

Some Aspects of the Artistic Solutions of the Wooden Mosques in Ajara

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Abstract

The 19th-20th century wooden mosques (*Jame*) preserved in Ajara represent a phenomenon deeply connected with Georgian traditions. The architectural solutions of the mosques and their associated functional structures are based on the requirements of Islamic religious buildings and Georgian local traditions. Their architecture reveals artistic features of ecclesiastical, secular, and residential structures. This characteristic is manifested in the exterior appearance of the buildings, the design of interior space, and individual decorative motifs.

The architecture of the mosques resembles the Ajarian-type "oda-house," though, depending on location, the two- or three-story wooden buildings erected on stone foundations are characterized by a certain autonomy. The mosque plan is primarily based on the theme of accentuating the center of the hall surrounded by a three-sided

mezzanine supported on columns, which is based on a concept familiar to Georgian tradition. The interior is distinguished by a light spatial-volumetric structure, rich decorative ornamentation, woodcarving, and diverse forms of roofing, in which the ancient traditions of Georgian woodwork can be read.

The architecture of 19th-20th century Ajarian wooden mosques is nourished by the traditions of national folk art and the artistic innovations of contemporary Ottoman art. They were built by local craftsmen and those who came from various regions (Shavsheti, Ch-aneti).

Keywords: mosque, Jame, folk, architecture, plan, exterior, interior, tradition

Introduction

From the 16th century, in the southwestern part of Georgia, particularly in Ajara, the period of Ottoman rule was followed by the spread of Islam and the establishment of lifestyles determined by new religious ideology, which had significant reflection in the population's way of life and culture. During the Islamization period, especially from the 19th century, there was intensive construction of religious buildings, opening of educational institutions, and the process of spreading and establishing the religious-legal system. The problem of synthesizing national and foreign traditions was reflected in all spheres of spiritual and material culture.

Ajara is a region renowned for its woodworking. In this forested corner, particularly in the mountainous zone, houses were built of wood, while in the lower zone they used mixed techniques - wood,

stone, or wood and brick constructions. Examples of vernacular architecture are characterized by harmonious integration with nature, a sense of wood material, amazing synthesis of wood and stone texture, color, construction mastery, decorative facades, and a certain austerity.

The most vivid manifestation of the highly artistic traditions of the region's folk architecture is represented by the unique wooden mosques-james preserved in Ajara. The term "jame" is the folk name for a mosque and should derive from the congregational or "juma" mosque, where Friday or holiday prayers were held; "jame" in folk understanding is a kind of synonym for mosque (Baramidze, 2010: 392-393). The majority of mosques preserved in Ajara, built in the 19th and early 20th centuries, are entirely constructed of wood. However, there are also james built with stone or mixed materials - stone and wood, whose internal structures and artistic forms are created with wood material. Stone buildings are few and most of them are found in the lowland zone. These are: Batumi, Khutsubani, Tskavr-oka, Khala, Khelvachauri, Makhvilauri, Maradidi, Khulo former and active mosques (Baramidze, 2010:400).

Most of the wooden mosques are preserved in the mountainous villages of Khulo, Shuakhevi and Keda, in smaller numbers in the territories of Khelvachauri and Kobuleti municipalities. Similar to Ottoman tradition religious complexes, mosques are associated with structures of various functions - minaret, madrasa, abdeskhana, cemetery, etc.

Both mosques built during Ottoman and Russian Empire rule are preserved in Ajara. Most of them were built in the 19th-early 20th centuries. By 1921, 158 mosques were registered in Ajara (Haris-Brandts, Wileri, Shioshvili, 2018:1-5). During the Soviet atheism period (1921-1991), their construction ceased, though existing buildings

were preserved because they were used as auxiliary economic structures. From the end of the 20th century, Muslim worship was restored in the mosques. Due to the absence of maintenance conditions during Soviet Georgia and recent modernization processes, only a portion of the active wooden mosques have survived in more or less authentic form.

These architectural examples have attracted the attention of Georgian scholars since the last century. In their works, Ajarian wooden mosques are primarily considered examples of folk woodwork. The connection with folk residential and Christian structures is particularly noted, as well as with ecclesiastical and pagan traditions, and Islamic religious architecture (Garakanidze, 1959; Sumbadze, 1982; Varshalomidze, 1979; 2010; Baramidze, 2010; Chichileishvili 2010; Kvachadze et al.). Some scholars question the understanding of Ajarian wooden mosques as unique examples of folk culture and think that such a view was conditioned by the results of Soviet researchers hired by the state and the desire to support the ethno-territorial vision of Georgia's history (Haris-Brandts..., 2018:5). Despite the contribution made to the study of mosques, issues of their architectural features, artistic solutions, the genesis of diverse ornamental decor, the synthesis of national and foreign traditions, the development of syncretic elements, and cultural dialogue still remain subjects of special research.

The purpose of this work is to present some artistic features of Ajarian wooden mosques, the main aspects of their exterior appearance and spatial solutions, and to discuss issues of the relationship between Islamic worship requirements and Georgian traditions.

Methods

The research methods are based on critical analysis of scientific, historical, written, visual, and epigraphic sources, as well as field

study of Ajarian wooden mosques, presentation of historical-artistic values, and art-historical analysis methods of architectural solutions, spatial structure, and artistic features of interior and exterior.

Results

In the regions conquered and subjugated by the Ottoman Empire, provincial examples of capital architecture were created by local craftsmen, taking into account traditional materials and techniques. Ajarian wooden mosques - "james" - are a phenomenon deeply connected with Georgian traditions. The architectural solutions of mosques and their associated functional structures are based on the requirements of Islamic religious buildings and Georgian local traditions. The mosque architecture resembles the Ajarian-type "oda-house"; its exterior, the facade design is characterized by simplicity.

The color scheme of dark grayish or yellowish-black tones of oak or other wood species, the dense arrangement of wooden beams, asymmetrically cut rectangular windows, and "overhanging" roof determine the specific appearance of the structure. The mosque plan is based on the theme of accentuating the center of the hall surrounded by a three-sided mezzanine supported on columns, which represents a concept familiar to Georgian tradition. The 19th-20th century Ajarian wooden mosques are the result of creative collaboration of local craftsmen and those who came from various parts of Georgia, especially Laz masters, inspired by the traditions of national folk art and the artistic innovations of contemporary Ottoman art.

Discussion

The architectural solutions of james and their associated functional structures are based, on the one hand, on the requirements of Islamic religious buildings, and on the other hand, on the traditions of local residential houses and Georgian folk art. This characteristic is manifested in the constructions and artistic elements of almost every

part, in the building's connection to the environment, external appearance, interior space design, and individual decorative motifs (Garakanidze, 1959: 105-106, tab. 176-182).

Mosques are built in places suitable for public gatherings. In Georgia, the tradition of site selection for jame and integration with nature is evident. Around the building, almost everywhere, green cover and courtyards are preserved. Its architecture resembles the Ajarian-type "oda-house," though, depending on location, the small-scale one-, two-, or three-story building erected on a stone foundation is characterized by a certain autonomy. These structures are externally indistinguishable from adjacent examples of vernacular architecture. Exceptions are mosques with minarets restored by the population.

Despite the chamber scale, the building set on a high stone base or stone floor, with vertical volumetric structure, a porch connecting to the environment, narrow wall planes, sparingly distributed window openings, and enclosed space, leaves the impression of a small "fortress" characteristic of Ajarian residential houses. This kind of "enclosure" of residential buildings is a characteristic feature of Islamic countries, though this peculiarity may also be determined by the specifics of the mountain region (Garakanidze, 1959:81-82).

The main facade of Georgian mosques is oriented to the north, which is determined by Georgia's geographical location relative to Mecca. The exterior of Ajarian mosques, the facade design is characterized by simplicity and clarity. The main facade is almost always designed symmetrically, with the central axis emphasized by a semi-circular stone staircase. A characteristic feature of the facade is the combination of enclosed volume and open porch (Kvirike—1860-1862, Dagvistavi—1826, Uchkhiti—early 20th century, Pirveli Masi—1864-1865, Kveda Agara—1860s, Medzibna—1910, Akho—1817-

1818, Nigazeuli—1922, Chanchkhalo—1923, Nenia—1891-1892, Jabnidzebi—1892-1893, Kidzinidzebi—1867, Dghvani—1907-1908, etc.). Unlike a residential house, the porch is a kind of corridor (*havli*) that is attached only to the main facade, inserted into the building volume like a loggia, and performs the function of a vestibule, a preparation room for prayer. Relatively rarely, there are mosques with porches distributed on both floor levels (Chaisubani mosque—late 19th century) and mosques without porches (Kosopeli, Shubani—1887-1888, Zundaga—mid-19th century, Darchidzebi—1908, Pushrukauli). The artistic expression of the porch is determined by the refined forms of supporting columns and brackets, light proportions, and ornamental carving that adorns the bases and capitals of columns. Sometimes the floor-dividing beams of facades also have a decorative belt. However, despite these artistic elements used in the exterior, the external appearance of mosques is still distinguished by austerity (Garakanidze, 1959:105-106, tab. 180-181).

Like residential houses common in Ajara, mosques are mainly covered with a four-sloped roof with steep pitch, primarily tile roofing. The dark grayish or yellowish-black tones of oak or other wood species, the dense arrangement of horizontal and vertical beams, asymmetrically cut rectangular windows, "overhanging" roof, and the shadow it casts give the building a mysterious appearance. An outstanding example in this regard is the mosque in the village of Kvirike (1860-1862), preserved in Kobuleti municipality. Here the edges of the building's roof pitch rest on a double row of tile-supporting rafters and belts. The rounded corners of the roof frame, the rhythmic arrangement of rafters, along with structural strength, add expression to the building. This detail, conditioned by Ajara's climatic conditions, speaks to high traditions of craftsmanship and woodworking. Similar but more simplified forms of roof edges are found in other mosques

(Akho—1818, Uchkhiti—1880s, Kosopeli, Khokhna—1899-1900, Darchidzeebi—1908, Matskvalta—1842-1843, Nigazeuli—1922, Kidzini-dzeebi—1867, etc.). Similar roofing forms of the building are widely spread in Ajarian and Laz-type residential houses and economic buildings.

As a result of Soviet-period anti-religious propaganda, the original minarets of 19th-20th century mosques have not survived, which are one of the important, dominant elements expressing religious identity and are characterized by sharply high, soaring proportions and narrow, rounded, conical, "pencil-like" roofing forms

The main entrance door to the mosque is the most expressive detail of the facade. The perception of the artistically decorated interior space begins with the door abundantly adorned with ornamental carving. The prayer hall, with its vivid design, carved decorations distributed like carpets on architectural constructions and ritual forms, plant and geometric ornaments, and colored painting, is understood as a kind of earthly paradise (Varshalomidze, 2010:427-428). The mandatory ritual architectural forms of the interior are the *mihrab* located in the center of the qibla, indicating the direction of Mecca, and the *minbar* intended for delivering Friday and holiday sermons. A mandatory attribute of the prayer hall ("*harim*") is a small lectern—*kursi*, which is sometimes attached to a column (Akho—1818, Kveda Agara—1860s, Tskmorisi—1891-1892, Jabnidzeebi—1892-1893, Shubani—1887-1888, etc.) or placed against the wall (Gegelidzeebi—1880-1900, Khokhna—1899-1900, etc.).

The foundation of the mosque plan is, primarily, a hall surrounded by a three-sided mezzanine, gallery ("*mahfil*"), whose central vertical is always accentuated by the ceiling construction. Sometimes the abundantly decorated narrow band of the mezzanine also extends to the qibla wall, resulting in a four-sided outline of the gallery. The

plastic elements of space—the three-sided mezzanine with its sharply sloped rectangular or semicircular central porch and the lighting system created by window distribution, like other examples of Islamic architecture, helps accentuate the qibla wall oriented toward Mecca. The artistic-semantic component of the southern wall—the arched decoration of the mihrab—in some cases shows similarity to the design of fireplaces in residential houses (Garakanidze, 1959: fig. 2, 44).

The canonical requirements of the mosque's worship forms, compositional accents, especially the emphasis on the mihrab, the formation of lighting and the qibla wall's overall decor into a unified system are understood through forms characteristic of Georgian tradition. The artistic design of the southern wall of *jame* reveals an analogy with the interior structure of Ajarian houses and the Meskhetian "*darbazi*," in whose space the leading role is given to the fireplace wall decorated with cupboards or shelves. The fireplace represents the "sacred hearth" of the house, the artistic center, whose emphasis is served by each component of the wall's artistic design. Of similar sacred significance is the mihrab, located in the center of the qibla, the main orientation point for the worshipper. Sometimes on one or both sides of the mihrab there are niches with raised steps from the floor and arched entablature (Khokhna—1899-1900, Chikuneti—1838, Pirveli Maisi—1864-1865, Medzibna—1910, Kveda Agara—1960s, etc.), which, with their decoration, emphasizes the special significance of the qibla wall.

The two main compartments of the interior space—the prayer hall and the second-floor gallery—are covered with differentiated ceiling constructions: the mezzanine covering is created by an alternation of flat square and rectangular panels emphasized by decorative cornices, while the center of the hall is almost always acce-

ntuated by a hemispherical dome or "crown"—a coffered ceiling, which is distinguished by rich ornamentation, carved decoration, and painted decor. The ceiling construction of Ajarian wooden jame demonstrates a high level of woodworking, continuity of traditions, creative approach to developing artistic forms, and diversity of forms.

One type of roofing is a hemispherical dome placed in the center of the ceiling square, which is hidden in a suspended ceiling supported on mezzanine columns. Relatively rarely, the dome marking the center of the hall square rests on 4 columns raised from floor level (Maradidi stone mosque-1914). Domed ceiling forms characterize the mosques of Kosopeli, Tskmorisi (1891-1892), Uchkhiti, Zundaga (second half of 19th century), Chvana (1894-1895), Nigazeuli, Dghvani, Purtio (1894-1895), Riketi (1918), Danisparauli (early 20th century), Paksadzeebi (19th century), Dagvistavi, Zoti (1905-1907), and other mosques (Baramidze, 2010). Often the dome construction is only of boards, but still demonstrates high construction culture. Sometimes a decorative belt follows the base of the dome (Dagvistavi, Tskmorisi, Chvana, Nigazeuli, Purtio, Dghvani, etc.).

The roofing of Kveda Agara mosque (1860s) is distinguished by its expressiveness - with panels of various rhythmic arrangements of narrow grooves and a ceiling dome. The dome is inserted into a frame of carved circle motifs, its base is created by a belt of independent rectangular ornamental panels, while the hemisphere of the dome is braided with dynamic wooden cornices, "rays," descending from the "rosette" at the apex. This dome design demonstrates the high carpentry mastery and artistic taste of Georgian woodworkers.

An interesting form is shown by the ceiling roofing of Darchidzeebi mosque, which can be called a "stepped dome." The dome hemisphere built in the center of the square is composed of circles embedded in the ceiling depth and pyramidally reduced, each level of

which is decorated with independent ornamental motifs. The center of the dome is finished with a rosette. This form of dome must have been inspired by the principle of "square pyramidal crown" ("stepped crown") roofing.

A different form of square roofing is used in the interior of Kviri-ke jame. Its dominant is the so-called "stepped false dome," which is raised by successive lifting of parallel rows of "crown" toward the center. The artistic structure of the construction is based on the principle of proportional reduction of square planes and stepped lifting in depth, resulting in a pyramidal form of the ceiling. Each square is accentuated by a decorative cornice, while the middle square is finished with a rosette. A noteworthy and expressive detail of this roofing form is the use of blue fabric as the background of the crown, which is also attested in the folk architecture of southern Georgia (Ajara, Trialeti) (Varshalomidze, 2009:426). The parallel-laid rectangular roofing of Kviri-ke mosque finds an echo with the "crown" construction of the Georgian *darbazi*, which takes its origins in ancient times. Similar ceiling decor is found in Gogadzebi mosque (1874-1875). In Khokhna jame, a parallel square "crown" ceiling with an octagonal coffer and rosette in the center is used. Unlike the stepped-square parallel construction, the mosques of Shubani, Jabnidzebi, Nenia, Pirveli Maisi, Goginauri, and others attest to octagonal coffer forms in the central part of the hall. In Chikuneti and Beghleti mosques (early 19th century), relatively wide, stepped, "flat-cassette" (coffer-like) ceilings are found.

In Ajarian wooden *james*, the center of prayer halls is primarily accentuated by one dome or one coffer, though there are exceptions. For example, in the form of the multi-domed ceiling of Ghorjomi (1902), whose ceiling construction divided into squares contains hemispherical domes and octagonal coffer-like forms (Haris Brandts...,

2018:122-130). Unlike other mosques, its ceiling construction divided into nine parts is supported by columns, with four small-volume domes on all four sides of the central, wide dome and four octagonal coffers at the edges, which in turn confirms the creative freedom and artistry of Georgian craftsmen.

Thus, based on authentic examples, it becomes clear that the ceiling construction of Ajarian wooden jame is characterized by diversity. Along with domes, there are coffered—"crown-like" and wide, "flat-cassette" ("coffer-like") forms. Taking into account the construction dates and chronology of mosques, different forms of ceilings coexist in parallel.

Similar forms of planning, interior structure, and hall roofing are found in the mosques of historical Tao-Klarjeti. The mosques of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region are large-scale stone buildings with square plans, internal mezzanines, wooden ceilings, and carved-painted details. Here the roofing of the prayer hall is mainly domed, though the entrance decor of Kharjami mosque also records the crown-like roofing of the traditional Meskhetian dwelling (Mosques in Samtskhe-Javakheti, 2022:64, 72-73).

The main motif of the prayer hall roofing, the idea of "crown-like," coffered ceiling comes from the ceiling forms of the traditional Georgian dwelling "darbazi." The open-hearth crown roofing used in this type of dwelling is preserved in Kartli, Trialeti and Samtskhe-Javakheti. It is known that wooden crown roofing was widely spread throughout the world from Korea to the shores of the Aegean Sea (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Tajikistan, Pamir, India, Iran, Abyssinia), but according to interior arrangement and roofing, the diversity of crown forms and heights, the most diverse picture is presented precisely in Georgia (Chikovani, 1960:101-102, 112). The ceiling forms used in Ajarian wooden mosques take their origins in ancient past. The

existence of this construction on Colchian land 2000 years ago is recorded in Vitruvius's treatise "Ten Books on Architecture." Although the wooden beam "dome" described by him has not survived to us, ethnographic and archaeological materials are found that confirm the existence of such construction in western Georgia. For example, the remains of a 10th century BC wooden house discovered in Choloki confirm the reliability of Vitruvius's information (Kipiani, Amashukeli, 1995:10). According to Vitruvius, the upper structure of the "Colchian house" is a "false vault" composed of parallel arrangement of logs, whose origin is connected with the existence of a hearth. The hearth, which is attested in Georgian territory from the III millennium BC, is connected with ancient representations and rituals of the family hearth. The so-called crown roofing was widely spread in Colchis territory. Its essence was determined by the functioning of the hearth. The traditions of the "Colchian" house find an echo in Ajarian folk architecture, particularly in the artistic-constructional design of jame ceilings. This applies not only to the false-crown-like or domed ceiling of Ajarian jame, but also to the stepped, cassette-like ceiling construction, which precisely repeats the construction of the "Colchian house" and represents its new artistic interpretation (Sumbadze, 1982:69-71). However, it is significant that these forms of roofing have partially lost their constructional essence, acquired the meaning of decorative elements, and become expressions of national traditions. Thus, the roofing system of the ancient "Colchian" dwelling, which is described in the ancient treatise and whose reflection is found today in ethnographic materials, is well preserved in the roofing of Ajarian jame (Garakanidze, 1959:136).

It should be noted that decorative forms of crown-like ceilings are also attested in the architecture of 19th-20th century residential houses of western Georgia (Ajara, Samegrelo) (villages Kedlebi, Bzu-

bzu, Sarpi, Didachara; cities Tsalenjikha, Senaki, Zugdidi). In residential houses of Guria and Samegrelo, guest rooms with domed ceilings are also attested: villages Bukistskhe, Orsantia, Khidistavi (Garakanidze, 1959, tab. 78-79, 81, 83-85, 87, 116-120, 125, 127; Chichileishvili, 2015:120-121). In Georgian wooden church architecture, curved forms produced by boards—conches and vaults—are used, which, together with artistically designed domes of mosques, confirms the traditional approach of folk woodwork (Garakanidze, 1959: 103-104, t. 167, 171-172).

Thus, the interior design of Ajarian mosques is based on the proven concept of space—the theme of "dome" based on a square, which constituted the main core of medieval Christian architecture. It is known that the center of Georgian temples is formed by a square crowned with a dome, around which a cruciform plan develops. The theme of dome based on square is genetically connected, on the one hand, with the existence of similar structure in the architecture of Middle Eastern countries and, on the other hand, with Georgian dwelling traditions coming from the pre-Christian period (Beridze, 1974:19). The basic requirements of the mosque's worship ritual and plan, which implied the arrangement of a unified prayer hall surrounded by galleries supported on columns, with accentuation of the center, was a concept familiar to Georgian architecture. The artistic understanding of the southern wall of jame also finds proximity with the interior of Ajarian houses, as well as with the structure of the Meskhetian "darbazi," in whose space the leading role is given to the fireplace wall flanked by cupboards and shelves. The composition of the jame's "sanctuary" wall—the dominant significance of the *mihrab*, the emphasized imagery of ritual elements—is nourished by the principle of artistic decoration of the residential house's fireplace as a "sacred hearth" and its associated components (Garakanidze, 1959:88).

It is known that in Ottoman architecture, the architectural design of mosque complexes developed by Mimar Koca Sinan (1489-1588) expressed territorial peculiarities, identity, memory, and forms of decor that, with their diverse visual combinations, gave his creations previously unknown content. Mimar Sinan's Mosque typology was based on the concept of light-filled centralized domed spaces, which is reflected in provincial Islamic examples. The sultan's architects, including Sinan, had developed typical plans whose implementation was possible taking into account proven materials, techniques, and artistic traditions for the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional population of the Ottoman Empire. The use of contemporary Ottoman and local vernacular artistic-constructional forms, in turn, determined the syncretic character of mosques.

From this perspective, interesting examples are recorded in Turkey's eastern Black Sea coast, especially in those territories that were separated from Georgia after the Ottoman conquests from the second half of the 16th century—Samtskhe, Javakheti, Ajara, Shavsheti, Kola, Artaani, Chrdili, Erusheti, Speri, Tao, Klarjeti and Chaneti. The Islamization process particularly accelerated from the 1830s (Mosques in Samtskhe-Javakheti, 2022:8).

Wooden mosques were widely spread in the forest-rich Anatolian region. Wooden columned mosques with wooden ceilings have been known in Turkey's old cities since the Karakhanid epoch (840-1042). Wooden columned mosques are attested in the Seljuk period (1077-1130) as well, but this type of building found wider spread during the Ottoman Empire era. The wooden mosques of the mentioned region are buildings constructed without nails; they are known in scientific literature by the term established by researcher Ekrem Haki Ayverdi—"Çandı (çantı)" mosques. Wooden, so-called "Çandı" construction mosques are found in the major cities of the Black Sea

coast region—Samsun, Sinop, Kocaeli, Düzce, Kastamonu, Ordu, Giresun, Rize, Trabzon, and Artvin areas (Erarslan, 2022:105-106).

Depending on topographical location, buildings are placed on slopes. Sometimes mosques are erected on stone foundations, while some stand directly on the ground without a basement. In two- or three-story examples, the first floor is used as a madrasa. Sometimes madrasas are located in separate buildings adjacent to the mosque. In mosques, as in Ajarian jame, it is important to observe the qibla direction, with the main facade and entrance oriented to the north. From the perspective of plan and spatial understanding, the concept of combining semi-open and closed spaces is evident here as well. The main components of the plan are the prayer hall (*harim*), the second-floor gallery—the so-called *mahfil*, and the principle of arranging small ritual architectural forms (*mihrab*, *minbar*, *kursi*) is similar. The exterior is primarily characterized by an open, columned portico and side galleries (*revaq*), external or enclosed spaces (*son cemaat revağı*) for latecomers. The mosque with galleries is covered with a four-sloped roof covered with Turkish-style tiles (Erarslan, 2022:112-113).

Similar planning structure characterizes the wooden so-called "juma" mosques attested in the Kavak region of Samsun (Bekdemiri—1596-1599, Tatirmuslu—18th century, Dere, Chakali—19th century, etc.), which were built for local believers to attend Friday prayers, religious holidays, and burial rituals. The interior gallery surrounding the "harim" is sometimes presented in the form of four-sided, three-sided, and one-sided mezzanines (Uzun, Çiftçi, 2017:322-333). A peculiarity of some mosques in the Kavak region (Bekdemiri, Kosaja) is the abundant interior decoration—a coffered ceiling decorated with carving and ornamental decor. Examples from the Rize region (Ardasen Doğanay—1829-1830, Findikli Meivali—1871-1872, Güneysu Çamlıca—1862, Kalandere Hüsyin Hoca—1834, Hemşin Bilenköy—

18th century, etc.) are characterized by the general concept of plan and space, domed and undomed ceilings of the prayer hall, among which flat or coffered forms predominate (the Ardasen Doğanay jame has a domed ceiling, while flat-coffered roofing forms are found in james - Meivali Findikli, Çayeli Çeşmeli, Çamlıhemşin Şenköy, Kalandere Hüsyin Hoca, İkizdere Şimşirli, etc.). The main characteristic feature of the exterior is wooden-railed porches, double-winged windows distributed on two floors, terraces, and a functionally accentuated northern facade (Azizsoy, Özkurt, 2021:888-890). The 19th-century *james* preserved in Trabzon, Çaykara district (Taşören Köyü Jame, Uzungöl-Filak Jame, Dernekpazari Yukari Kondu Jame, etc.) are also distinguished by the principle of combining wood and stone materials, the general concept of space, decorative design of the interior, door, *mihrab* and *minbar*, hall ceiling, domed or coffered forms of ceilings, and decoration of columns and gallery railings with ornamental "embroidery" (Zorlu, 2017:58-67).

The mentioned regional examples of the eastern Black Sea coast confirm that the spatial-planning structure of mosques was based on norms developed by Islamic worship canon, though construction technique, materials, and artistic understanding of forms, execution methods, and the repertoire of ornamental motifs expressed the typological, local peculiarities of regional architecture.

The planning and spatial structure of Ajarian wooden mosques is determined by Islamic religious requirements. The spatial concept, the theme of accentuating the central hall, and artistic-constructional features are nourished by Georgian house-building traditions, which find manifestation in artistic forms used in the building's facades and interior (columns, porch railings, ceiling decoration, ornamental motifs). The artistic decor of mosques contains forms of Georgian stone and wood architecture carving coming from the depths of centuries

and decorative elements and motifs developed under the influence of contemporary Ottoman and also European art, which emphasizes the diversity and syncretic character of these examples.

It is a fact confirmed by Georgian historical sources, inscriptions, and accounts that in Georgia (in Ajara and Samtskhe-Javakheti) mosques were mainly built by Laz masters. It is also probable that local, native Ajarian masters were involved in their construction and decorative embellishment, though the status of the so-called "*bash-usta*," chief craftsman, was primarily given to Laz masters (Varshalomidze, 1979:33). Arabic inscriptions preserved on mosques contain information about masters: the Dagvistavi mosque mentions the Laz master Hasan oghli Usta from Arkhavi (1826), the Zundaga mosque (before the 1860s) was built by Laz master Usta Qabazi Ahmedi and local masters—Kajaia, Gogitidze, and Turmanidze, the builder of Purtio mosque is Laz usta (master) Omer Quroghli (1894-1895), of Nenia mosque—Hasan Usta (1891-1902), the foundation of Khokhna mosque (1899-1900) was built by a Laz, while the building by local masters Hasan and Resul Qajaiebi, Ghorjomi mosque was built by Laz masters Omer Usta and Usta Bin Ahmed (1902), Dghvani mosque was built by Omer Bin Ahmed from Lazistan (1907-1908); the work of masters who came from Shavsheti includes Darchidzeebi (1908), Nigazeuli, and the mosque in village Chao (early 1900s), etc. (Muslim Community..., 2010:217-218). The handwriting of Laz and local Meskhis is also read in the construction of Samtskhe-Javakheti mosques—according to inscriptions preserved in Zikilisi and Vale mosques, these mosques were built by Laz brothers from Arkhavi, Musa and Ali Usta, and their father was the renowned woodworker Hasan Usta. Also, accounts confirm that in the construction of Meskheti mosques, Christians helped Muslim neighbors, both physically and with agricultural products, while local Muslims also contributed to

church construction (Mosques in Samtskhe-Javakheti, 2022:13-14, 75).

Traces of Laz construction activity are also attested in the construction of residential houses in various regions of Georgia (Ajara, Guria, Samegrelo, Meskheta, Trialeti). The ethnic group of Georgian origin—the Laz—have been settled in the territories of the eastern Black Sea coast since ancient times (Trabzon, Rize region, western territories of Chorokhi). Currently, most of historical southern Georgia, including Chaneti-Lazeti, is today almost entirely within Turkey. In Georgia's Black Sea coast, only a part of the single border village of Laz territory—Sarpi—remains (Sarpi, 2015:5, 10, 68-69). The similarity of artistic solutions and decorative elements of Georgian examples and mosques of eastern Turkey regions (Artvin, Rize, Trabzon, Samsun areas) was determined not only by common principles of ritual practices but also by the knowledge and creative understanding of traditional and contemporary artistic forms by Laz masters and "traveling" craftsmen who came from other parts of Georgia.

Conclusion

The 19th-20th century Ajarian mosques are the result of creative collaboration of local masters and those who came from various parts of Georgia, especially Laz masters, inspired by the traditions of national folk art and the artistic innovations of contemporary Ottoman art. The goal of Ottoman imperial rule was to pursue assimilation policies, to unite and subjugate multi-ethnic and multi-confessional subjects. At a certain stage, the construction of mosques developed according to religious requirements proceeded based on traditional materials, construction techniques, and artistic methods for the imperial regions. The example of Ajarian mosques clearly shows that their attractiveness and uniqueness are determined by the synthesis of both centuries-old local traditions and contemporary Ottoman artistic

forms in the architectural-spatial and decorative design of the buildings.

Based on the analysis of the artistic form of 19th and early 20th century mosque architecture, it emerges that the ideological and worship requirements of Islamic places of prayer were creatively understood by Georgian craftsmen. The introduction of innovations was also facilitated by the fact that, besides typical plans and ritual forms, the use of local materials, artistic-constructional forms, elements of ecclesiastical architectural and vernacular decor was acceptable, which, together with imported motifs and forms, determined the expressiveness and diversity of these monuments. National construction culture and folk art, over time, creatively processed and assimilated foreign ethnic and religious motifs on local soil and created unique examples based on a familiar concept and diverse sense of form in the form of Georgian, specifically Ajarian wooden mosques.

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➤ In addition to the photographic materials taken by the author, the work also uses photographs by Ruslan Baramidze and Nana Meparishvili, for which we express our special gratitude to them.



Illustrations



1-2. Mosque in Kvirike. 1860-1862



3. Medzibna. 1910



4. Uchkhiti. 1910s.



5. Kvirike. Mosque roof construction.



6. Village Takidzebi. Roof construction of a residential house.



7. Matskvalta. 1st half of 19th century



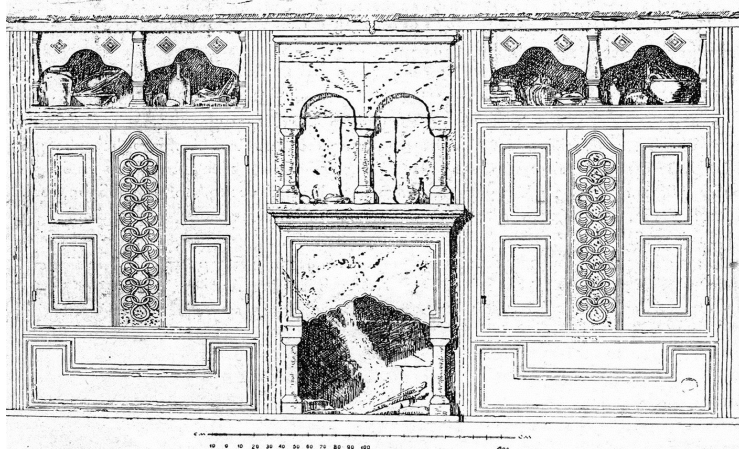
8. Kidzinidzebi. 1867



9. Kveda Agara. 1860s



10. Medzibna. 1910



11. Village Khani (Imereti). Interior of Natriashvili's House
(According to L. Sumbadze)



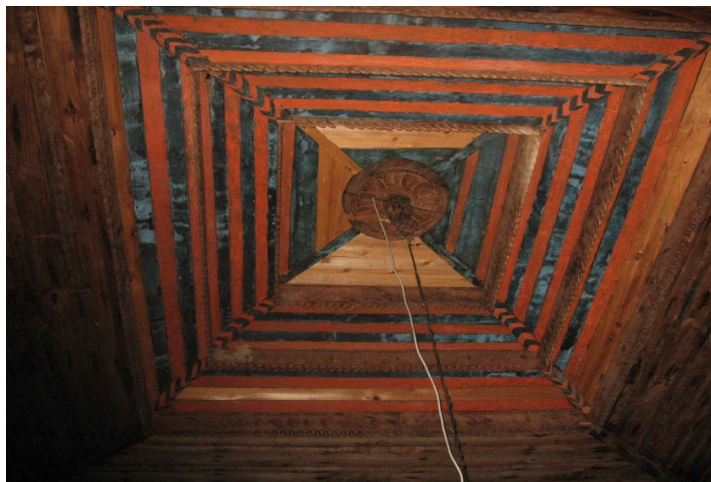
12. Purtio. 1894-1895.



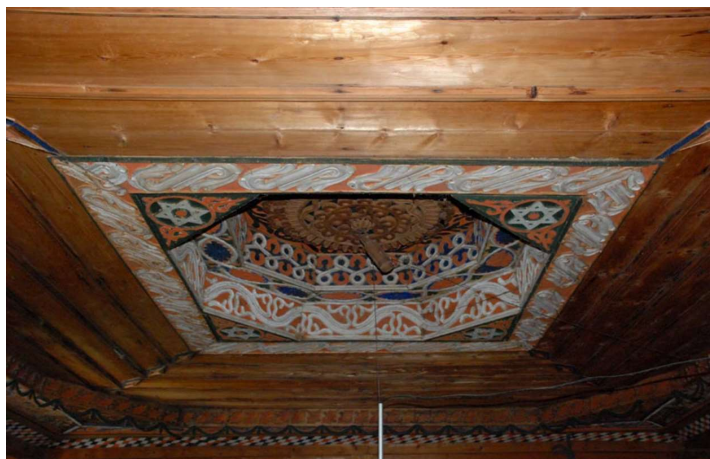
13. Dghvani. 1907-1908



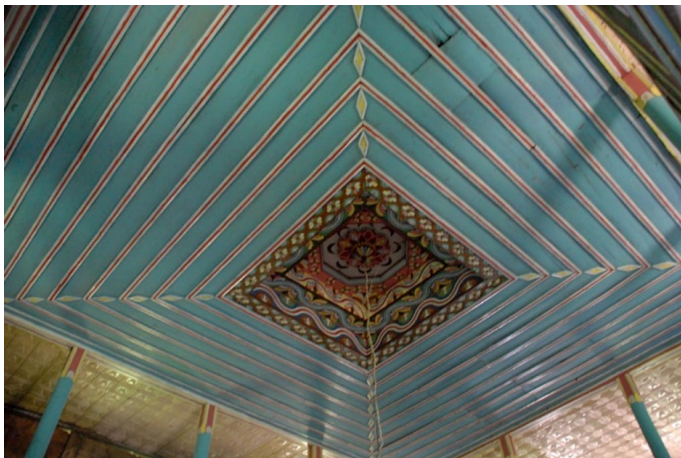
14. Darchidzebi. 1908



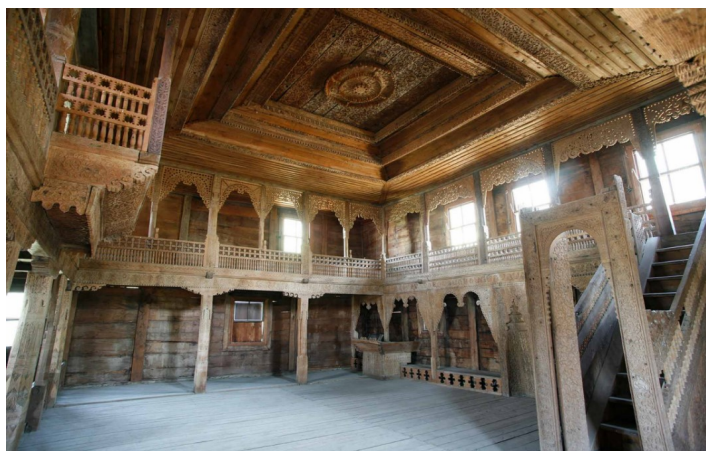
15. Kvirike. 1860-1862



16. Shubani. 1887-1888



17. Khokhna. 1899-1900



18. Mosque in Chikuneti. 1st half of 19th century.