyday Life in Early Twentieth-Century Adjara (1900–1925)

Photographs dating from the early decades of the twentieth century reflect the strong influence of Muslim traditions and the continuing legacy of Ottoman cultural practices in Adjara. Women's dress, bodily comportment, and participation in everyday activities reveal a social environment in which religious norms and customary expectations played an important role in shaping female identity and visibility. The following photographs illustrate these cultural patterns while also preserving individual experiences and moments from women's everyday lives.



Photograph 1.
Adjarian
Woman Hold-
ing a Copper
Water Vessel/
 აჭარელი ქალი
 თუნგით
 ხელში (Batomi
 [Facebook
 page]. (2020,
 September 23).

This photograph provides valuable insight into the everyday lives of women in rural Adjara at the beginning of the twentieth century. Beyond its ethnographic value, the image reveals the gendered division of labor that structured village life. The act of carrying water in a *gugumi* (copper water vessel) was an essential part of household work and was largely performed by women. Springs and water sources functioned not only as places of daily necessity but also as important spaces of social interaction within the community.

The woman's traditional dress and headscarf reflect the cultural and religious environment of the period, while her solitary presence in the image emphasizes the central role of women in sustaining everyday domestic life. Particularly striking is her downward gaze, which lends the photograph an introspective quality and invites reflection on the personal dimension of labor and responsibility. In this sense, the image may be read not simply as a record of a routine activity but as a visual testimony to the lived experiences of women whose contributions were

fundamental to the functioning of village society.



Photograph 2. Young Adjarian Woman, Meriem (1925) (Kajaia, N., Personal photograph archive).

This portrait provides valuable insight into the visual representation of female identity in Adjara during the early twentieth century. The photograph reflects a cultural environment in which dress, bodily posture, and personal appearance functioned as important markers of social belonging and gender expectations.

Particularly significant is the woman's *lech'aki* (headscarf), which may be understood not only as an element of traditional attire but also as a visible expression of cultural and religious affiliation. Her long dark dress and carefully arranged appearance correspond to prevailing norms of modesty and respectability, while the necklace introduces an element of personal adornment that remains consistent with accepted social conventions. Attention is also drawn to her footwear and posture. Her posture is slightly tense, yet her overall bearing remains composed and dignified. This detail brings into sharper relief the inner condition of the individual within a traditional environment and the forms of self-presentation conditioned by social constraints.

The formal pose and composed expression suggest established modes of female self-presentation within a traditional social environment. Rather than emphasizing individual distinctiveness, the portrait reflects broader cultural expectations concerning femininity, dignity, and social propriety. At the same time, the photograph preserves the individuality of its subject, reminding the viewer that cultural norms were experienced and embodied by real women whose lives unfolded within these social frameworks.

Viewed together, the first two photographs reveal important aspects of women's everyday lives in early twentieth-century Adjara. They document a world shaped by religious tradition, domestic responsibilities, and clearly defined gender roles, while simultaneously preserving traces of personal identity and lived experience.

During the period of early Soviet transformation, the governing system offered women access to a range of social and professional roles. Women were no longer defined exclusively as mothers and wives; they were actively incorporated into the country's developmental processes, and the image of women was frequently deployed as a powerful propagandistic instrument. Soviet ideology purported to dissolve the boundaries between "feminine" and "masculine" occupations, thereby emphasizing gender equality and women's full emancipation. Soviet press and television actively promoted women in professions such as lathe operation, carpentry, and painting; however, in Georgia – and particularly in Adjara – these professional models did not become

widespread in women's everyday practice. Nevertheless, this does not imply that women were not engaged in arduous labor. On the contrary, women in highland Adjara were required on a daily basis to perform physically demanding and labor-intensive tasks, which constituted an inseparable component of the economic and domestic reality of village life.



Photograph 3. Adjarian Woman Wearing a *Lechaki*/ აჭარელი ქალი ლეჩაკით by L. Kekelidze, n.d., National Photo Chronicle, National Parliamentary Library of Georgia (<https://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/87677>).

This portrait illustrates the persistence of traditional cultural and religious norms in Adjara during the period of early Soviet transformation. The woman's *lechaki* (headscarf) remains the most prominent visual element of the image, serving not only as a component of traditional attire but also as a marker of cultural continuity and social identity. In this context, dress functions as a visible expression of belonging to a community shaped by long-standing religious and cultural traditions.

The photograph may also be interpreted as a representation of a generation whose life experience was formed before the profound social changes associated with Soviet modernization. The woman's appearance, facial expression, and posture convey a sense of dignity and resilience that invites reflection on the experiences of women whose lives were shaped by demanding forms of labor and strong communal expectations.

From Barthes's perspective, the image may be approached not only through its *studium* – its ethnographic and historical information – but also through its *punctum*, the details that create a personal and emotional response in the viewer. In this sense, the portrait functions as more than a record of an individual woman; it becomes a visual reminder of a broader historical generation and its cultural experience.

Taken together, the first three photographs document a social world in which women's identities were closely connected to family responsibilities, religious traditions, and established community norms. At the same time, they reveal important differences between individual experiences and modes of self-representation. While the images preserve visual markers of cultural continuity, they also provide insight into the diverse ways in which women occupied and negotiated their social roles. The following photograph further illustrates these themes through the representation of an elderly woman whose life embodies the intersection of memory, tradition, and everyday experience.



Photograph 4. An Elderly Woman, Asiye, in Her Yard (Ardzenadze, A. Personal photograph archive. Batumi, Georgia)‘

This photograph offers a valuable visual record of village life in Adjara during the mid-twentieth century. The domestic setting, the courtyard, and the woman's appearance situate the image within a social world shaped by family, land, and everyday labor. Her traditional headscarf remains an important marker of cultural continuity, while elements of her clothing suggest the gradual influence of changing fashions and social conditions.

Beyond its documentary value, the photograph may also be understood as a representation of memory and generational experience. The woman's age, posture, and facial expression evoke a lifetime shaped by historical change, while the image itself preserves a moment

that would otherwise have disappeared. In this sense, the photograph functions not only as evidence of everyday life but also as a visual trace of personal and collective history.

Barthes's notion of *ça a été* ("that-has-been") is particularly relevant here (Barthes, 1981). The photograph reminds the viewer that the woman portrayed once occupied this space and lived within this social world. It preserves not only her image but also the memory of a generation whose experiences connected traditional village life with the transformations of the twentieth century. Through this perspective, the photograph becomes a medium of cultural memory as much as a document of historical reality.

In this photograph, too, it is precisely this sense that proves most powerful. This woman genuinely existed; she sat in that yard, at that specific moment, and the photograph remained as a trace of her existence. For this reason, the photograph is no longer merely an image; it is evidence of time, of memory, and of human existence. G. Darchiashvili likewise attributes particular significance to photography as a means of reconstructing and preserving historical reality, observing that "the pursuit of truth is the destiny of humankind, and it is achieved precisely through research, to which photography contributes distinctively" (Darchiashvili, 2024, p. 215; translated by the author).

In the comparatively later period (the 1960s–1980s), the Soviet woman is represented as a fully empowered and active member of society. Moreover, over time, the parameters of individual perception of female beauty underwent change; women's attire shifted in accordance with their established social roles; and the educated, civically engaged woman – within the framework of communist ideology – occupied a particularly prominent social position and commanded high levels of social recognition and esteem. As a result, a stereotypical ideal took shape: the ideally educated woman distinguished by a refined aesthetic appearance (in dress and hairstyle), by individuality, and by the ability to successfully fulfill both domestic and public functions.

An exception to this pattern may be observed in a small group of elderly women – found predominantly in highland Adjara – who retained the headscarf and adhered strictly to Muslim religious tradition. Radical changes in their way of life were less apparent, and traditional domestic and cultural norms largely remained intact. This was understandable: for women of advanced age, the alteration of a habitual way of life constituted a particular difficulty. It is important to note, however, that these women nonetheless supported their children – including

their daughters – in pursuing education and adapting to the demands of the contemporary world, in the hope of a better future. Consequently, a pronounced divergence was frequently observable between the generations of mothers and daughters, both in terms of educational attainment and in terms of the character of their respective ways of life.

While the previous photographs primarily reflect the persistence of traditional cultural patterns, the following images reveal the growing impact of Soviet modernization on women's social roles and forms of self-representation. Changes in education, employment, and public participation gradually reshaped women's visibility and identity, creating new generational distinctions that became increasingly evident in photographic representation.



Photograph 5. An Elderly Woman and a Young Woman (Ardzenadze, A. Personal photograph archive. Batumi, Georgia).

This photograph occupies a central place within the visual narrative of women's transformation in twentieth-century Adjara because it brings two generations into a single frame. Through differences in dress, posture, and self-presentation, the image reveals both continuity and change in women's social and cultural identities. The older woman remains visually associated with traditional cultural patterns, while the younger woman reflects emerging forms of female visibility shaped by modernization and changing social expectations.

The significance of the photograph lies not only in the contrast between the two figures but also in their physical proximity. The gesture of touch and the shared space suggest the persistence of familial bonds and intergenerational continuity despite broader social transformations. In this sense, the image illustrates how cultural change is experienced not as a simple replacement of one model by another, but as a process negotiated within families and across generations.

From Bourdieu's perspective, the photograph may be interpreted as a visual representation of the transmission and transformation of social practices across generations. At the same time, Hall's concept of representation helps to illuminate how different models of femininity coexist within a single image. The photograph does not merely document two women; it represents a moment in which distinct cultural and social worlds encounter one another.

Particularly striking is the coexistence of traditional and modern visual markers. The headscarf worn by the older woman remains a visible sign of cultural continuity, whereas the younger woman's appearance reflects changing forms of self-presentation and social participation. The image therefore functions as a powerful visual testimony to the gradual reconfiguration of women's identities in Adjara during the Soviet period.

The decades following the establishment of Soviet power were marked by extensive social transformation. Particular emphasis was placed on women's education, participation in professional life, and integration into public institutions. These developments contributed to the gradual reconfiguration of gender roles and forms of female self-representation.

The photographic record reflects these changes in multiple ways. European-style clothing became increasingly widespread, hairstyles changed, and women appeared more frequently in educational, professional, and public settings. While traditional cultural practices did not

disappear, they increasingly coexisted with new social expectations and models of femininity promoted by Soviet modernization.



Photograph 6. Young Adjarian Women (Ardzenadze, A. Personal photograph archive. Batumi, Georgia).

The photographs of young Adjarian women reflect important changes in female self-representation during the late Soviet period. In contrast to the earlier images discussed in this study, traditional markers of religious and cultural identity become less visible, while new forms of dress, bodily presentation, and social visibility emerge. European-style clothing, modern hairstyles, and confident engagement with the camera suggest changing expectations concerning women's roles in society.

These visual transformations correspond to broader social developments associated with Soviet modernization, including expanded access to education, professional employment, and participation in public life. The women portrayed in these photographs appear as students, teachers, and socially active members of their communities, reflecting new opportunities and changing social norms.

From the perspective of Hall's theory of representation, these photographs may be understood as visual expressions of changing models

of femininity. They reveal how new social identities were constructed and communicated through appearance, posture, and modes of self-presentation. At the same time, the images should not be interpreted simply as evidence of a complete break with the past. Rather, they illustrate the complex interaction between continuity and change that characterized women's experiences in twentieth-century Adjara.

Viewed in relation to the preceding photographs, these images reveal the extent of social and cultural transformation across generations. Together, they demonstrate how photography can serve as a valuable source for examining the changing position of women and the broader processes of modernization that reshaped everyday life in Adjara.

Taken as a whole, the photographic corpus examined in this study documents not only changes in women's appearance but also broader transformations in social roles, family relations, cultural norms, and forms of public participation.

Conclusion

The analysis of the photographic material presented in this study demonstrates the complex transformation of the social and cultural identity of Muslim women in Adjara from the late nineteenth century to the late Soviet period. Through a chronological comparison of family and archival photographs, it becomes possible to trace changes in women's appearance, social roles, forms of self-representation, and participation in public life, while also identifying elements of continuity that persisted across generations.

The photographs reveal that the transformation of women's identities did not occur as a simple replacement of tradition by modernity. Rather, the images document a gradual and often uneven process in which inherited cultural practices coexisted with new social expectations shaped by education, urbanization, and Soviet modernization. Differences in dress, bodily presentation, and public visibility reflect broader changes in gender relations, while at the same time preserving traces of religious and cultural traditions that remained important components of everyday life.

The study further demonstrates the analytical value of photography as a historical and anthropological source. Consistent with the approaches developed by Barthes, Bourdieu, and Hall, photographs may be understood not only as visual records of past realities but also as forms of representation through which social meanings, cultural values, and collective memories are produced and communicated. Family

and archival photographs therefore provide access not only to historical events and social conditions but also to the ways individuals and communities understood and represented themselves.

Ultimately, the visual transformation of Adjarian women documented in these photographs forms part of a broader history of social and cultural change in twentieth-century Adjara. The images reveal the dynamic interaction of continuity and transformation, demonstrating how photography can contribute to a deeper understanding of gender, memory, and cultural identity in periods of profound historical change.

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