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Dolna 17, Warsaw,
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+48 226 0 227 03
editorial_office@rsglobal.pl

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INFORMAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN ADJARA: A SOCIAL ANALYSIS PERSPECTIVE

Irakli Manvelidze (Corresponding Author, Email: irakli.manvelidze@bsu.edu.ge)

Doctor of Public Administration, Candidate of Historical Sciences, Professor, Shota Rustaveli State University of Batumi, Batumi, Georgia

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6422-2049

Ineza Zoidze

Candidate of Historical Sciences, Professor, Shota Rustaveli State University of Batumi, Batumi, Georgia

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3354-4069

ABSTRACT

This study examines the informal religious practices of the Muslim communities in Adjara, Georgia, with a particular focus on elements of Sharia law that have persisted as “silent norms.” The research aims to identify these Sharia elements, analyze their social functions, gender dimensions, and normative significance, and explore the hybrid normative environment created through their integration with local cultural traditions.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach combining historical and comparative analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews with local elders and religious leaders, and documentary analysis. Ethical standards were strictly observed, ensuring respondent anonymity and informed consent. Data were analyzed through thematic coding and comparative analysis, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the historical, social, and legal coexistence of Sharia norms in the region.

The findings reveal that despite the formal abolition of Sharia institutions following Russian and Soviet rule, certain elements continue to function as informal norms within the community. These practices-encompassing marriage rituals (Aqdis Gachra), inheritance, funeral rites, oaths on the Quran, and other life-cycle ceremonies-play a significant role in maintaining social order, gender arrangements, community identity, and cultural memory. They represent a hybrid normative system where secular state standards and religious-cultural norms coexist and shape everyday social life.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that Adjara’s Muslim communities maintain historical religious heritage alongside contemporary social standards. Informal Sharia norms function not only as cultural and religious practices but also as mechanisms of social regulation, intercultural continuity, and community cohesion, illustrating a unique example of normative pluralism and cultural resilience.

KEYWORDS

Adjara, Muslim Community, Informal Religious Practices, Cultural-Religious Normative Space

CITATION

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Introduction

Adjara represents a historically significant region of Georgia, distinguished by its unique religious-legal and cultural characteristics. From the 17th century onwards, following integration into the Ottoman Empire, Islam spread intensively in the region, resulting in the establishment of Sharia law elements within local social life. Sharia does not constitute a codified legal system; rather, it is a set of normative principles that guide the daily life of each Muslim, including prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, as well as interactions with neighbors and the broader social environment (Hussain, 2011). It regulates all aspects of a believer's life, encompassing religious, familial, and inheritance-related matters, as well as civil and criminal law issues (Ioseliani, 2021). In contemporary Adjara, the influence of these legal norms is particularly evident in family relations, marriage, inheritance regulation, and other socio-religious practices.

Following the region's liberation from Ottoman rule and the establishment of Russian administration, formal Sharia institutions were gradually abolished, and the functions of legal regulation were transferred to state authorities. Subsequently, the totalitarian Soviet regime significantly curtailed the space for religious practice, leading to the gradual erosion of Sharia elements. During the Soviet era, the consolidation of a secular state model ensured their complete deinstitutionalization.

Nevertheless, Sharia norms have partially persisted within the Muslim community of Adjara as elements of informal order, continuing to operate within social practices, religious routines, and cultural representations. These norms, often perceived as "silent norms," are not legally binding but exert considerable influence on social cohesion, the preservation of community identity, and the formation of collective cultural experience.

Islam continues to play a significant role (Gelovani & Sanikidze, 2009) among certain segments of the population in the Adjara region (Papuashvili, 2008). According to the 2014 Georgian Census, approximately 40% of the population of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara (132,852 people) adhere to Islam (Georgia, 2014). Data from 2011 indicate that there were around 180 religious buildings in the region (Baramidze, 2010). Evidently, a substantial portion of the population in Adjara demonstrates an ongoing interest in preserving Muslim traditions (Liles, 2012).

The aim of this study is to describe and analyze certain elements of Sharia law preserved in Adjara, trace their historical origins, identify their social functions, and characterize their normative significance. Particular attention is given to areas where Sharia norms have merged with local traditions, resulting in a hybrid normative environment. This environment represents a multi-sourced, integrated system in which religious and cultural elements function equally, shaping everyday social order and defining community practices.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do elements of Sharia law ("silent norms") function in contemporary Adjara?
2. What impact do these norms have on community identity and social order?
3. How are gendered aspects (such as mahr and inheritance) manifested, and how do they evolve in contemporary practice?
4. How does normative diversity manifest in local practices where religious-cultural traditions coexist with everyday social order?

Methodologically, the research is based on ethnographic observation, interviews with local residents, and documentary sources, enabling the identification of practices that continue to function within the Muslim community of Adjara as mechanisms sustaining social and religious order.

The study demonstrates how historical norms can be preserved within everyday practices related to cultural representation, social control, and community identity, and how religious traditions coexist with contemporary social standards in a shared space.

This research is particularly significant in the context of Adjara, as it highlights how the region maintains its historical heritage alongside contemporary social and cultural practices, offering a valuable analytical framework for understanding local normative diversity and intercultural intersections.

Research Material and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach and relies on an interdisciplinary framework combining historical, social, and legal analysis. Data were collected using multiple methods:

1. Historical-comparative analysis – archival materials, legal documents, and existing literature were examined.
2. Fieldwork and anthropological observation – direct observation of religious and social practices within local communities.

3. Interviews – semi-structured interviews were conducted with community elders, religious leaders, and local residents, taking gender differences into account.

4. Documentary analysis – comparison of religious texts and state legislation with local practices.

Ethical standards were strictly observed, ensuring respondents' anonymity and informed consent. Data were analyzed through thematic coding and comparative analysis, enabling an in-depth understanding of the historical, social, and legal coexistence of norms.

The research is grounded in three principal theoretical approaches to analyze the historical, social, and legal context of Sharia elements preserved in Adjara. First, cultural anthropology theory (Geertz, 1973) facilitates the interpretation of religious-cultural practices, particularly “silent norms,” as social-cultural texts in which belief, tradition, and everyday practice are interconnected.

Second, social norms theory (Cialdini, 1998) provides a framework for understanding how communities maintain informal order and how individual behavior is regulated through social control within the community, even in the presence of formal legal regulations.

Third, gender analysis (Connell, 2009), allows for the assessment of the gendered dimensions of marriage (mahr), inheritance, and other social practices, including their influence on power, rights, and social positioning.

In brief, cultural memory theory (Assmann, 2011) helps to highlight how Sharia norms sustain the cultural-religious identity and collective memory of the community, while the legal pluralism approach (Tamanaha, 2008) provides a framework for understanding the coexistence of secular law and religious-cultural traditions.

This theoretical combination provides a robust foundation for evaluating the “silent norms” of Sharia law in Adjara, enabling an in-depth investigation of their historical origins, social functions, and legal significance. Accordingly, the theoretical framework allows Sharia remnants in Adjara to be understood not as formal institutions, but as social and cultural norms that support community cohesion and contribute to the formation of a multidimensionally integrated normative environment.

Results and Discussion

Social and Cultural Regulators in the Muslim Communities of Adjara: The Role of Informal Mechanisms

In the Muslim communities of Adjara, state norms and religious-cultural practices often coexist within the same social space, creating a unique hybrid situation. Local residents practically observe both the requirements of the Constitution of Georgia and the Civil Code, as well as the preserved religious traditions of the Adjara region. This coexistence reflects a hybrid normative environment, in which official standards and informal practices are integrated into everyday social life.

Following the abolition of formal Sharia institutions, a system of informal mechanisms has persisted within the Muslim community of Adjara, shaping local social order and authority. These “silent norms”-including marriage customs, inheritance practices, and the regulation of religious rituals-actively function as mechanisms of social control and community governance.

In particular, in the highland villages, local elders and religious leaders exert significant influence over everyday decisions. Their authority is based not on formal legal power but on the recognition of community identity, cultural memory, and religious norms. They often act as mediators in conflict resolution, in the regulation of inheritance matters, or in overseeing both formal and informal marriage processes.

As a result, hybrid social regulations have emerged in Adjara, where state standards and religious-cultural norms operate on an equal footing and are integrated into everyday social practices. Secular regulations and religious-cultural practices coexist, collectively shaping social reality. This hybrid environment continues to structure daily life, reinforce collective memory, and maintain social order within the Muslim community of the region, despite the absence of formal institutions.

Social Practice and “Silent Norms”

a) The Tradition of “Aqdis Gachra”

In Adjara, the practice of *Aqdis Gachra* represents a locally adapted form of *nikah*, serving as a hybrid religious-social instrument. Marriage ceremonies are often held in mosques and follow a prearranged protocol: the couple notifies the religious officiant in advance, an official marriage document is drawn up, at least one witness from each side is required, and the couple voluntarily declares their consent.

During the ceremony, the Muslim cleric performs a ritual that requires the presence of at least two male witnesses (Kalebashvili, 2025). The purpose of witness participation is to ensure the legitimacy of the marriage and to provide public verification.

The document prepared by the Muslim cleric typically includes:

- The full names of the bride and groom;
- The terms of the marriage agreement;
- Signatures of the witnesses confirming the agreement;
- The conditions of *mahr*, a pre-determined compensation that the groom must provide to the bride in the event of marital dissolution.

Historically, *mahr* has taken various forms, including money, household items, or livestock. In contemporary practice, the most common form of *mahr* is gold, quantified in grams, which ensures the woman's economic rights.

Gender Aspect: Historically, the symbolic act of “*chrili*” (the ceremonial cutting) was performed exclusively on the bride's hand. This reflected a patriarchal view of female “purity” and the necessity of protection, emphasizing the social function of marriage. Contemporary documentary practice partially transforms this aspect: through *mahr*, the woman's economic rights are guaranteed, thereby enhancing her social and legal position within the family.

Legal Context: In Adjara, *Aqdis Gachra* functioned as a practical legal mechanism that ensured the legitimacy of marriage within the community. Although secular Georgian law does not confer formal legal force to *nikah*, this practice continues to operate as a form of social and cultural validation. It represents a hybrid instrument, combining elements of religious and social control.

b) Inheritance Rights

Within the Muslim communities of Adjara, the influence of certain Sharia law elements, transformed into religious practices, remains evident in the domain of inheritance. Historically, Sharia norms stipulated that a woman's inheritance share was half that of a man's. Ethnographic observations and interviews indicate that this practice continues to partially operate in some families: women often receive a smaller portion of property than men, reflecting a gender imbalance derived from Sharia principles.

On the other hand, within the contemporary socio-cultural context and the process of transformation in family practices, guarantees for women's economic position have significantly evolved. Specifically, the documentary validation of marriage, i.e. *Aqdis Gachra*, ensures the protection of women's rights through *mahr*. *Mahr* represents a pre-determined compensation that the husband must provide to the wife in the event of marital dissolution. This system establishes an economic security mechanism for women and partially mitigates historically generated gender imbalances.

As a result, inheritance practices within the Muslim community of Adjara reflect a hybrid form of Sharia norms and contemporary cultural-economic practices. Although the official Civil Code regulates property distribution, local practices-shaped by Sharia influence and the *mahr* system-function as part of social order, cultural memory, and familial economic justice.

c) Funeral Practices

Funeral practices within the Muslim communities of Adjara clearly reflect the influence of Sharia law. These customs continue to serve both religious and social functions and constitute an integral part of the region's cultural heritage:

1. **Prompt Burial of the Deceased** – The rapid interment of the deceased serves to preserve the sanctity of the body and show respect for the deceased, in accordance with Sharia requirements.
2. **Ritual Washing (*Ghusl*)** – The ritual washing of the deceased with clean water or herbal substances ensures spiritual purity, instills a sense of responsibility among family and community members, and expresses a religious culmination for the deceased.
3. **Moderate Grave Decoration** – The simplicity of the grave represents social and religious control, reflects adherence to Sharia norms, and underscores the importance of humility in the community.

These practices demonstrate that Sharia norms no longer function as formal legal instruments in Adjara; however, their elements remain observable in daily religious-cultural practices. Such practices are not limited to marriage and inheritance but play a significant role in shaping social order and establishing normative behavior in everyday interactions. They create a hybrid cultural-sociological space and contribute to the preservation of community identity, social cohesion, and cultural memory.

Accordingly, Sharia elements in the Muslim communities of Adjara are perceived as significant social, ethical, and cultural regulators, ensuring the internalization of norms and their integration into communal practices.

d) Oath on the Quran

In the Muslim communities of the Adjara region, the practice of taking an oath on the Quran continues to be employed in conflict resolution, dispute settlement, and various forms of agreement-making. This practice is grounded in the role of oaths (*qasm*) in Sharia, which confer particular trustworthiness to an individual's word and increase the parties' sense of responsibility.

Taking an oath on the Quran functions in these communities as a mechanism of social, ethical, and cultural control. Violation of the oath is perceived as both a religious and social transgression, further enhancing its significance within the context of community faith, social order, and the preservation of honor.

Other Religious and Everyday Practices

In the Muslim communities of the region, vital life-cycle ceremonies-such as childbirth celebrations, sacrificial offerings, and circumcision-are performed through a combination of religious dogma and local practice. During childbirth celebrations, sacrificial offerings may involve cows, goats, or sheep; portions of the sacrifice remain within the household, while others are distributed to the needy or to relatives. Circumcision, despite its historical context, is now typically performed in hospitals and is considered a medical procedure rather than a religious ceremony.

Religious practice within these Muslim communities is relatively standardized. Prayer and ritual supplication are officially conducted in Arabic, ensuring uniformity with global mosque practices, while personal prayers may be offered in any language. Islam prohibits worship directed toward intermediaries; the role of saints is recognized only as moral exemplars.

Religious norms and local cultural practices coexist harmoniously in the region. Customs not prohibited by religion are actively observed, whereas religious prohibitions, such as abstaining from alcohol or pork, are strictly followed. This illustrates how Muslim Georgians maintain religious dogma while simultaneously integrating local culture and national identity.

Interfaith marriage is permitted for men marrying non-Muslims, but prohibited for Muslim women. Empirical evidence from interviews and ethnographic observations indicates that mixed families generally do not face resistance from religious norms and do not experience significant marital conflicts.

Analysis of interviews and ethnographic data shows that the local population perceives Sharia elements not as formal legal mechanisms but as practices connected to cultural heritage and social order. These practices play a significant role in the internalization of community norms and in their integration into everyday life.

Conclusions

Following the liberation of the region from Ottoman rule, the subsequent establishment of Russian administrative governance, and later the Soviet totalitarian regime, the space for religious practice was significantly restricted. As a result, Sharia legal institutions gradually declined, and the establishment of a secular state model during the Soviet era led to their complete deinstitutionalization. Nevertheless, a range of norms and practices associated with Sharia law has persisted to the present day as an integral part of social practice and everyday cultural routines.

The study demonstrates that in Adjara, despite the historical abolition of formal Sharia institutions, certain elements continue to function as "*silent norms*"-informal religious practices. These norms play a significant role in maintaining community identity, social cohesion, and historical-cultural memory.

The coexistence of religious-cultural traditions and contemporary social practices in Adjara provides a unique example of normative diversity and intercultural convergence. Such a hybrid environment illustrates how a society manages to synthesize historical heritage with contemporary social standards, which can be considered a clear manifestation of social dynamism and cultural resilience.

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