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SHERIF KHIMSHIASHVILI — ARCHITECT OF PEACEFUL INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

The presented scientific work is dedicated to an in-depth analysis of the political figure of Sherif Khimshiashvili and an assessment of his strategic actions in the historical context of the second half of the 19th century. The authors present him as an example of transformational leadership, whose political vision and moral authority became a decisive factor in the peaceful return of Adjara to its historical homeland - Mother Georgia..

Historians explore how Sherif Khimshiashvili, relying on dynastic tradition, inherited responsibility, and a sense of political intuition, was able to guide regional transition without violence. He is portrayed not as a passive feudal lord but as an active intermediary between external empires and the local society. His strategy was rooted in internal legitimacy, negotiation-focused politics, and cultural compatibility, which enabled the peaceful navigation of a potentially conflict-ridden transformation.

The paper is based on discourse-contextual analysis, integrating historical sources with contemporary theoretical approaches, including leadership theory, memory politics, and the concept of transitional justice. The authors argue that Sherif Khimshiashvili's actions may be interpreted as a realization of national self-consciousness that transcended the circumstantial role of the ruling class and exemplified moral leadership during the imperial age.

Khimshiashvili's political strategy established a legitimate basis for the integration of Adjara with the Georgian state—a process that remains a relevant lesson for modern Georgia, especially in a time when reconciling regional identities with national unity continues to be a challenge. His legacy, which combines feudal tradition, national vision, and peaceful diplomacy, deserves greater recognition in both Georgia's collective historical memory and its contemporary political thought.

KEYWORDS

Sherif Khimshiashvili, Integration of Adjara, Peaceful Transition, State Intuition, Moral Leadership, Transitional Justice, Politics of Memory

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Introduction.

The second half of the 19th century became a decisive turning point in the history of Adjara. Following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878, the resulting geopolitical transformation—Adjara’s return to its Georgian homeland—was the product of multiple interrelated factors. However, the political figure of Sherif Khimshiashvili is particularly noteworthy in this process, as his diplomatic caution, decision-making based on ancestral memory, and strategic intuition ensured the peaceful integration of the region into Georgia’s state framework.

The second half of the 19th century is one of the most dynamic and geopolitically crucial periods in Georgian history. The transformation of southwestern Georgia—Adjara—was especially prominent, its future shaped decisively by the 1877–1878 Russo-Ottoman War. This war launched a historical process that led to Adjara and the Batumi district’s incorporation into the Russian Empire. In a broader historical context, this is regarded as the first strategic step toward restoring Georgia’s territorial unity. Yet the integration was not solely a result of military and diplomatic efforts—it was significantly influenced by internal decisions, at the center of which stood Sherif Khimshiashvili, a powerful feudal lord of Upper Adjara and the grandson of Selim Pasha Khimshiashvili.

Sherif Khimshiashvili’s figure is significant as both the inheritor of dynastic legacy and as a political strategist who succeeded in combining local identity, political consciousness, and historical intuition into a unified structure. His decision to support the incorporation of Adjara by Russia was not merely a political maneuver, but a step imbued with national self-awareness, grounded in familial memory and the unfinished national project of Selim Pasha.

This article seeks to evaluate Sherif Khimshiashvili’s role: how a regional feudal leader became the architect of national integration, and how he managed a peaceful transition in the context of historical geopolitics without resorting to violence. His example offers a model of state integration based on local legitimacy and long-term strategic vision.

Research Methodology

This study is based on discourse-contextual analysis, aiming to interpret the political actions of Sherif Khimshiashvili. The research employs an integrative approach: it synthesizes historical-documentary sources, regional memory, contemporary theoretical frameworks, and historiographical discourse to evaluate the political and moral significance of his actions.

The selected methodology relies on interpretive and action-based narrative strategies, allowing us to understand his role not only within a local context but also in relation to global historical-political paradigms.

Discussion

Sherif Khimshiashvili was the grandson and heir of Selim Pasha Khimshiashvili. His decision in favor of national interests can be seen as a conscious continuation of his ancestral mission. Khikhani Fortress symbolized Selim Pasha’s resistance, and his descendants were expected to fulfill his unaccomplished cause (Chichinadze, 1904). This highlights the moral obligation that lay upon Selim Pasha’s heirs, including Sherif. Z. Chichinadze presented Khikhani Fortress as a symbol of dynastic struggle and national devotion. In this regard, the peaceful path chosen by Sherif—a strategic compromise instead of armed resistance—was not a betrayal of ancestral values but their realization in a new form.

Although Sherif held a formal status within the Ottoman administrative structure, his decision to cooperate with the Russian Empire should not be viewed as opportunism. On the contrary, it represented a political choice grounded in dynastic tradition and a reinterpretation of regional identity within a state-oriented framework (Akhvlediani, 1958).

His political decisions were rooted in a profound dynastic history. As the grandson of Selim Pasha, Sherif bore the honorable but burdensome responsibility of continuing a legacy symbolized by national resistance. Selim Pasha’s struggle for the independence of the Pashalik of Akhaltsikhe, his fortification in Khikhani, and his tragic end, represented not just defeat, but a symbol of historical choice and inherited duty. From this legacy, Sherif read the message of his time—choosing negotiation over force as a more sustainable and effective path.

It is essential to consider that in the 1870s, Adjara had become a geopolitical arena of competition. The Ottoman Empire was gradually weakening, while Russian influence in the Caucasus was strengthening. At the same time, Western powers—especially Great Britain—were interested in the strategic position of Batumi port, making military-based integration highly risky. In such conditions, Sherif Khimshiashvili’s orientation toward mutual understanding and peaceful transition demonstrated strong political intellect and a far-reaching state vision.

Sherif Khimshiashvili was not simply a feudal aristocrat defending personal authority. As Zacharia Chichinadze rightly noted, the Khimshiashvili family represented a rare phenomenon within the Ottoman space that preserved Georgian identity. Their influence over Upper Adjara was not only military-administrative, but also cultural and ideological. They maintained elements of national identity among the local population, which otherwise might have been lost under imperial assimilation.

Even while serving under the Ottoman banner, the Khimshiashvilis did not forget their Georgian heritage and sought to protect ancestral customs and values. This thesis fully reflects their historical role (Zosidze et. Al., 2025).

Chichinadze's evaluation highlights the Khimshiashvili family as a structural defender of national heritage under Ottoman rule. This statement is particularly important in assessing Sherif Khimshiashvili's historical persona. He should not be viewed as a feudal lord assimilated into a foreign system, but rather as a member of a noble house striving to preserve Georgian identity on spiritual grounds.

In this context, Sherif's political decision for peaceful integration with Russia was morally reinforced by the continuation of dynastic mission. Thus, the actions of Sherif Khimshiashvili should be regarded as a continuation of politics grounded in the will of national ideals. He inherited not only land and administrative privileges but also a responsibility—not to leave Adjara's future under imperial oppression.

As the war of 1877–1878 approached, the local feudal elites were forced to position themselves strategically. While Russian intervention could be perceived as a new imperial threat, Sherif Khimshiashvili correctly identified the historical moment and understood that rational cooperation with a rising empire was more advantageous for the region than continued support for the declining Ottoman rule.

Among the Khimshiashvilis, there was a special closeness to the people. They were seen in the villages not merely as rulers but as mediators. Z. Chichinadze describes Sherif Khimshiashvili's political success not solely as a function of dynastic status, but above all, as a product of social trust and credibility. The fact that the Khimshiashvilis were perceived as 'mediators' supports the thesis that Sherif's peaceful integration was possible due to public consent and internal legitimacy (Surguladze et. Al., 2013).

This reveals one of his most important traits—geopolitical intuition. He did not judge the situation merely based on the change of empires, but understood that, in the context of Georgia's historical and state legacy, Adjara's return would align more naturally with a broader national framework. His decision was not a short-term reaction to military events, but a long-considered, strategically reasoned choice based on family experience and social management skills.

His political strategy may be described as 'integration through local consensus'—a formula that would prove extremely rare and valuable during the turbulent transformations of the 20th century. It demonstrates that regional leaders with adequate historical vision can play a critical role in state processes without resorting to violence.

This choice further affirms that Sherif Khimshiashvili was not just a political actor, but a historical architect who developed Adjara's political potential during a complex period. His decision was marked by political wisdom founded in tradition, but not constrained by it—he reinterpreted the meaning of dynastic duty and transformed it into a symbol of universal regional integration.

In Adjara, the Khimshiashvili name was so deeply connected to national sentiment that almost no one could act politically in the region without their approval. This observation reflects a level of dynastic authority that was rooted not only in legal structure but in national consciousness. Sherif Khimshiashvili's political actions—mobilization of regional elites and choosing the Russian side—should be viewed not as impulsive moves but as a deliberate use of dynastic power in the service of national integration (Zosidze et. Al., 2025).

Therefore, a complete understanding of Sherif Khimshiashvili's role requires not only an analysis within the context of regional history but also his institutional and symbolic integration into the broader national narrative. The historical process of Adjara's return to the homeland in 1878—its peaceful reintegration into Georgia—represents one of the rare events in Caucasian history where territorial change occurred not through violence, but through consolidated local consensus. Sherif Khimshiashvili's participation in the negotiation process with Russia was a critically important factor in establishing regional legitimacy (King, 2008: 224). He effectively built a bridge between external powers and the local population, illustrating his pragmatism as a leader and his vision for statehood.

The return of this historical region to the Georgian political space stands out as one of those unique developments in the Caucasus where, instead of a violent conflict, a political shift was achieved through consensus. This was a transformation enabled by the conscious participation and strategic agreement of the local feudal elite, with Sherif Khimshiashvili playing a defining role in shaping the nature and outcome of the integration.

“The peaceful integration of Adjara represents one of the rare cases in which a Caucasian political transition occurred through agreement, not military coercion.” (King, 2008: 224). This evaluation emphasizes the distinctiveness of Khimshiashvili’s actions within imperial political structures.

Sherif Khimshiashvili was precisely this kind of figure—a local feudal lord who did not act under direct instruction from imperial centers. His decision to facilitate peaceful integration with the Russian Empire should not be read as blind loyalty, but as a politically calculated strategy with national orientation. He represents the prototype of a leader who, in a complex political environment, chose long-term state integration over armed resistance.

At the same time, his role was decisive in shaping a narrative that would be acceptable to the local population: that the incorporation of Adjara into the Russian Empire would not be an externally imposed decision, but the result of internal consensus. His participation in negotiations, in geopolitical dialogue, and later in constructing new administrative systems, created a unique model of integration—one in which the local elite became participants in the transition, rather than victims.

Charles King, in another work—**The Ghost of Freedom**—explains that “Caucasian history is so multilayered that local figures often played a greater role in establishing regional stability than imperial strategies themselves.” (King, 2008). This directly reflects the structural importance of Sherif Khimshiashvili’s actions.

It is especially important to highlight the moral authority Sherif Khimshiashvili exercised at a time when part of the Muslim population remained loyal to Ottoman culture and trust toward Russian rule was low. His personal prestige, public speech, and ethical standing within the local community were essential to ensuring a peaceful transition.

We fully agree with historian Abel Surguladze’s view that Sherif Khimshiashvili’s step was an expression of national responsibility in a moment when the alternative of violent integration was real, but was overcome by internal legitimacy (Zosidze et. Al., 2025). The symbolic and practical importance of this process has also been noted by foreign scholars. Charles King (2008) emphasizes that in the late 19th century, there were rare moments in the Caucasus when territorial change occurred in agreement with local actors rather than by military action. Adjara and the actions of Sherif Khimshiashvili belong to this rare category of exceptions.

It should be noted that Sherif Khimshiashvili never abandoned the legacy of Selim Pasha. On the contrary, he constantly emphasized in his letters and speeches that the act of integration was not a rupture with the past, but its fulfillment. He viewed the return of Adjara as the realization of a historic national mission which his grandfather had initiated but was unable to complete.

This interpretation is especially important for understanding the deeper logic of his actions—not merely as a tactical move, but as a strategic continuity of dynastic vision. Selim Pasha Khimshiashvili’s tragic death in Khikhani Fortress was seen by Sherif as a moral and political legacy that had to be honored in a new political framework.

The strategic choice not to resist militarily, but to pursue peaceful integration, appears to be part of a consciously formulated political vision. Sherif Khimshiashvili regarded the Russian Empire as a platform through which he could institutionalize Georgian identity in Adjara. He sought to preserve the region’s cultural autonomy within a broader national framework. In this regard, Sherif Khimshiashvili’s actions should not be interpreted as assimilation or betrayal. Rather, they should be seen as a model of transition in which national interest and local identity were aligned through political pragmatism.

Historians who have critically evaluated the process of Adjara’s reintegration agree that the Khimshiashvili family, and particularly Sherif, played an exceptional role in reconciling cultural and political differences in the region. The peaceful character of the reintegration is even more remarkable given the imperial context in which violence and forced assimilation were common. Sherif’s model stands out as an exception in this regard.

According to archival data, Sherif Khimshiashvili maintained regular correspondence with both Russian authorities and the local Muslim clergy. He acted as a mediator not only between the empire and the region but also among competing local groups, thereby ensuring a unified front for integration. This aspect of mediation—both vertically (with imperial authorities) and horizontally (with the population)—is a particularly unique feature of his political leadership.

He effectively became a political and moral ‘translator’ between empires and local identity, reconciling imperial policies with traditional customs, and introducing state structures gradually, without social upheaval. It is for this reason that we can refer to Sherif Khimshiashvili as an architect of peaceful integration—someone who chose political negotiation and civic mediation over coercion, and whose decisions had a long-lasting effect on the political geography of the region.

The legacy of Sherif Khimshiashvili must be evaluated not only through the lens of his noble status but also as an intellectual and strategic figure of transitional leadership. His role becomes especially evident when

we compare Adjara's peaceful reintegration to other Caucasian regions, where ethnic and confessional conflicts dominated.

In Dagestan, Chechnya, and even in parts of Armenia, integration into the Russian Empire was often associated with mass violence, military campaigns, and the forced displacement of populations. Against this backdrop, the peaceful transfer of Adjara under Sherif's mediation appears as a noteworthy exception.

Sherif Khimshiashvili's political decisions were not merely elite-driven; they were also informed by the pulse of the local population. His ability to balance the expectations of both imperial representatives and the traditional Muslim communities of Upper Adjara was fundamental to the success of the peaceful transition.

It is also worth noting that he was not entirely isolated from intellectual currents of the time. According to archival materials, he maintained contacts with Georgian nobility in Tbilisi, exchanged letters with Orthodox clergy, and supported educational initiatives aimed at integrating Muslim youth into broader national frameworks.

Sherif Khimshiashvili's vision of integration went beyond a simple change of political allegiance. He sought to make Adjara a functional part of the Georgian political space while maintaining local cultural and religious traditions. His view was, in many ways, similar to modern concepts of autonomy within a national framework.

Therefore, the model created by Sherif Khimshiashvili can be seen as a prototype of modern regional governance, where loyalty to the state does not require cultural erasure but rests on inclusion and adaptation.

This aspect of political innovation has not been sufficiently emphasized in the historiography. Most analyses tend to focus on the dichotomy of loyalty versus betrayal, but rarely consider the complexity of Sherif's balancing act between empire and identity.

The peaceful return of Adjara—unique in 19th-century Caucasian history—was possible precisely because of this careful balance. Sherif Khimshiashvili must be viewed as a historical figure who recognized and skillfully navigated these tensions. In this sense, Sherif Khimshiashvili may be considered not just a political mediator but also a reformist who understood the limits of imperial structures and the potential of national frameworks.

The Khimshiashvili family's case, and particularly Sherif's example, presents an alternative vision of leadership in transitional periods—one that values dialogue, pragmatism, and gradualism over coercion and radicalism.

In this regard, Sherif Khimshiashvili's legacy can be interpreted as a critical element in the transformation of Adjara's political culture. His ability to transition from a feudal leadership model to a modern political mediator demonstrates the kind of adaptability that is rarely observed in imperial peripheries. The integration of Adjara under Sherif's guidance provides a practical model of peaceful nation-building, where national identity was not enforced through repression but cultivated through consensus and legitimacy.

It is particularly significant that Sherif Khimshiashvili did not position himself as an unconditional loyalist to the empire. Rather, he used the framework of empire to achieve goals that were culturally and politically grounded in the Georgian national project. This dynamic reflects a layered political strategy in which Sherif ensured that integration would not lead to cultural loss, but rather would affirm the distinctiveness of Adjara as a Muslim region within a Christian-majority state.

This model challenged the prevailing imperial assumption that unity could only be achieved through uniformity. Khimshiashvili's strategy showed that integration could preserve, rather than erase, difference. As a result, his name remains associated not only with the political integration of Adjara but also with the protection of its unique cultural-religious landscape. This balance is what made his strategy so durable.

The symbolic nature of his leadership was further reinforced by his public stance: he often referred to Adjara as an 'inalienable part of Georgia,' thus anchoring his actions in a broader national discourse. Archival sources confirm that even after integration, he remained involved in local governance and served as a liaison between the imperial bureaucracy and regional communities. This enabled him to mediate imperial policies and adjust them to local realities.

This role—serving as both interpreter and enforcer of state logic—allowed Sherif to become a figure who was simultaneously traditional and modern, local and national, imperial and Georgian. His ability to traverse these categories is what makes his historical profile particularly important for understanding the nature of peaceful integration and hybrid governance in 19th-century border regions.

In conclusion, Sherif Khimshiashvili's life and political path represent one of the most unique and successful cases of peaceful integration in 19th-century Georgian history. His strategy—grounded in pragmatism, cultural sensitivity, and national thinking—demonstrates that state-building in multiethnic and multi-confessional regions could be achieved without violence and repression.

His role was not limited to symbolic mediation. Sherif Khimshiashvili was a real political actor who implemented a new paradigm of governance at the local level. He used both his personal authority and institutional mechanisms to legitimize the region's transition. The lessons drawn from his approach are still relevant today—particularly in understanding how to reconcile center-periphery tensions, how to mediate between empires and local traditions, and how to shape a statehood that is both inclusive and sustainable.

Sherif Khimshiashvili's example challenges traditional interpretations of imperial loyalty and national resistance, demonstrating that peaceful transformation can be a credible path in peripheral regions with complex identities.

In this context, we should acknowledge the significance of regional actors in the formation of national unity—not as passive recipients of imperial will, but as strategic co-creators of political order. Finally, Sherif Khimshiashvili's case invites us to reconsider what it means to be a national leader in a borderland—how leadership can take the form of negotiation, diplomatic balance, and institutional adaptability.

His historical experience offers not only a rich source for scholarly analysis but also a symbolic foundation for future models of regional governance in Georgia and beyond. As such, the legacy of Sherif Khimshiashvili deserves a prominent place in the academic and civic narrative of Georgian statehood.

His life was not an accidental episode of imperial accommodation but a well-planned and executed political choice with long-term significance. By integrating Adjara into the Georgian political space through consensus, rather than coercion, he offered a new horizon of possibility for the construction of modern statehood in the Caucasus.

This makes Sherif Khimshiashvili not only a figure of regional history but also a pioneer of moral diplomacy and peaceful political transformation.

Key Research Theses:

1. Sherif Khimshiashvili must be regarded not merely as a local feudal lord, but as a transformational leader whose political strategy laid the groundwork for the peaceful integration of Adjara into the Georgian state space.

His actions exemplify the model of moral leadership, wherein local interests were prioritized over personal power, and negotiation emerged as a transcendent political form.

2. His dynastic memory and the legacy of Selim Pasha became not a nostalgic reaction to the past, but a modern strategy of collaboration with the state. Khimshiashvili transformed hereditary legitimacy into a moral obligation aimed at safeguarding the interests of Adjarian communities during a period of imperial transition.

3. Sherif Khimshiashvili's negotiations with the Russian Empire's military-administrative circles constituted a unique precedent of imperial agreement based on local legitimacy and ethical trust.

This model was not defined by textual treaties alone, but by the culturally rooted and ethically framed relationships that bridged regional leadership with imperial governance.

4. The historical narrative that portrays Khimshiashvili as an architect of negotiation and non-violent transition contrasts sharply with dominant national heroic models based on armed resistance.

His strategic choice calls for a new political-ethical vocabulary that valorizes consensus over conflict and stability over revolution.

5. Despite holding strong communal authority and imperial recognition, Khimshiashvili never emerged as a prominent figure in the national collective memory—a result of the selective nature of memory politics.

Soviet historiography deliberately reinterpreted him as a reactionary feudal, thereby stripping him of the moral and strategic dimension that his actions genuinely embodied.

6. The Russian Empire's political approach, which treated Khimshiashvili as a moral intermediary rather than merely a formal official, demonstrated the effectiveness of a hybrid model of peripheral governance.

This system converted dynastic legitimacy into a form of political stability where moral authority proved more functional than military force.

7. Khimshiashvili's policy constitutes a rare model of imperial transition wherein an ethnically, religiously, and geopolitically sensitive region did not become a zone of confrontation, but rather a laboratory for peaceful integration. This case remains an intellectually and politically relevant precedent amid today's challenges surrounding regional integration and state cohesion.

8. Sherif Khimshiashvili should be recognized as a symbol of ethical stability and negotiated state-building—a political figure whose role demands deconstruction through a renewed historiographical framework.

This necessitates reforming the architecture of national memory to valorize consensus-driven political action not as weakness, but as a sovereign and historically responsible choice.

Conclusions

The historical and political figure of Sherif Khimshiashvili represents a distinctive phenomenon in the historiography of Georgian state development. He was not merely a representative of local feudal governance but emerged as a driving force behind a political and moral transformation that enabled the peaceful integration of the region of Upper Adjara into the Georgian state space during a period of imperial transition. His actions affirm that state-building processes can be accomplished without violence—through local legitimacy, ethical responsibility, and strategically framed dialogue.

This article has demonstrated that Khimshiashvili's conduct should be interpreted not simply as a tactical maneuver, but rather as a historically and ethically grounded choice based on dynastic moral obligation and pragmatic geopolitical reasoning. His decision to facilitate Adjara's integration into the Russian Empire through negotiation was in reality a sovereign and community-centered position, far from any form of unilateral capitulation.

Khimshiashvili's political agency was anchored in three critical pillars: first, his dynastic heritage and its associated moral capital; second, his negotiation-oriented political intuition, which harmonized communal and imperial interests; and third, his realistic understanding that sustainable peace in the region could only be achieved through locally grounded participatory strategies. This is precisely the type of leadership that modern theory defines as “moral leadership”—one that transcends technical governance and is grounded in a compact of public trust.

The analysis of memory politics reveals that Khimshiashvili's figure has not been fully incorporated into the national historical narrative. This omission is rooted both in Soviet-era class-based ideology and in the structurally centralist view of imperial peripheries. Nevertheless, his legacy remains alive within local memory and is gradually being reassessed in contemporary historiography, particularly through the lenses of transitional justice and regional integration (Surgulaze et. Al., 2013).

Sherif Khimshiashvili's example teaches us that a non-violent transfer of power—achieved through consensus and deliberation—is not a sign of weakness, but rather a supreme form of responsible state leadership. His case is significant not only as a historical precedent but also as a morally instructive model for the present, especially in light of Georgia's ongoing need for regional cohesion and inclusive stability.

Accordingly, the deconstruction and re-evaluation of Khimshiashvili's historical role necessitates not only a reformation of memory politics but also a reconsideration of the political-ethical discourse itself. He should be recognized as a symbol of a nation-building model that is not predicated on confrontation, but rather on consensus, shared values, and historical responsibility.

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