

# THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STORIES OF ADJARIAN WOMEN IN THE BLACK SEA CONTEXT

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**Abstract.** The Black Sea region, as a geopolitical and cultural crossroads, embodies multilayered civilizational trajectories in which tradition and modernity, East and West, and Christianity and Islam intersect in diverse and dynamic ways. Within this landscape, Adjarian women emerge as distinctive socio-cultural actors who preserve, reinterpret, and transform experiences intimately connected to identity, memory, and narratives of power.

This paper employs a historical methodology and incorporates the personal accounts of Adjarian women across different generations. The study seeks to explore women's narratives through the prisms of religion, family, education, and public roles, thereby uncovering their implicit struggles with gender stereotypes, cultural heritage, and the shifting dynamics of social transformation.

These narratives function not merely as illustrations of regional history but as active components shaping the multilayered civilizational map of the Black Sea. The voices of Adjarian women, positioned at this crossroads, offer new analytical perspectives for understanding the gendered and cultural dimensions of the region.

**Keywords:** Black Sea region, Adjara, geopolitical region, transformation.

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**Introduction.** The Black Sea region is one of the most unique and fascinating areas of Eurasia. For hundreds of years, it has served as a hub connecting Europe and Asia, as well as the West and the East. This geographic position has given the countries of the Black Sea region important opportunities for economic growth, helping to improve the social and material conditions of their populations. However, this very location has also posed serious challenges regarding security and stability. As a strategic geopolitical area, the Black Sea has consistently been targeted by major powers and used as a stage for the competition of influence.

Historically, the Black Sea region has been one of the most dynamic and diverse areas where the meeting of Eastern and Western civilizations has, for centuries, shaped a unique network of social, economic, and cultural connections. In this context, Georgia is a particularly sensitive and vulnerable region, where the cultures of both neighboring and distant states have left noticeable traces throughout history, especially in peripheral and border areas. Such cultural influence is common, as civilizations throughout history have continually interacted with and influenced each other. However, Georgia stands out as a country with a distinctive culture, its own independent language and writing system, and a strong Christian heritage, while

being surrounded by states with different religious and social structures. These interactions create the diversity that adds unique beauty to Georgia's cultural landscape, while also demanding careful political strategies.

Within Georgia, the southwestern regions stand out for their unique blend of cultures and civilizations. In this paper, we focus on one such region—Adjara. Adjara offers an interesting example because it showcases the coexistence of tradition and modernity, Christian and Islamic cultural heritages, and ongoing globalization processes.

The history of Adjara as an important part of the Black Sea region begins with the civilization of Colchis. Over time, it developed within the changing territorial boundaries of the Byzantine Empire and the Georgian kingdoms. This small region endured the harsh rule of the Ottoman Empire, and in seeking liberation from this control, it eventually became part of the Russian Empire as what was seen as the "best possible option." Later, the region actively took part in the processes surrounding the dissolution of the Soviet Union and faced a specific challenge as a border region responsible for managing land, maritime, and air boundaries.

These historical upheavals—first under the Ottoman Empire and later during the period of Soviet occupation—created serious challenges for the Adjara region in terms of cultural, religious, and social identity. The integration of the region's population with the Georgian state occurred through a complex process marked by struggles, uprisings, submission, and persistent efforts to assert their identity.

Thus, Adjara is one of the most important regions in the Black Sea area, where traces of historical development are clearly visible in the region's social and cultural space. Historical events have greatly shaped the way of life in the area, yet they did not weaken the state-focused identity of the Adjarian people. Despite Ottoman influence, the local residents never saw themselves as part of the Ottoman nation. At the same time, the diverse cultural environment and intercultural exchanges became key factors in social life and cultural growth, which in turn helped drive integration. It is important to highlight that this process mostly occurred in a relatively peaceful setting within the framework of the Georgian state.

The present article is based on available economic and ethnographic studies, local research materials, nuanced journalistic sources, and expert analyses. The final analysis focuses on several thematic blocks: religion and identity, family roles, socio-economic transformations, and women's civic activism.

### **1. Transformation of Women's Social Roles in Adjara**

The development of society within Georgian culture has been shaped by both European and Asian influences. This has mainly been due to Georgia's geographic location and the neighboring civilizations. Despite this complex cultural interaction, Georgian society has always stayed strongly connected to its national heritage. However, as noted earlier, neighboring states have still influenced various parts of Georgian life, including language, clothing traditions, and social structures.

Gender inequality in Georgian society historically existed but was relatively moderate compared to many neighboring countries. When compared with other states in the region, it becomes evident that attitudes toward women and the cultural perception of their role were somewhat different in Georgia. Nevertheless, when examining the history of Adjara, it becomes clear that the aforementioned external influences significantly shaped and altered the socio-cultural environment of Adjarian women.

In Adjara, as in other regions of Georgia, the social role of women was long defined by the traditional hierarchy of the family. A woman's position was primarily associated with the management of the household and family life, which included both child-rearing and the proper allocation of family economic resources. Despite the clearly defined patriarchal order, women held an important function in maintaining social unity within the family and transmitting cultural values from one generation to another. Religious and cultural norms shaped behavioral models for women, who were often perceived in society as "guardians of protection and tradition."

In the realm of economic activity, Adjarian women have historically been actively involved. Their labor was especially vital in agriculture and the production of agricultural goods. Women's participation in the family economy was often crucial, as their work secured daily needs and helped maintain family income. Over time, with the growth of economic processes, women's roles gradually expanded to include involvement in small-scale entrepreneurship, the service sector, and educational activities.

This development became particularly evident during the Soviet period. On the one hand, certain professions became associated with women, while on the other hand the Soviet era symbolically promoted women's professional participation, even presenting figures such as female cosmonauts. Thus, during the Soviet period, cultural differentiation appeared to diminish to some extent. Nevertheless, in Adjara, the social status of women and the realities of their everyday lives remained somewhat distinct.

The issue of women's education in Adjara has long remained an important social challenge. Although traditional cultural norms imposed certain restrictions on women's access to education, gradual progress became visible over time. The efforts of prominent Georgian enlighteners and literacy movements laid the foundation for expanding educational opportunities for women. Later, the Soviet period made a significant contribution to increasing access to education, which in turn promoted women's intellectual development and professional realization.

Education became not only a means for individual development for Adjarian women but also a key source of social mobility. As a result, women gradually became active participants in intellectual and cultural life, which significantly shaped their role in modern society.

Today, as globalization and migration processes increasingly reshape the social landscape of the Black Sea region, the study of women's narratives has become especially important. These narratives show how traditions stay important within new social realities, how identities change, and what role women play in maintaining the region's culture and its future growth.

The experiences of Adjarian women in the Black Sea region are not just important for history and culture but also serve as a crucial area for social research, helping us understand the extent and direction of ongoing changes in the region.

## **2. Cultural Narratives of Adjarian Women**

Historically, Adjarian women have played a vital role in preserving cultural heritage and passing it down through generations. Within the family, women were mainly responsible for maintaining religious rituals, holiday traditions, and everyday customs. Notably, they preserved folkloric heritage—legends, poems, and songs—where women's voices and interpretations were essential in maintaining the continuity of cultural traditions.

In religious matters, including both Muslim and Christian rituals, women often served as moral and spiritual pillars. This role strengthened their status not only within the family but also within the broader social environment.

The geopolitical position of the Black Sea region has turned Adjara into a crossroads of various civilizations. In this setting, Eastern and Western cultural traditions interact, further enriching women's experiences. For example, Ottoman influence was visible not only in religious practices but also in clothing customs and daily social interactions. Meanwhile, Western culture—especially in education and the arts—provided women with new chances to improve their social standing. Amid this cultural diversity, the stories of Adjarian women gain special importance: they both honor tradition and highlight the need for change.

The social and cultural stories of women in Adjara clearly show the clash between Eastern and Western values. Influenced by Eastern traditions, women's roles often centered on caring for the family, obeying authority, and following traditional hierarchies. Yet, with the increasing impact of Western culture—mainly

through education, migration, and cultural exchange—women started to lean more toward independence, personal growth, and active involvement in public life. These two influences blend to form a unique mix that still shapes the social stories of Adjarian women today.

The stories, memories, and everyday experiences shared by women play a crucial role in creating a space of “living memory.” Their narratives reflect not only personal or family histories but also serve as tools for preserving and transforming social culture. Through women’s spoken and practical expressions of experience, traditional values, social changes, and personal emotional layers intersect. Therefore, the narratives of Adjarian women can be seen as a cultural-historical archive that combines collective memory and personal experience.

### **3. Contemporary Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Adjarian Women**

In modern Adjara, like in the rest of Georgia, the issue of gender equality remains a major social challenge. Even though laws and government policies acknowledge the principle of equal opportunities, women still face structural and cultural obstacles in practice. Traditional stereotypes about women’s roles often restrict their participation in public life and their career growth. Juggling family responsibilities with career development is often difficult, especially in rural areas where access to education, jobs, and public participation is limited. Therefore, gender equality in Adjara should be seen not just as a legal matter but also as a deeply rooted cultural and social issue.

Over the past decades, the involvement of Adjarian women in public and political life has increased significantly. While in the past their roles were largely confined to family and cultural spaces, today women are increasingly participating in local self-governance, civil society organizations, and political processes. The non-governmental sector has become an important platform through which women promote the agenda of gender equality and social justice. Nevertheless, the level of women’s representation remains relatively low, indicating that the political empowerment of women is still an ongoing and incomplete process.

Migration and globalization have also had a significant impact on the social and cultural narratives of Adjarian women. Women’s participation in international migration is often linked to economic necessity, creating both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, migration has provided women with financial resources and new spaces for personal freedom. On the other hand, it has also created risks related to the destabilization of family structures and social isolation.

Globalization processes—particularly in the fields of communication and media—have intensified cultural exchange and strengthened the influence of Western values. This has contributed to the growth of women’s self-awareness and their social activism. At the same time, globalization has also introduced dilemmas of cultural identity, as balancing traditional and modern values remains a complex challenge for women.

### **4. Interpretation of Narratives**

The personal stories of Adjara women create an important network of “living memory” that not only preserves individual experiences but also maintains collective identity. Personal narratives are often linked to historical traumas, social change, and cultural shifts. It was mainly through women that family histories, religious customs, and everyday traditions were kept alive, giving the culture of memory in the region special importance. Their experiences show up in daily practices and oral traditions that, through passing from one generation to the next, become part of collective memory.

Women’s narratives serve as a vital source in shaping social identity. Amid diverse historical and cultural backgrounds, women portray their lives as a constant juggling act between tradition and modernity. The stories they share reveal not only personal journeys but also the collective experiences of a wider social group. History viewed through women’s eyes offers alternative stories that often add to or challenge the

mainstream “official” historical narratives. In this way, women’s voices play a crucial role in fostering social self-awareness and reinforcing identity.

Women’s narratives also gain particular importance in integration and cultural peace-building processes. Their experiences combine various religious, ethnic, and cultural influences, contributing to the strengthening of coexistence and mutual respect within a diverse society. In women’s verbal and practical activities, a tendency toward harmonization can be observed: preserving traditions, recognizing cultural diversity, and supporting social dialogue. From this perspective, the narratives of Adjara women can be assigned a “cultural peace-building” function that contributes to conflict prevention and strengthens integrative processes within society.

**Conclusion.** The social and cultural narratives of Adjara women within this historical and geopolitical context offer a complex picture. They simultaneously reflect experiences rooted in patriarchal traditions while also showcasing emancipatory elements in the modern era. The roles of women in family, economy, religious life, and public activities illustrate not only the stories of individual women but also broader social changes.

The study of the social and cultural stories of Adjara women reveals many aspects that highlight their important role in developing both family structures and the larger public sphere. Considering the historical and geopolitical background, Adjara women have diverse experiences where traditional values, Eastern and Western cultural influences, modern societal needs, and globalization's effects come together.

The research has identified several important findings:

1. **Transformation of social roles:** Despite traditional hierarchical structures, Adjara women have actively participated in family, economic, and educational processes, which has shaped their social status and level of intellectual development.
2. **Cultural narratives:** Women play a significant role in preserving traditions and folklore, as well as interpreting cultural diversity and transitional processes, which strengthens cultural consensus and integration in the region.
3. **Contemporary socio-cultural dynamics:** Gender equality, participation in public life, migration, and globalization create a complex landscape of new opportunities and challenges, making women’s social narratives even more multilayered.
4. **Interpretation of narratives:** Women’s personal stories and experiences represent not only individual but also collective memory, contributing to the formation of social identity and supporting cultural peace-building processes.

In this context, the narratives of Adjara women constitute an important segment of identity, culture, and social cohesion. This raises both academic interest and politically and socially significant conclusions, based on which several recommendations can be proposed.

#### **Recommendations**

- **Pluralism of narratives:** Policies and cultural programs should recognize the pluralism of Adjara women’s narratives, including both religious and non-religious perspectives.
- **Heritage initiatives:** Museums and tourism projects in Adjara should more actively present the historical multidimensionality of the region through the demonstration of economic and cultural materials.
- **Social support for employment:** Local policies should place greater emphasis on expanding women’s opportunities, including professional training and support for women in the tourism and service sectors.
- **Strengthening gender institutions:** The activities of Adjara’s gender councils and civil society organizations should be more firmly monitored and supported with increased resources.

Thus, the stories of Adjara women are influenced by multiple systemic factors: historical (Ottoman heritage), Soviet (atheistic policies and integration efforts), and current socio-economic realities (tourism and urban growth). In daily life, women maintain and adapt traditions and practices to support family and social functions. This is supported by ethnographic evidence as well as recent studies and regional reports.

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