

NEW SOCIOCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURAL MEMORY: THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF MIGRANTS RESETTLED FROM AJARA IN TSALKA

Ana Bagrationi

PhD student at Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University;

Research fellow at Niko Berdzenishvili Institute

Email: Anabagrationi.1131@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5319-7775>

Abstract. The article examines the everyday life of resettlers from Adjara in Tsalka Municipality through the lens of cultural memory and new sociocultural environments. The study is based on an individual ethnological field expedition conducted in August 2025, including 20 in-depth interviews with residents across several villages. The analysis draws upon Halbwach's theory of collective memory and acculturation theories. The findings demonstrate that cultural memory in a new environment both preserves traditions - practices, family customs, and culinary heritage-and transforms through intercultural interaction. Issues of land ownership, economic adaptation, and interethnic marriages play a significant role in shaping identity and integration processes. Generational differences are evident: older generations remain strongly connected to agriculture and land-based livelihoods, while younger generations increasingly associate their future with urban centers. The research argues that Tsalka represents a hybrid cultural space in which Ajarian cultural memory coexists and interacts with Svan, Greek, and Armenian social practices.

Keywords: cultural memory; eco-migration; Ajarians; intercultural relations; adaptation

* * *

Introduction. The resettlement of populations from Adjara to Tsalka is historically linked to processes of eco-migration, particularly since the 1990s. The primary causes of relocation included natural disasters, land scarcity, and deteriorating socio-economic conditions. Tsalka Municipality, located in the Kvemo Kartli region, represents a multiethnic environment historically inhabited by Greeks, Armenians, Svans, and other groups.

Beginning in the 1990s, intensified landslides, soil degradation, and infrastructural collapse significantly undermined the stability of life in the mountainous villages of Adjara. (Trier., T, Turashvili., M., 2007) (Putkaradze, 2006)). This wave of movement can be characterized as forced eco-migration, in which relocation served as a strategy to ensure physical safety. Resettlement primarily occurred in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, regions historically characterized by ethnic diversity. (Lyle, 2012).

While initial displacement was driven by environmental threats, social and economic factors gradually became increasingly significant. Since the 2000s, new migration flows have been linked to social challenges and limited land-use opportunities in mountainous Adjara. (Trier., T, Turashvili., M., 2007).

The central research problem concerns how cultural memory transforms in a new environment and how adaptation unfolds within a multiethnic space. The study aims to identify the role of everyday practices-religious celebrations, cuisine, agriculture, and social relations - in the preservation and transformation of cultural identity.

The theoretical foundation of cultural memory draws on Maurice Halbwachs' argument that memory is structured within social frameworks. (Halbwachs., 1992). Adaptation theories further allow cultural change to be conceptualized as a dynamic and negotiated process.

Methods. The research is based on qualitative methodology. In August 2025, a five-day individual ethnographic field expedition was conducted in Tsalka Municipality. Twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out with residents across several villages. The reasons for relocation included eco-migration, land scarcity, family division, or proximity to relatives.

The research methods included:

- In-depth interviews
- Participant observation
- Thematic analysis

Data were processed using thematic coding, allowing for the identification of recurring motifs: land, property, religion, economy, intercultural relations, and generational differences.

Discussion. According to Halbwachs (1992), memory is always constructed within social frameworks. In the case of Ajarian settlers in Tsalka, although geographic location changes, the social carriers of memory: family, kinship networks, and religious communities continue to function. However, these frameworks undergo reconfiguration in the new environment.

Narrators frequently stated: “At first, we did not feel established here.” (Field Materials, 2025) This phrase indicates the symbolic non-acceptance of space. The absence of a cemetery in the early years represented a strong marker of temporality. Later, state allocation of land and the initiation of local burials marked a symbolic turning point- space gradually transformed into “one’s own.”

Skepticism toward Muslim Ajarians within Orthodox communities initially hindered integration. Similar tensions were reflected in the broader social context. (Ivlelashvili, 2019). However, these boundaries were not static. One narrator noted:

“We still have very good relations with the Greeks... We also have good relations with the Svans; my daughter’s godparent was Svan.” (Field Materials, 2025)

This testimony illustrates boundary transformation: initial distancing gradually shifted toward cooperation.

Early cohabitation was marked by tension:

“We were newly arrived... when we beat the Armenians in football... they couldn’t accept it.” (Field Materials, 2025) Over time, cooperation emerged:

“Some Ajarians now work as teachers in Armenian villages and teach Georgian.” (Field Materials, 2025) The football incident symbolized the presence of a social boundary. With time, these boundaries softened through collaboration, employment relations, and language instruction. This demonstrates that intercultural relations are not static; they transform through communication, shared economic interests, and prolonged interaction.

Environmental adaptation also became part of cultural memory. Narrators described agricultural adaptation:

“Everything grows here: pears, apples, plums... there’s a pear that ripens naturally in winter... in my childhood we called it ‘Magara.’” (Field Materials, 2025)

They also emphasized knowledge exchange:

“The Greeks saw from us that beans could grow here.” (Field Materials, 2025)

Such examples demonstrate how adaptation to landscape becomes incorporated into cultural memory and transmitted across generations, supporting Halbwachs’ (1992) argument that memory is socially constructed and spatially framed.

Land registration issues generated uncertainty in Tsalka. Eco-migrant status and lack of property ownership reinforced feelings of temporality and influenced identity formation. (Lyle, 2012)

One narrator from Samtseba village described ownership disputes:

“Some live in Greek houses... my sister renovated one, and the Greek owner expelled her.”
“There was also a case where an Ajarian built a house on a Greek’s land... he was told the house is yours, but the land belongs to the state.” (Field Materials, 2025).

Economic reality remains dual. On one hand, land fertility is emphasized (“Everything grows here”); on the other, market mechanisms reduce labor value (“There is no point in sowing because prices are too low”) (Field Materials, 2025). This reflects local agriculture’s dependence on broader economic structures.

According to Berry’s (1997) adaptation model, economic stability is a key factor in successful integration. However, integration here is not fully assimilationist. Rather, a separation-integration pattern is observed: cultural identity is preserved, while economic strategies adapt to the local context. (Berry, 1997)

Religious practices function not only as memory transmission but also as tools of integration. One narrator stated:

“We celebrate Bayram as we did in Adjara, and we congratulate each other; Christians bake Easter bread and bring it to us.” (Field Materials, 2025)

Religious difference thus becomes a platform for dialogue and coexistence. Spatial coexistence - “We have a mosque in Tsalka, and there are churches around it” demonstrates how symbolic religious spaces coexist within everyday secular practices, normalizing difference.

Culinary practice represents an informal form of integration:

“I learned to cook kubdari here... the Svans learned Ajarian dishes from us... Here I discovered what ‘ghimi pickles’ are - they call it ‘dilqa,’ it’s Greek.” (Field Materials, 2025)

Narrative analysis reveals reciprocal exchange. This produces a hybrid cultural space in which memory retains symbolic continuity while adapting to new contexts.

Intermarriage further confirms intercultural integration:

“An Ajarian woman married a Svan, another married a Greek... one woman has been married to a Greek for 25 years.” (Field Materials, 2025)

Marriage functions as an institutionalized social mechanism that contributes to the softening of ethnic boundaries. (Barth, 1969). Changes in wedding formats (“Now we hold weddings in ceremonial halls”) reflect adaptation to new social infrastructures.

Generational differences are evident:

“We planned to stay for three years; those three became twenty.”

“I am staying here; I’m not going anywhere - Tsalka is developing.” (Field Materials, 2025)

Older generations remain attached to land-based livelihoods, whereas younger generations associate their future with urban centers. If Tsalka became a “new home” for the older generation, it may represent a seasonal or transitional space for youth. Cultural memory thus shifts geographically alongside generational change.

Integration extends beyond institutional policy. It unfolds through everyday cooperation, neighborly relations, children’s friendships, rituals, and family traditions. Identity preservation through religious practice and internal solidarity coexist with openness to intercultural exchange and mutual respect.

Conclusion. The findings allow several key conclusions:

1. Cultural memory is dynamic- it transforms in new spaces while preserving core symbolic structures (religion, family, cuisine).

2. Symbolic appropriation of territory is crucial for settlement; cemeteries, land cultivation, and property ownership foster a sense of belonging.

3. Intercultural interaction generates hybrid cultural forms: cuisine, marriages, and celebrations reflect ongoing negotiation.
4. Economic uncertainty constrains full integration, though social networks mitigate risk.
5. Generational differences indicate future directions of cultural memory transformation.
6. Tsalka can be conceptualized as a post-migratory cultural space where identity is continuously negotiated and reconfigured.

Bibliography

- Barth, F. (1969). *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*. Boston.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *International Association of Applied Psychology*, 30. Получено из https://is.muni.cz/el/fss/podzim2016/ZUR393i/um/W_2_Acculturation.pdf (2025). Field Materials.
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ivlelashvili, T. (2019). *Religious Minorities in Samtskhe-Javakheti*. Tbilisi: Universali.
- Lyle, J. (2012). *The Resettlement of Eco-Migrants in Georgia: Ongoing Changes, Trends, Implementation, and Perceptions in Resettlement Policy*. Working Paper No. 53, ECMI.
- Putkaradze, T. (2006). *Historical and Ethnological Problems of Migration of the Population of Adjara*. Batumi: Batumi State University.
- Trier, T, Turashvili, M. (2007). *Resettlement of Environmentally Displaced Persons: Solving Existing Problems or Creating New Ones? Eco-Migration in Georgia 1981–2006*. ECMI.