

Women in Georgia: Trace of Islam

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Abstract—Islam appeared in Adjara (Georgia's autonomous province) between 1510 and the beginning of the seventeenth century when the Ottoman Empire started to expand in the Caucasus. As a result of spreading of Islam in Adjara, the Islam traditions were introduced to the local life. The research focuses on the details characterizing the life of Adjarian women, as well as their traditions, culture and challenges. The causes determining the change or preservation of separate survivals connected with the woman's status are of considerable interest from the point of view of ethnography. The study is mainly based on the ethnographic and historic sources.

Index Terms—Islamic tradition, Adjarian women, Georgia, Ottoman Empire.

I. INTRODUCTION

Georgia, like the whole Caucasus region, historically was and still is a place of encounter of the East and the West, Christianity and Islam. It's a unique crossroad of civilizations. It is exactly this distinctive geopolitical location and the immediate neighborhood with the Islamic world which has been one of the key factors of the increasing international interest in our country.

In view of rapidly growing globalization tendencies in the modern world, Islamic studies are considered in Georgia to be of much significance and interest for scholars.

The whole history of relationships between Georgia and Muslim world has been complex and multidimensional. The development of Islam in Georgia has been characterized by a number of peculiarities. This fact has had an influence on social, cultural and family lives of the Islamic communities living in Georgia.

Muslims constitute 9.9%,[1] (or 463,062), of the Georgian population. According to other sources Muslims constitute 10-13% of Georgia's population [2]. There are two major Muslim groups in Georgia. The ethnic Georgian Muslims are Sunni Hanafi and are concentrated in Autonomous Republic of Adjara of Georgia bordering Turkey. The ethnic Azerbaijani Muslims are predominantly Shia Ithna Ashariyah and are concentrated along the border with Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The Role of the Ottoman Empire in Adjara emerged in the XVI century. The process of Islamization was difficult. At first, Islam was spreading mainly among the nobles. This was due to the socio-economic and political reasons. Before tanzimat (broad reform in the Ottoman Empire in 1839-1870) individuals converted to Islam as a result of their free choice. Adjara remained under Turkish rule until 1878,

when it was seized by the Russian Empire. By that time Adjarians had been Muslim for ten to fifteen generations. They viewed themselves as a separate ethnic group, with their own traditions that were derived from Islam.

II. WOMEN AND ISLAMIC TRADITIONS IN ADJARA

A. Ottoman Adjara

A woman in Adjara occupied by the Turks was particularly powerless and degraded. A Russian historian Al. Frenkel, who visited Adjara in 1879, in his book 'Essays about Churuksu (Kobuleti) and Batumi' said that in some villages, namely in Kapnistavi, girls were simply omitted in the census of the population, as they were not considered humans at all. It is also a fact that the spread of Islam in Adjara was especially opposed by the women. This is evidenced by historical and ethnographic material. When Rostom, the pasha of Akhaltsikhe, in the name of Sultan, ordered his subordinates to adopt Islam, his own wife objected to his order and tried to avoid treachery to the nation and faith by throwing herself to the precipice. Adjarian women struggled against the Islam policy even with arms in their hands [3]-[5].

The national culture was quite depressed during the Ottoman reign in Adjara. The Ottomans, besides spreading Islam, tried to spread Turkish writing and education in Adjara. Georgian, as the native language was persecuted, Georgian books, manuscripts and rare specimens of Georgian art were destroyed. 'The Georgian language in the Ottoman Georgia shared the fate of the Christian religion,' – wrote D. Bakradze [6]. The spread of the Turkish language was greatly supported by schools opened at mosques (jame – in Adjara) or madrasahs educating pupils in the Turkish language. The madrasahs were used as one of the most efficient means to convert the population to the new religion. There were total 180 mosques functioning on the present territory of Adjara then (Sanjak of Lazistan: 24 mosques was in district of Batumi; 17 – in district of Churuksu; 30- in district of upper Ajara; 39 - in district of lower Ajara; 29 – in district of Machakhli; 31 – in district of Gonio). The children were made to study Arab prayers by heart, whose meaning was absolutely unclear to them.

Girls were eligible to study at madrasahs only till the age of 12, and they were taught only reading, not writing so that to prevent them from writing love letters in the future. There were no religious institutions of higher learning in Adjara under the Ottomans. Instead, the children of the Adjarian nobility were often sent to religious schools in Turkey and other Muslim countries, and as a result, the clerical elite tended to have a pro-Turkish orientation [7].

Another thing to spread in Adjara was an Islamic tradition of marriage. A girl was obliged to study at madrasah as she reached the age of 8. Since the age of 13, a

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girl was not allowed to appear before men without a veil (The wearing of the veil was instituted by Muhammad in the early days of Islam. Within about one hundred years of his death, the institution of veiling and seclusion had been spread all over the Middle East). Neither was she allowed to walk in the street freely, as her parents were afraid of her talking to some fellow what was a public disgrace.

A bridegroom and bride were not allowed to see each other until the betrothal day. The fellow had to see the bride in secret, with the help of a matchmaker so that the bride would be unaware. A woman was not allowed to show her face even on the day of her marriage. She had her face covered with a veil, the Duagh. After the party, the woman had her Duagh taken off and replaced by a transparent cloth. As for the bridegroom, he was not allowed to see the bride until the end of the wedding [8].

The obligation of wearing a veil in Adjara should be explained by the spread of Islamic religion. Veil is not met with the women's garments of other corners of Georgia. Thus, it was unfamiliar to the Georgian reality. The common colors of veil were white and black, rarely blue. There are no regularities observed with using veils of different colors [9].

The most suitable age for marriage was 17 through 20. Marriage of minors was a common practice, and they sometimes married a woman without her consent [10]. Uncles of the bride's mother's line enjoyed particular priority in this respect, who married a woman by considering their own interests only. The nobility, property qualification and business arrangement were of priority. A bride could have been even redeemed for Kalim. Usually, a fellow had his bride chosen by his mother, sister or sister-in-law, who had the chance to watch the bride's behaviour, judge her pluses and minuses. Approving a woman as one's bride was called 'Selection'. This was followed by gathering the data about the woman. Then, a matchmaker, or envoy was sent to the woman's family. They usually, planned betrothal on Jum'a (Friday) with the full moon. The Muslim religion prohibited marriage during the Ramadan great fast. The marriage was attended and registered by a mullah. In lieu of the marrying couple, the consent to marriage was given by attorneys.

The mullah drew the marriage document called Niqah in the Arabic language. The Niqah stated the amount of Mahr (Mehir in Adjara) in the first instance to be paid by the bridegroom's to the bride after the marriage, or in case of divorce (Mahr is the gift which the bridegroom has to give the bride when the contract of marriage is made and which becomes the property of the wife. Mahr is usually divided into two parts: prompt mahr (muajjal), which is paid at the time of marriage; and deferred mahr (muwajjal), which is paid at the termination of marriage by death, divorce, or other agreed events).

The amount of Mahr was fixed in advance and amounted to 1001 Roubles; however, haggling was allowed, and the parties could even have brought down the Mahr as low as 101 Roubles. The dowry was denoted by Persian Jahiz (Jeiz in Adjara). Dowry is more cattle, while Jeiz is more ware and other items. The inevitable element of dowry was cows or poultry, several changes of linen, chest and household

items. The dowry was the property of a woman's family and thus, it was in no way related to the ransom [11],[12].

Polygamy and incest in Adjara should be explained by the influence of the Muslim religion, as these are wholly admissible customs by the Koran and Sharia. However, marrying for the second time without the consent of one's first wife and her brothers and uncles was reproachable in Adjara. The first wife was given a say in choosing the second wife. However, all travelers and researchers point out that polygamy was extremely rare in Adjara and was the case only with the upper layers of the society. Most cases of bigamy were because of the problem of childlessness.

Incest was widely spread in Adjara. This was the case for instance, between the sisters- and brothers-in-law, brothers-in-law and deceased wife's sisters or cousins. Incest helped to painlessly solve many economic concerns in everyday life by means of marriage. The marriage between the cousins of mother's line with no common property interests was prohibited. Marriage between foster sisters and brothers was also prohibited. Foster-relationship was regarded as an impediment to marriage in the same degrees as blood relationship; People strictly observing this rule in Adjara is the evidence of Muslim influence. Besides, the marriage between the children and godsons/goddaughters of a godfather was prohibited. According to the saying, seven generations were set as a boundary for this limitation. It should be noted that baptism in Adjara was performed with a Muslim tradition and was associated with circumcision; however, prohibited marriage between the godfather and goddaughter and their offspring should be the survival of the Christian religion, as no such prohibitions exist in Islam. Most marriages with the people of different beliefs or nationalities meant bringing a woman to Adjara, not marrying a woman at a place other than Adjara. Usually, the Adjarian preferred becoming related with the Adjarians. As it is known, this preference helped preserve the Georgian and Georgians' customs and habits in the Turkish surroundings [4], [13].

Levirate marriage has been practiced by Adjarian societies. Levirate marriage is a type of marriage in which a woman marries one of her husband's brothers after her husband's death. The term is a derivative of the Latin word levir, meaning "husband's brother". This custom was prohibited in Georgia in the 16-th century, but Islam favoured its revitalization. However, the prolonged custom of levirate marriage in Adjara was not only due to the spread of Islam, but also some economic factors, as well. In particular, in case of marrying a widow, the husband's family retained the widow's share and dowry and was exempted from the marriage expenses [14].

A study of all aspects of marriage in relation to economic and household problems, as well as to the interests of the family and the structural, labour and legal interrelations of the members of the family has shown that perpetuation in Adjara of many aspects of marriage was determined by the economic and household interests of the family and the influence of Islamic religion.

The main cause of divorce was unfaithfulness, idleness or childlessness. Fornication was the principal reason for divorce. A head of family would raise the question of divorce between the woman accused of adultery and her

husband at the family meeting, which was attended by the woman's relations, too. The woman charged with adultery was given neither a share in the family, nor Mahr. There were the facts about punishing the couple detected in adultery. They were usually stoned.

The institute of divorce was subject to significant transformation due to the Shariat. The document of divorce was called Talaq (Boshgadigh). Talaq - repudiation of a wife by a husband, a form of divorce, effected by pronouncing the special formula – anti talak ("you are dismissed"). A husband, in the presence of witnesses, would take proper number of pebbles or clods in his hand and throw them behind his back saying 'I am setting her free'. The ethnographic material evidences that they tried to avoid saying 'Talaq' for three times. Sunni practice requires no witnesses, and allows a husband to end a relationship by saying the one, two or triple talaq. Reconciliation between the same husband and wife is possible if the divorce was pronounced only once or twice, but on the third time, the divorce is final.

Notwithstanding the cause of divorce, the children stayed with their father. If a child was of a minor age, he/she stayed with his/her mother and was returned to the father's family after some time. In case a widowed woman stayed in her husband's family, she was entitled to 1/4 or half of the family property. Some cases of divorce ended up by a woman taking cattle with her and leaving Jeiz to her children. A woman was not entitled to the dowry for her second marriage. In case a woman died, a part of her dowry constituting her personal belongings was given to her unmarried daughters, with the rest of the things remaining in the family [15],[16].

Important questions of the economic and moral status of the family, including such questions as marriage, divorce, division of the family and so on were not settled by the head of the family and his wife alone. Such questions were agreed upon in consultation with elder men of the family or with the brothers and uncles. It should be noted that the high rights of the elder woman in the family contradict the view according to which Adjarian women deprived of all rights in the family.

The woman's rights in her family were somehow limited. Despite a woman's hard work, she was obliged to make dinner for guests, but was not allowed to meet them, especially if they were strangers to her, not relatives. A woman had no right to meddle in men's business.

Man and women of one family had dinner separately. We think that the like principle of differentiation between men and women in Adjara should be more of a general Georgian, not a pure Muslim nature, as similar customs and habits were spread in other corners of Georgia, too (in Pshav-Khevsureti for instance). Islam merely helped preserve this habit for some period.

Islam had a certain influence on the cult of the dead, too. A woman was not allowed to mourn over her deceased husband in voice, but only silently, and no mother was allowed to cry over her dead child loudly. Women's participation in the funeral procession was strictly prohibited. A woman was to be buried in a coffin to protect her body against a touch of a strange man. Besides, a woman's dead body was to be buried deeper than a man's

body. A woman was allowed to visit the cemetery only one week, i.e. on the eighth day after the demise. These Islamic habits, which were introduced to Adjara, were put into effect by imams and mullahs [17].

The researchers are unanimous in confessing that it was an Adjarian woman with the principal role in protecting and preserving the native language. It is true that the woman was isolated from the social life and concluded to the family life, but in return, she had extensive possibilities to protect the sanctity of the Georgian language in her family. It is due to the women's merit that archaic Georgian expressions and names of domestic things have been survived in Adjara. "All the members of a household speaks in Georgian They said that fifteen years ago women and children didn't know Ottoman language, but nowadays only women don't know this language(Turkish)"[8].

Georgian Muslim women in Adjara also preserved the elements of the ancient national Georgian dresses. Under the veil (yashmak), they wore Georgian clothes with Georgian embroidery on the bib (It should particularly be noted here that the embroidery with a cross was still retained notwithstanding its direct connection to Christianity). Veil is not met with the women's garments of other corners of Georgia. Thus, it was strange to the Georgian reality. Besides the factory-made clothes, homemade wool and silk clothes were also used to make a veil. The common colors of veil were white and black, rarely blue. There are no regularities observed with using veils of different colors. Veil has been established in the everyday life of the Ajarians. Traditionally, an Adjarian woman played a leading role in the family life and folk holidays, and always remained loyal to traditions [18].

B. Present Day Adjara

In 1917, the law about the equality of men and women was adopted officially and in the Soviet period the government clearly limited religious rules. On the other hand, a 1924 decree abolished the Sharia courts in Adjara and women's committees were set up. In 1926, religious subjects were removed from the school curriculum and women were prohibited from wearing the full veil (On 20 July 1929, a campaign discouraging the wearing of headscarves was launched). Mosques were gradually closed down. Old marriage customs and habits were declared invalid. The government tried to abolish madrasahs and extend women's rights by virtue of the legislation. Progressive transformation of identity was further enhanced by a campaign for changing Islamic first names to classic Georgian ones. In 1929, a special committee developed a provision envisaging the use of penalties for using foreign customs and habits. For instance, the one taking a ransom from a son-in-law was fined and sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment. A forced marriage of a woman was punishable with 3 years of imprisonment. The same penalty was envisaged in case of marrying a girl until the marriage age, and polygamy was also punishable. Marriage in present-day Adjara differs radically from the old times. A major role was played by the emancipation of women and fight against religious survivals. Though some old wedding rites do exist in the wedding ritual, they have lost much of their original significance. As for the veil, it had become

customary and is more or less worn by the women in Adjara to present [19]-[23].

In the post-Soviet period, the emergence of democratic values was followed by the reislamization process and rehabilitation of Muslim traditions. This process, however, affected only parts of the population [14].

III. CONCLUSION

An Analysis of ethnographic materials, literature data shows that under the long Turkish domination in Adjara the life of the local population, including women, came under a definite influence of Islam. The phenomena of polygamy, marriage between the blood relations and among the underage, obligation of wearing a yashmak (veil), prohibition of marriage between foster brothers and sisters, a form of divorce effected by pronouncing the special formula – talak, father's right to his children after divorce, tradition of ritual stoning as a punishment for fornication, prohibiting a woman to loudly mourn over her dead husband or child or take part in a funeral procession and other similar traditions in Adjara should be explained by the spread of Islamic religion. But Islam also helped the conservation of old Georgian traditions and customs and habits. It should be also noted that separate customs and rituals regarding Adjarian women were mainly characterized by common Georgian features.

Despite the three centuries of Turkish rule, the Adjarian women preserved and developed the typically Georgian forms of life-style and culture, as well as the primary components of national values: the Georgian language, traditional way of life and ethnic self-awareness.

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