

History

Informal Manifestations of Muslim Identity in the Muslim Community of Ajara as Historical Remnants of Muslim (Sharia) Law

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Abstract. The study explores the emergence and development of informal practices of Muslim identity in Ajara, examining them as mechanisms of cultural resilience and social adaptation. The novelty of the research lies in demonstrating that these practices are not merely historical remnants, but dynamic social mechanisms that simultaneously preserve traditional elements and adjust to political, social, and cultural transformations. The aim of the study is to identify the historical and social contexts that shaped local Muslim practices – from the period of Ottoman rule through the Soviet era and to the contemporary transitional period. The findings illustrate how the community has managed to preserve its identity through a culturally normative hybrid that reinforces social order and internal solidarity. The conclusion is that in Ajara, Muslim informal elements still function in the Ajara Muslim community today, as historical remnants of Muslim (Sharia) law, which contribute to the strengthening collective self-awareness, cultural continuity, and social stability. © 2026 Bull. Natl. Acad. Sci. Georg.

Keywords: Ajara, Muslim identity, Muslim (Sharia) law, informal practices, cultural sustainability

Introduction

Ajara is a historically significant region, where, beginning in the seventeenth century, the influence of the Ottoman Empire led to the establishment of Islam and Islamic religious practices. Today, Islam constitutes an important part of the cultural memory and identity of the Ajarian population (Kldiashvili, 2022). The formation of the Muslim community was a complex and protracted process. During the initial period of Ottoman rule, the spread of Islam was driven primarily by social factors. Subsequently, under the combined influ-

ence of political, social, cultural, and economic conditions, the local population gradually converted to Islam. The region's administrative system, while ensuring imperial control, also entailed certain concessions intended to enable local feudal lords to protect the borders and demonstrate loyalty to the imperial center (Chachibaia, 2020).

Despite the formal abolition of Sharia institutions, certain norms have been preserved within the local community and continue to function as informal religious and cultural practices (Kldiashvili, 2022). In the highlands of Ajara, mixed-

religion families create a hybrid environment in which Christian and Muslim traditions coexist; religious holidays are marked by ritual inclusivity, even as symbolic religious boundaries remain in place (Abuladze, 2022).

Local cultural practice encompasses personal names, religious terms, traditional dishes, and architectural patterns in which Islamic and indigenous elements are interwoven (Kldiashvili, 2022).

The present study aims to describe and analyze the informal Muslim practices preserved in Ajara, focusing on their historical origins, social functions, and their impact on community identity, family relations, and inheritance traditions.

The research underscores that knowledge of these practices is essential for maintaining local identity, strengthening social order, and ensuring cultural resilience in the context of ongoing globalization processes.

Materials and Methods

Studies related to the topic (Kldiashvili, 2022; Andriashvili, 1973; Chachibaia, 2020; Abuladze, 2022; Ananidze, 2022) demonstrate that informal Muslim religious practices constitute a historically formed sociocultural system that continues to influence community identity, social order, and gender structures.

The research employs a historical-social approach, drawing on archival materials and analyses of local interviews, which together illustrate the social functions of informal Muslim practices and their culturally normative hybrid forms.

The theoretical basis of the study is the concept of the cultural-normative hybrid (Friedman, 2014), which explains how diverse legal and cultural norms are integrated within social systems. The informal Muslim practices present in Ajara operate as mechanisms of social regulation, ensuring the preservation of identity, and combining historical, religious, and local traditional elements. This framework helps elucidate the role these practices

occupy within the social structure of the contemporary Muslim community.

Discussion and Results

From the early 17th century until the 1870s, Ajara was part of the Ottoman Empire, which led to the spread of Islam and the establishment of Sharia law in the region. These developments significantly shaped familial and legal practices (Baramidze, 2010). Even after incorporation into the Russian Empire, a judicial system based on Sharia and tradition remained active in the region. Higher-level justice addressed matters related to state interests, while at the village level, local law was administered by village elders or an imam together with members of the Mejlis, primarily in matters of property, marriage, and family relations. At the district level, the people's court consisted of three elected members and was headed by a Qadi, appointed by the governor; this body was subordinate to the Okrug people's court, which dealt exclusively with major criminal cases (Lisovskiy, 1887).

After the establishment of the Soviet regime in Ajara, religious institutions and practices were subjected to strict restrictions. Initially, Sharia courts were permitted to operate and were even funded through the state budget (Ajara Central State Archive). However, by the end of 1924 they were abolished (Andriashvili, 1973), and in 1926 the local Muftiate and judicial bodies of the Muslim community were fully dismantled (Andriashvili, 1973). As a result, the public activities of the Muslim community came to a halt, and religious knowledge and practice survived only in covert, orally transmitted forms. Citizens developed hybrid ways of preserving certain Sharia norms in family life, inheritance, and ritual practices – forms that continue to characterize the religious-cultural landscape of highland Ajara today.

This period was marked by the severe suppression of religious practices, which fostered the emergence of clandestine and socially embedded hybrid forms. Muslim marriage, unequal inheri-

tance shares between sons and daughters, restricted access to divorce for women, and discriminatory patterns of property distribution within the family often persisted despite official prohibitions.

Despite the prohibition of religious marriage, families often resorted to Islamic rituals covertly in order to ensure the legal status of their children. Likewise, burials were conducted at night, Qur'an recitation was discontinued, and holiday prayers were held only within households, since the only functioning mosque was located in Batumi and mobility was restricted. These processes produced a three-layer hybrid system in which Islamic norms coexisted with Soviet regulations and community-based social control.

During the Soviet period, religious knowledge was transmitted primarily through oral tradition, which led to divergent interpretations and modified practices. Some traditional rituals were preserved in secret, while others gradually weakened. By the late 1980s, these informal practices slowly re-emerged in the public sphere (Chachibaia, 2020). Today, they continue to shape the socio-religious life of the Muslim community in Ajara, forming a hybrid cultural space in which historical Islamic norms coexist with local traditions and oral beliefs. Despite the abolition of formal Sharia institutions, these norms survived as residual elements and continue to play an important role in contemporary Muslim identity and social structure.

Contemporary analysis shows that a segment of the population in Ajara – particularly in the highland regions – actively strives to preserve its religious identity within the framework of Muslim traditions. Although the formal institutions of Sharia law were abolished long ago, certain norms persist today in the form of informal religious practices. These norms continue to influence everyday social life, especially in the domains of family relations and inheritance, where cultural-religious regulations play a significant role. These processes ensure the preservation and ongoing functioning of

residual elements of Sharia law within the contemporary social reality of Ajara.

In this context, it is particularly important to highlight those religious rituals and practices that continue to function within the Muslim communities of Ajara, reflecting the living remnants of Sharia law. These include the daily five-time prayers, recitation of the Quran, animal sacrifice, various forms of charitable practices, and the observance of the Prophet's birthday (Mevludi), as well as Ramadan and Eid al-Adha celebrations. Additionally, there are elements such as practices reinforced by local superstitions (e.g., Kashatoba – abstaining from tilling the land or other activities on certain days), incantations associated with Islamic traditions (particularly among elderly women), the wearing of headscarves by women, and other similar cultural-religious markers. Collectively, these practices constitute a living form of normative hybridity, serving as an important mechanism for preserving identity and transmitting cultural memory among the population of Ajara.

An important component is the funerary ritual practice, which in the Muslim communities of Ajara continue to reflect the influence of Sharia law. These include ritual burial procedures, such as wrapping the deceased in a white shroud, the promptness of interment (typically within 24 hours), and the strict prohibition of alcohol during the Kelekhi ceremony. Death and burial practices clearly reflect the principle of "respect for one's own faith": the deceased is generally interred according to the religious norms to which they adhered in life. However, in certain cases – for example, the burial of a Christian according to Muslim rites – potential conflicts may arise. This underscores that matters of religious identity become particularly sensitive at the time of death and highlights both the delicate balance and the challenges present within the community (Abuladze, 2022).

Elements of Islamic law, as cultural-religious legacies, are observed infrequently but remain present in the social life of highland communities

in Ajara. These elements are manifested, to some extent, in the influence of religious institutions – for example, the involvement of clergy in resolving family disputes – and in the regulation of moral and behavioral norms, such as restrictions on women's right to divorce, formal limitations on interactions between men and women in public spaces, and the traditional practice of female body covering.

The legacies of religious law are also evident in matters of inheritance. Specifically, the application of different rules for sons and daughters, the comparatively limited influence of women in family property decisions, and the unequal distribution of shares from communal property favoring men continue to be observed as manifestations of traditional norms. Additionally, some families and communities maintain the practice of zakat – charitable giving – which serves to support those in need. Although the payment of zakat is no longer obligatory under contemporary conditions, it persists as a remnant of religious-cultural tradition.

It is also noteworthy that certain aspects of Muslim law established during the Ottoman Empire – sharia – are reflected in cases of polygyny in the highland villages of Ajara. According to tradition, a man could marry multiple wives provided he ensured their equitable care and well-being.

However, existing research and an analysis of investigative and judicial practices at the end of the twentieth century indicate that cases of polygyny in Ajara were more influenced by regional and social circumstances than by the direct application of strict Muslim laws.

Currently, the practice of polygyny has been largely minimized and is now virtually absent in the highland villages of Ajara. It is noteworthy that under the current Criminal Code of Georgia, adopted in July 1999, polygyny and multiple marriages are no longer considered criminal offenses, whereas Article 231 of the previous Criminal Code of Georgia, in force until June 2000, recognized such practices as criminal offenses and prescribed corresponding penalties.

Some elements of Sharia law have been preserved in Ajara due to the opening of the state border with Turkey and subsequent developments. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Muslim boarding schools emerged in the region, enabling young people to study the Qur'an and learn about Islamic practices, thereby facilitating the dissemination and integration of customs. Religious schools in Turkey also fostered youth interest in Islam, supporting the preservation of remnants of Sharia law in Ajara and their continuation in social practices. The internal cohesion of the contemporary Muslim community is situational, as different groups hold diverse views on religious, social, political, financial, and legal matters (Zviadadze, 2020).

Conclusions

The study of informal forms of Muslim identity in Ajara has demonstrated that local religious practices constitute a unique form of cultural-normative hybridity, combining traditional ethics, experiences of social order, and religious beliefs. This hybrid structure functions as a mechanism for maintaining social order, regulating ethical behavior, and preserving collective identity, thereby reinforcing internal cohesion and cultural sustainability within the community.

The research revealed that informal Muslim practices – particularly in the domains of marriage, inheritance, and religious rituals – operate as practical instruments that establish a normative framework within local social life. They are adapted to historical, social, and cultural changes, which renders them flexible and dynamic mechanisms in contemporary society.

The study confirms that informal Muslim practices in Ajara are not merely a legacy of the past but also an active component of present-day cultural and social reality. Their continued presence indicates that the preservation of local identity and the maintenance of social order often rely on

informal normative systems that balance tradition and modernity.

Thus, the analysis of informal Muslim practices in Ajara highlights the significance of historically formed social mechanisms and provides a theoretical framework for understanding contemporary cultural-normative hybrids. This approach

can serve as a tool for planning cultural policy, educational initiatives, and local development strategies, aimed at studying religious and cultural practices, understand their social functions, and ensure their alignment with contemporary societal challenges.

ისტორია

მუსლიმური იდენტობის არაფორმალური გამოვლინებები აჭარის მუსლიმურ თემში, როგორც მუსლიმური (შარიათის) სამართლის ისტორიული ნაშთები

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ნაშრომში განხილულია მუსლიმური იდენტობის არაფორმალური ელემენტების წარმოშობისა და განვითარების პროცესი აჭარაში, როგორც კულტურული მდგრადობისა და სოციალური ადაპტაციის მექანიზმი. კვლევის სიახლე მდგომარეობს იმაში, რომ გამოვლენილი პრაქტიკები არა მხოლოდ ისტორიული ნაშთებია, არამედ დინამიკური სოციალური მექანიზმია, რომელიც ერთდროულად ინარჩუნებს ტრადიციულ ელემენტებს და ერგება პოლიტიკურ, სოციალურ და კულტურულ ცვლილებებს. კვლევის მიზანია ისტორიული და სოციალური კონტექსტების განსაზღვრა, რომლებმაც ჩამოაყალიბა ადგილობრივი მუსლიმური პრაქტიკები ოსმალეთის მმართველობიდან საბჭოთა პერიოდამდე, თანამედროვე გარდამავალი ეპოქის ჩათვლით. შედეგები აჩვენებს, როგორ მოახერხა თემმა იდენტობის შენარჩუნება კულტურულ-ნორმატიული ჰიბრიდის მეშვეობით, რომელიც ამაგრებს სოციალურ წესრიგსა და მუსლიმური თემის შიგნით სოლიდარობას. შეიძლება დავასკვნათ, რომ აჭარაში მუსლიმური არაფორმალური ელემენტები დღესაც ფუნქციონირებს აჭარის მუსლიმურ თემში, როგორც მუსლიმური (შარიათის) სამართლის ისტორიული ნაშთები, რომლებიც ხელს უწყობს კოლექტიური თვითშეგნების, კულტურული უწყვეტობისა და სოციალური სტაბილურობის განმტკიცებას.

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