

ISSUES OF THE ECONOMIC ADAPTATION AND EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE ASSYRIANS IN GEORGIA

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Abstract: The article discusses the main issues related to the economic adaptation and everyday life of the Assyrians living in Georgia. The aim of the study is to present the history of migration of the Assyrian community in Georgia, their economic activities, traditional lifestyle, and the process of integration into the Georgian ethnocultural environment. The research is based on historical sources, ethnographic literature, periodicals, and field ethnographic materials.

The article examines the historical background of the settlement of Assyrians in Georgia and the waves of migration, with particular attention given to the village of Kanda in the Mtskheta Municipality as the main Assyrian settlement in Georgia. The process of their economic adaptation is analyzed, which was expressed through the adoption of local agricultural practices, viticulture and winemaking, livestock breeding, and traditional rural economic technologies. At the same time, the study demonstrates that despite integration into the Georgian environment, the Assyrians have preserved significant elements of their ethnic identity, including language, religious traditions, rituals, celebrations, and traditional cuisine.

The research reveals that the economic adaptation of the Assyrians in Georgia represents a successful adjustment to local natural and economic conditions, achieved alongside the preservation of their ethnocultural identity. This process clearly reflects the characteristics of ethnic minority integration and cultural sustainability in Georgia.

Keywords: Assyrians, Georgia, ethnic minorities, economic adaptation, ethnic identity, traditional lifestyle, Kanda, ethnography, cultural integration, migration.

Introduction: Georgia has historically been a multiethnic and multi-confessional country, where various ethnic groups have coexisted for centuries and contributed to the country's social and cultural development. Among these communities, the Assyrians occupy a distinctive place, as their history of settlement in Georgia spans several centuries. Despite their relatively small population, the Assyrian community has preserved important elements of its ethnic identity to the present day, including language, religious traditions, customs, and cultural heritage, while at the same time becoming organically integrated into the Georgian social and cultural environment.

The study of the economic adaptation of ethnic groups provides an important opportunity to understand how migrant communities adjust to new natural, social, and economic environments, how they adopt local economic practices, and which traditional elements they preserve within the framework of their cultural identity. From this perspective, the Assyrians of Georgia represent an important subject of research, as their

historical experience, migration processes, and transformation of economic activities clearly demonstrate the interrelationship between adaptation and cultural continuity.

The aim of this paper is to explore the main aspects of the economic adaptation and everyday life of the Assyrians living in Georgia within the context of their historical migration, settlement patterns, economic activities, traditional culture, and interaction with the Georgian ethnocultural environment. Particular attention is paid to the village of Old Kanda in the Mtskheta Municipality, which represents the main Assyrian settlement in Georgia and where many elements of their traditional lifestyle and cultural heritage have been preserved most fully.

The research is based on historical and ethnographic literature, archival materials, information preserved in periodicals, as well as field ethnographic data collected by the authors at different times. Through the comparative analysis of these sources, the study examines the process of Assyrian economic adaptation, the forms of adoption of local economic practices, and the preservation of ethnocultural values that have enabled the Assyrians of Georgia to maintain their ethnic identity while achieving successful integration into Georgian society.

Discussion: Among the ethnic minorities living in Georgia, the Assyrian ethnic group occupies a noteworthy place. They are a people whose ancestors created a distinguished history and culture. This community is referred to by several names: Assyrians, Assyrians (under the influence of the Russian language), Aysors (under Armenian influence, a term currently considered derogatory), as well as Chaldeans, Aramaeans, Syrians, and others. Due to religious affiliation, they have sometimes been referred to as Nestorians, Jacobites, and Chaldeans. Their self-designation, or endoethnonym, is Assuraya, Chaldai, or Athurai. In the present study, we use the term “Assyrians,” especially since this is also the preferred designation of the community itself.

Even in ancient historical periods, there were several encounters between the ancestors of Georgians and the ancient Assyrians. Long before the birth of Christ, the tribes and early states located in the southern part of historical Georgia became acquainted with the powerful Assyrian state and its supreme deity Ashur. Later, particularly at the turn of the old and new eras, during the Hellenistic period, historical sources indicate that the Assyrian, or Aramaic, language was one of the widespread official and literary languages in the Kingdom of Kartli. This is evidenced, among other things, by the so-called Armazi Bilingual inscription discovered in Mtskheta, at Armazihevi. The epitaph on Seraphita’s gravestone was carved in both Greek and Aramaic. Thus, the Aramaic language has been present in Georgia for approximately two thousand years, and a local form of writing known as the “Armazian script” was developed in its historical context.

However, by that time the Assyrians no longer had their own state, nor did they regain one throughout subsequent history. From 610 BCE onward, and for many centuries thereafter, the Assyrian people were mainly dispersed, living in scattered communities and enclaves within various empires and states. They inhabited territories that today correspond to several countries with predominantly Muslim populations: Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. It was Christianity and religious faith that played a decisive role in preserving the ethnic identity of the Assyrians.

The Assyrians were among the first peoples to adopt Christianity. This was not accidental, since Jesus Christ himself spoke and preached in the Aramaic language. Christianity spread to Georgia from Syria, particularly from Antioch, and during the early period the Georgian Church was subordinated to the Church of Antioch. Later, in the sixth century, the “Thirteen Assyrian Fathers” arrived in Georgia under the leadership of John of Zedazeni. They came from Urha (Edessa), introduced monastic life, and through their faith, preaching, and exemplary way of life revitalized Christian traditions that had weakened under the influence of Zoroastrianism.

Life became increasingly difficult for Assyrians within the surrounding Muslim world, which led them to seek new possibilities and safer places for settlement. This search directed their attention toward Georgia. It appears that the first Assyrian families began to appear in the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti as early as the 1770s (Abashidze, 2008, p. 208; Chikhladze, 2002, p. 3). Constant persecution and oppression shaped their historical experience, and therefore the descendants of Assur and Nineveh sought a peaceful and religiously familiar environment. They considered Georgia such a place, and this choice proved successful.

There are several important documents from the period of King Erekle II that serve as valuable sources for the history of Georgian-Assyrian relations. These include letters written to Erekle II by the Assyrian Catholicos Simon (in Assyrian: Mar Shimun) and Bishop Isaiah (Mar Ishai) (Macharadze, 1984, p. 21; Osipov, 2007, p. 15). In his correspondence, the Catholicos promised the king that if Erekle II launched a military campaign into Ottoman territories, he would be able to provide an army of twenty thousand soldiers in support. Particularly noteworthy is Erekle II's note on Bishop Isaiah's letter, "which had previously arrived to us and asked whether the Assyrians wished to unite with you."

The Russian Empire became the main "accelerating factor" in Assyrian migration. From the end of the eighteenth century, Russia intensified its imperial policy in the Near East and conducted numerous wars against Iran and the Ottoman Empire. In these conflicts, Russia presented itself under the banner of protecting Christians, viewing Christian populations living in these regions as potential allies. The local Christian communities, in turn, looked upon Christian Russia with hope and provided various forms of assistance during Russian military operations. However, Russian campaigns were accompanied by both victories and defeats, and during periods of retreat, Christian populations, including Assyrians, often became targets of retaliation by Ottoman and Iranian authorities, as well as by neighboring Muslim communities. As a result, Russia was compelled to resettle persecuted Assyrians within the territories of the empire.

Assyrians entered Georgia through Armenia in several migration waves: first in the 1830s and later in the 1840s. Even before these migrations, Assyrians had periodically arrived in the Caucasus for seasonal work, particularly gravitating toward Tbilisi as the administrative and economic center of the region. Some of them eventually settled permanently. In the 1860s, one group of Assyrians migrated and established settlements in Lower Kartli, in the Karaia Plain, in present-day Gardabani Municipality. Near Gardabani, they founded the villages of Vasilevka and Karatapa. Around the same period, in 1867, Assyrians settled in the village of Kanda.

A particularly large number of displaced Assyrians arrived in Georgia in 1915, during the First World War, when the Assyrian genocide took place. Seeking refuge, many Assyrians found a new homeland in Georgia. Other Assyrian communities also settled in Russia, particularly in the Krasnodar and Rostov regions, and today a significant number live in Moscow.

For a traveler heading west from Tbilisi, in the historical Mukhrani estate, along the banks of the Ksani River and south of the impressive Ksani Fortress and the Skhaltba ridge, one of the most striking sights is a picturesque village surrounded by greenery, characterized by beautiful houses and well-maintained courtyards. Today it is known as Old Kanda. It was here that a large part of the Assyrians who had fled from Urmia (Iran), Salamas (Iran), and Hakkari (Bitlis, Ottoman Empire) established themselves and created a new community among the hospitable Georgian population.

Regarding the etymology of the toponym "Kanda," one interpretation, based on the Explanatory Dictionary of the Georgian Language, considers it a word of Persian origin meaning "to shine" or "to illuminate." The word is also mentioned in Sulikhan-Saba Orbeliani's Dictionary, where it refers to "gold leaf," a meaning that appears particularly suitable for this location. It is not known with certainty when and from where this name originated for this fertile area situated in the lower Ksani valley.

The village of Kanda is mentioned by Prince Vakhushti Batonishvili, although it is not listed among the villages of the region. He refers only to “Kanda Fortress.” The renowned historian and geographer writes: “Again, west of the confluence of the Narekvavi River, the northern slope of the Sarkineti mountain up to the foot of Kanda Fortress is covered with vineyards, fruit trees, fertile land, and forests. The Ksani River flows below the fortress” (Batonishvili Vakhushti, 1973, p. 351).

It appears that by the eighteenth century neither the present-day village of Tsikhisdziri nor Kanda existed in their current form. Tsikhisdziri is a village settled by shepherds of Turkic origin who were relocated by the Mukhranbatoni princes, whereas Kanda became an Assyrian settlement. Today, approximately 540 households, or more than 1,500 people, live there.

Assyrians also established settlements in other parts of Georgia, although in smaller numbers, including Gardabani–Karaia, Batumi, Senaki, Zestaponi, Kutaisi, and especially Tbilisi, where they lived mainly in the Vera, Vake, and Kukia districts.

The purposeful and industrious Assyrians founded brick factories in Tbilisi, and crosses were stamped on the bricks they produced. Some Assyrians belonging to Nestorian and other Christian traditions later converted to Eastern Orthodoxy. The nineteenth-century Georgian press, including the newspapers “Iveria”, “Tsnobis Purtseli”, and others, reported on these religious and social transformations among Assyrians (“Iveria”, 1898; “Tsnobis Purtseli”, 1898). Information about Assyrians who settled in Georgia was also published in the newspaper “Droeba” (“Droeba”, 1875).

The newly arrived Assyrians became fully integrated into the Georgian environment, bringing valuable human qualities such as diligence, honesty, and devotion toward their new homeland. Although Assyrians settled in different regions of Georgia, their main settlement today remains the village of Old Kanda in the present-day Mtskheta Municipality.

As noted above, Kanda is an old settlement mentioned since the medieval period; however, it should be emphasized that by the time Assyrians arrived, the village had already become abandoned. Local residents recount that in 1900 a man named Usta Alaverdi, whose surname was Badalov, purchased local lands from Ivane Mukhranbatoni for the already settled Assyrians. He was reportedly the “head of the craftsmen’s guild” and is said to have received state contracts. According to local oral traditions, he was a very wealthy person, and the price paid for the land is metaphorically described as “a cartload of gold.”

In general, newly settled Assyrians were divided according to their places of origin and were identified as mountain Assyrians, Urmians, Salamasans, and others. The settlers were also socially organized into clans, each headed by a malik. Different groups brought with them distinct customs and traditions. For example, among mountain Assyrians, the practice of purchasing a bride was known, which later placed women in an almost dependent social position (Songhulashvili, 2005, p. 35). Assyrians also brought many interesting wedding traditions and rituals to Kanda.

One example was the custom in which the groom’s family brought a symbolic tree to the bride’s house, decorated with gifts and sweets. This ritual has certain similarities with the Georgian wedding tradition of “chiraghadani” or “iakhtani”. The ceremony of “redeeming” the wedding tree was also practiced.

Around 150 years ago, the Assyrians of Kanda, who settled on the Mukhrani Plain, adopted agricultural practices from the neighboring Georgian villages of Mukhrani and Agaiani. They acquired local farming skills, varieties of grain crops, and agricultural tools and techniques related to field cultivation. Assyrians adopted both endemic and traditional Georgian wheat varieties, including “dolis puri”, “dika”, “tavgukhi”, “shavpkha”, and others.

Due to the climatic and soil characteristics of the Shida Kartli plain, a specific type of plough known as the large plough (“didi gutani”) had developed by the medieval period. Moreover, variations of this plough existed according to different micro-regions. In the Mukhrani Plain, the so-called Mukhranian large plough

was used, equipped with a massive ploughshare and cutter and operated with eight to nine pairs of oxen and buffaloes.

Following the example of their Georgian neighbors, the Assyrians of Kanda adopted the “Mukhranian large plough” and the associated cooperative labor system known as “modgami”. They learned traditional agricultural practices such as preparing the threshing floor, spreading sheaves, and using tools including the “kevri”, “arnadi”, and sieves. The finely ground flour produced from these grains became one of the main ingredients in preparing the ritual dish “murtukha”.

In general, many traditional Assyrian dishes have a ritual significance and are prepared during agricultural, family, and religious celebrations. One such dish is “murtukha”. In terms of its ingredients, it is not complex; however, symbolically it represents the agricultural and cultural identity of the Assyrians of Kanda, reflecting the symbiotic relationship between agriculture and livestock breeding.

Livestock breeding in Kanda was primarily of a stall-based character. Due to the absence of mountain pastures, seasonal transhumance, which was characteristic of mountain Assyrians from the Bitlis–Van region, was not practiced there.

The Assyrians of Kanda adopted local methods and tools of dairy processing from the Georgian population, particularly the traditional horizontal wooden churn known as “varia”, used for producing butter. They also adopted local vegetable varieties from Georgians and began cultivating them. However, they paid particular attention to viticulture and winemaking. Although Assyrians had cultivated grapes in their ancestral homeland, living within a predominantly Muslim environment likely limited their wine production. In Kanda, they began growing local grape varieties such as “Chinuri”, “Goruli Mtsvane”, “Shavkapito”, and others. Today, large-scale vineyards are less common in Kanda; however, wine is still produced from grapes such as Chinuri, Goruli Mtsvane, Isabella, and Lomiauri, mainly from vines grown on traditional trellises.

It is also interesting that for a certain period Assyrians lived alongside Germans. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Germans were settled to the east of Kanda, in an area adjacent to the village, and a separate settlement called Georgental was established there. The Assyrians of Kanda adopted many useful practices from them. The first school was founded in this area, where education was conducted in German, and some Kanda children began their studies there. A main wide street was constructed, which still preserves its original spatial arrangement. Long houses positioned perpendicular to the road were also built, several of which have survived to the present day.

Later, during the Second World War, the Germans were deported to Central Asia. The Stalinist deportations also affected part of the Assyrian population; some were accused of being agents of Iran or Turkey and were subjected to repression.

The study of Assyrian anthroponymy is also of particular interest. The displaced Assyrians who arrived in Georgia originally did not possess family surnames. They identified one another through the father’s name or patronymic forms. Examples include “Bit Yakob”, “Bit Atanez”, “Bit Khirdi”, “Mar Shimun”, “Mar Ishai”, and others. The administration of the Russian Empire later assigned surnames to them, naturally using Russian suffixes such as “-ov” and “-ev.” In Armenia, Assyrian surnames were adapted according to Armenian linguistic patterns; for example, “Bit Rais” became “Raisian”.

Today, there is a tendency to replace Russian-style surnames with Georgian forms. For instance, “Iakubov” is transformed into “Iakobidze”, and “Ivanov” into “Ivanidze”. A different tendency developed in Western Georgia, where Assyrians adopted Georgian surname forms from the beginning, often based on patronymic traditions. Therefore, in Imereti and Adjara, Assyrian surnames include forms such as “Ionanidze”, “Igavaidze”, “Ichvaidze”, “Ashkashidze”, “Azvanishvili”, and others. Today, children are predominantly given Georgian names.

The newly settled Assyrians practiced a wide range of professions. They worked as shoemakers, shoe polishers (a profession that existed until the recent past), and even developed their own formulas for shoe polish. Until the middle of the twentieth century, residents of Tbilisi remembered tall men with thick mustaches carrying special devices on their shoulders equipped with sharpening stones. These were Assyrian knife sharpeners. Although this profession has disappeared, another occupation has remained in demand: the Assyrians of Kanda are renowned as excellent plasterers.

A large part of the interior walls of traditional Kartlian houses covered with “gaji” (a type of plaster) were finished by them. This profession provided good income, and during the days spent working in different families, many Assyrian craftsmen also formed marital connections with local communities. Therefore, when one examines the origins of the brides in approximately half of Kanda’s families, a mosaic of villages throughout Kartli emerges.

Thus, the Assyrians of Kanda demonstrated considerable success in agriculture, expanded livestock breeding, and adopted many practices from the Georgian population. At the same time, they preserved what was most important: along with their loyalty to Georgia, they maintained respect for their origins, memory of their ancestral roots, and awareness of their ethnic identity. Above all, they preserved the Assyrian (Aramaic) language, which remains a fundamental element of their ethnic consciousness.

Because of the desire to protect and preserve the Assyrian language, it is currently taught at the Kanda school. Students study the Assyrian language and script and acquire reading and writing skills in Assyrian.

Despite the introduction and promotion of atheism during the Soviet period, the Assyrians faithfully preserved their traditional Christian celebrations. Moreover, many of these festivals are now observed even more widely among local families. One such celebration is “Kha b-Nisan”, the Assyrian New Year. It is a spring festival associated with the awakening of nature and the equinox. In Kanda, it is celebrated every year on April 1.

In the past, when agriculture - especially grain cultivation - occupied an important place in the everyday life of Kanda, as it did in the neighboring Georgian villages of Mukhrani and Agaiani, and when ploughing and sowing formed one of the key stages of the spring agricultural calendar, this day marked the beginning of fieldwork and the drawing of the first furrow.

Another important celebration is “Ida Sura” (Christmas), which is highly significant for the Assyrian community. After the fasting period, everyone eagerly awaits the end of the fast. On Christmas Eve, families prepare “harisa”, a traditional dish made from chicken meat and wheat. On Christmas morning, the fast is broken with “harisa”. According to Mrs. Naya Bit Yaoyani-Ivanidze, the Assyrian Christmas “harisa” is prepared as follows: “Water is poured into a pot, and washed wheat and poultry meat are gradually added. The mixture is placed on the fire and stirred from time to time. When the wheat and meat are thoroughly cooked, the pot is removed from the fire. When served on plates, it is seasoned with salt and melted clarified butter.”

Among the traditional Assyrian festive cycle, important celebrations include “Sida Gura” (Easter), “Mar Givargiz” (St. George’s Day), “Mariamoba” (the Dormition of the Virgin Mary), and others. Assyrians of Kanda firmly believe that both Saint George and Saint Nino were originally of Assyrian origin (Osipov, 2007, p. 66).

The Assyrians of Kanda celebrate “Marezoba”, also known as the feast of “Mar Eza” or “Mar Zaya” (Saint Zaya), with particular enthusiasm. It is celebrated twice a year: in winter, on January 18, and in summer, on June 14. This festival is dedicated to fertility, abundance, and prosperity.

The winter “Marezoba” is associated with animal sacrifice and communal feasting. Money is collected within the village, and livestock is purchased with these funds. After a three-day fast, on January 18, at dawn, the animal is sacrificed, cut into portions, and cooked in a large communal cauldron. According to tradition, the prepared meat is distributed among households. On this day, red roosters are also sacrificed as sacred

offerings. The summer “Marezoba” in June differs from the winter celebration, as it is held without animal sacrifice. Instead, the village collects milk, flour, and clarified butter. In the center of the village, beneath a large tree, “murtukha” is prepared throughout the night and later distributed among the entire community.

What can be concluded from these two forms of “Marezoba”? The common element between them is that both are dedicated to fertility, reproduction, and abundance. The winter emphasis on livestock sacrifice and the summer focus on grain, milk, and butter symbolically reflect the traditional Assyrian economic and cultural model. This refers to the harmonious combination of livestock breeding and agriculture and the desire to receive prosperity and abundance through both branches of economic activity.

Finally, one of the most important elements contributing to the preservation of a people’s identity and distinction from others is traditional cuisine. Assyrian folk dishes represent a rich cultural heritage, including “hasida”, “bushala”, “murtukha”, “khmsa”, “khvisa”, “chur churi”, “jajik”, “harisa”, “trida”, “iarqa”, and others.

Some of these dishes are everyday foods, while others have ritual and festive significance. The important point is that, alongside common Christian holidays celebrated together with Georgians (such as the Dormition of the Virgin Mary and St. George’s Day—“St. Givargis Day”), Assyrians have faithfully preserved the feast days of their ancestral saints, celebrating them with respect and preparing traditional ritual dishes. One of these important celebrations is “Marezoba”.

Conclusion: The study has demonstrated that the settlement of Assyrians in Georgia was determined by historical, political, and religious factors, while their permanent establishment in the country took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the new social and natural environment, Assyrians successfully adapted economically, which was reflected in their adoption of local agricultural practices, viticulture and winemaking, livestock breeding, and traditional rural economic experience.

The example of the Assyrians living in the village of Kanda, Mtskheta Municipality, is particularly significant, as it demonstrates how the adoption of local Georgian agricultural traditions became organically integrated with Assyrian traditional lifestyle and culture. They successfully adopted local agricultural crops, forms of labor organization, and economic technologies; however, this process did not result in the loss of their ethnic identity.

The research confirms that, alongside integration into Georgian society, Assyrians have preserved essential elements of their ethnic identity, including the Aramaic language, religious heritage, traditional festivals, rituals, cuisine, and family customs. The preservation of this cultural heritage has ensured the continuity of their ethnic consciousness within Georgia’s multiethnic society.

Thus, the economic adaptation of Assyrians in Georgia represents a successful example of cultural adaptation, based on both effective adjustment to the local socio-economic environment and the faithful preservation of their own ethnocultural values. The experience of Georgia’s Assyrian community clearly demonstrates that the integration of an ethnic minority can coexist harmoniously with the preservation of cultural identity, which represents one of the important characteristics of Georgia’s centuries-old tradition of multiethnic coexistence.

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