MUSLIMS MINORITIES OF GEORGIA

SANIKIDZE, George
GÜRCİSTAN/GEORGIA/ГРУЗИЯ

ABSTRACT

In Georgia the development of Islam has been characterized by a number of peculiarities. This fact had an influence on social, cultural and family lives of the Islamic communities living in Georgia.

Since the early Middle Ages Georgia has always had intensive contacts with the Islamic world. Under the condition of Islamic expansion a minor part of the Georgians (specifically, those living in the provinces of Adjara and Meskheti) converted to Islam. On the other hand, the tribes of Islamic confessions, basically of the Turkish origin, have been settle in Georgia for the good.

Nowadays, in Georgia there are approximately 400,000 Muslims. They include both active believers, who are trying to follow all Islamic rules and rituals, and passive ones, who are more indifferent to the religious requirements. The Islamic communities of Georgia, basically the Azeri people, are characterized by a strong demographic impulse. At the same time, over the recent years, a significant part of the Azeri population left Georgia either for a while or for the good.

In Georgia Islam have very extraordinary features. For example, in the rituals and religious practices of the Muslim Georgians of Adjara one may observe some influence of Christianity. Furthermore, over the recent period of time conversion of the Muslim Adjarians to Christianity is getting more and more frequent. Islam of the Chechens (the Kists, according to the Georgian tradition) living in the Pankisi Gorge is well mixed with both the Christian and local pagan beliefs. A very interesting situation has been formed among the Azeri community: as a result of mutual influence of the Shiites and the Sunites, living side by side, the difference between the rituals of these two major streams of Islam has faded (the Shiites perform the Sunite rituals and vice versa).

In the context of the overall religious revival in the world, the rise in the level of religious identity of the Muslim citizens of Georgia (first of all of those who are not ethnic Georgians) is noticeable. New mosques have been constructed and, sometimes, even young people have been sent to the religious educational institutions of the Islamic countries for getting higher Islamic education. All these processes have been funded by foreign Islamic organizations or individuals. In this context the spread of Wahabism among the Muslim communities of Georgia (especially the Kists of Pankisi Gorge) is the matter of much concern, especially as there is a strong discord between the Wahabits and the adherents of the traditional Islam.

Key Words: Islam, Muslims, Georgia, Wahhabites, Islamic Education, Islamic Organisations.

My presentation focuses on religious practices among Georgia's Muslims today. It will consider relations between Muslims and other religious groups; the influence of religion on everyday life; the relationship between the religious and national consciousness; and tensions between supporters of the syncretic forms of Islam that have been traditionally practiced in Georgia and the allegedly "pure" and "alien" form of Islam that is typically, although not necessarily accurately, referred to as "Wahhabism" in post-Soviet space. I'll begin with an brief overview of the history of Islam in Georgia.

Islam in Georgia: A brief overview

During the Middle Ages and the early modern era, intensive contact with the Islamic world created favorable conditions for the spread of Islam in Georgia. After the conquest of the city by Arabs in the 8th century, Tbilisi became the capital of an Islamic emirate from 730ies or 770ies (Japaridze, 1999; 73) (nisba at-Tiflisi[1], or at-Taflisi, is first mentioned in Arabic historical sources at around that time). Georgia's King David IV (David the Builder) retook city in 1122, and Tbilisi became the capital of the reunified Georgian Christian state. It continued, however, to have a significant Muslim minority thereafter, and its Muslims were generally afforded certain privileges such as exemption from some taxes.

From these times the majority of Tbilisi's population has been Christian, however. This was the case even in the 16th and 17th centuries when the

[1] The Arabian form of a pronunciation of the name of city which then entered in Russian and from here in the European languages and was the official name of city till the beginning of the 20th century.

Ottoman Turks and Iranian Safavids controlled much of the country. According to the French traveler J. de Turnefort, among the 20,000 inhabitants of Tbilisi in 1701, only 3,000 were Muslim (De Tournefort, 1988; 64).

It was during this period that Islam spread to various segments of the rural population. It came first to the southwest region of Georgia (Samtskhe-Saatabago), where the Ottomans created the *pashalik* of Akhaltsikhe (Childir). Later, Islam was embraced by ethno-linguistic minorities in the country, and it was also spread through the arrival of waves of Turkic speaking Muslims. Later, For mostly strategic reasons, Russian imperial authorities initially attempted to change the demographic balance in some of Georgia's border regions in the 19th century, but the attempt met with only partial success and was soon abandoned. By-and-large, Russian imperial authorities were tolerant of Georgia's Muslim minorities, and by the end of the imperial period, the population of what is today Georgia was some 20 percent Muslim.

The same cannot be said of the Soviets. The militantly atheistic Soviet state launched a particularly vicious campaign against all religious institutions and ecclesiastical authorities in the 1920s and 1930s. A measured accommodation was reached with certain religious traditions during the Second World War, however, including Islam. But both official Islamic institutions and unofficial practices and religiosity accordingly survived the Soviet period, and indeed in Georgia as in other parts of the Soviet Union, the Gorbachev and early post-Soviet periods witnessed a notable "Islamic revival."

The last Soviet census in 1989 did not, however, inquire into religious identity or practices, and no census or nationwide survey has been possible in the period since the Soviet collapse. As a result, the number of people who consider themselves believers, whether among traditional Muslim peoples or Georgians, is unknown.

Moreover, it is inherently difficult to classify individuals as believers or non-believers, since there are degrees of religiosity, and the distinction between believer and non-believer is thus to a degree an arbitrary one. In general, it is possible to distinguish four groups of Georgian Muslims on the basis of religiosity. The first consists of those who execute all religious rituals and believe that the non-observance of the religious prescriptions of Allah will mean severe punish. For them, fasting, ritual sacrifice (*qurban*), and recitation the religious passages (*mevlud*) mean that Allah will forgive

their sins, and as a result they enter Paradise upon their death. Second are those who believe in Allah but pray or visit mosques only intermittently. Third are those who believe in Allah but observe religious rituals as a family or national tradition only. Finally, some are agnostic religiously but nevertheless consider themselves "Muslim" in the sense that Islam is seen as part of the traditional culture of their particular nationality.

It was estimated that the number of "Muslims" in the republic at the end of the Soviet period was as high as 640,000, or 12 percent of Georgia's total population at the time of 5.4 million. Today, most estimated are lower, at around 400,000, a decrease that in part results from emigration and in part from a more considered distinction between believer and non-believer. The percentage of Muslims in the total population appears to have changed only little, however, since total population has also declined since 1989 (by non-official estimation about 1 mln person left Georgia from 1989).

Islam in Ajaria

The region Ajaria was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire and islamized from the early 17th century.

The Muslims of Ajaria are, virtually without exception, Sunnis. Sufism, however, is rare, unlike in Turkey or among other Muslim-majority parts of Georgia.

There were no religious institutions of higher learning in Ajaria under the Ottomans. Instead, the children of the Ajarian nobility were sent in some cases to religious schools in Turkey and other Muslim countries. For most, however, there was limited opportunity to learn Turkish or Arabic. In Batumi, the Ajarian capital, there was one *madrassa* that combined primary and secondary schools and where instruction was conducted in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish. In Ajaria's second largest city, Kobuleti, where at the end of the 19th century the population consisted almost entirely of Georgian-speakers, there was another *madrassa*, where again teaching was conducted there in Arabic and Turkish (Chichinadze, 1913; 13). Nevertheless, Arabic was incomprehensible to most the students at the *madrassa*, many of whom memorized religious texts without knowing their meaning.

It seems that tensions between Muslim and Christians in Ajaria graduate increased in the second half of the 19th century. In 1855, during the Crimean War, many Ajarians fought on the side of the Turks, and during the Turkish-Russian war of 1877-78 Ajarians held a number of top

positions in the Ottoman armed forces, while some 6,000-10,000 Ajarians served as soldiers (Iashvili, 1948; 138). During World War I, Ajarian *muhajirs* (emigrants to Turkey) formed a division within the Turkish army (Datunashvili, 1989; 14).

Ajaria became part of the Russian Empire under the terms of the Treaty of Berlin of 1878, at which point Batumi was made into a free trade zone.[2] Article 6 of the earlier Treaty of San-Stefano was left unchanged, according to which the population living in areas conquered by Russia was given permission to sell property and immigrate to Turkey. It was then that many of the Muslims of the region began to emigrate (the *muhajiroba*), a process that continued until the end of the 1880s. Orthodox Christian missionaries also began actively proselytizing in the region in the late 19th century (Frenkel', 1879; 62). As a result, there has long been a strong Christian presence in the region, which remains the case today.

Russian sovereignty proved a hardship for many Ajarians. Previously the Turkish border had played an important role in the economic life of the region, as Ajarian men left for Turkey seeking seasonal work. After accumulating savings, they would typically return to their native villages. With the establishment of Russian border guards and tariff posts, however, movement across the border became much more difficult. These and other restrictions proved a heavy burden. At the same time, because they feared that local Muslims would prove disloyal to the Tsar, the authorities attempted to populate the region with peoples –mostly Christians – from other parts of Russia. They also used both official and informal means to encourage the emigration of Muslims to Turkey. Members of the feudal Muslim nobility who were emigrating also forced their dependant peasants to leave with them, while the local Muslim clergy encouraged emigration as well (although eventually many reconciled themselves to Russian rule and called for cooperation with the new authorities).

It is difficult to estimate the number of emigrants from Ajaria during this period. The most reliable figure is around 10,000, 6,000 thousand of whom were Ajarians (many of the rest were Abkhazians).[3] One indicator of the overall decrease in the Muslim population in the region is demographic data from Batumi. Of the 4,970 inhabitants in 1872, approximately 4,500 were

[2] Porto-franco (duty-free trade) in Batumi had been cancelled in 1886 under the order of the Russian emperor.

[3] During the muhajerstvo, some Muslim Abkhaz moved to Ajaria, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire, including approximately 300 families who settled near Batumi. Of these, 146 chose to remain after Ajaria's incorporation into Russia (Sichinava, 1958; 87). By 1989, when the last Soviet census was conducted, 1,636 Abkhaz (0.4% of the region's population) still lived in Ajaria. Most, however, left after the Abkhaz conflict broke out in 1992.

Muslim (Georgians, Turks, Circassians, and Abkhazians). By the time of the census of 1897, the population of the city had grown enormously, but now the Orthodox Christian population was 15,495 (mostly Slavs) while Muslims numbered only 3,156, some of whom were citizens of Turkey (Sichinava, 1958; 110).

Also relevant is overall data for Georgia. According to official sources, a total of 150,000 individuals left the country for Turkey during the *muhajiroba* (Datunashvili, 1989. Baramidze, 1996).

At the end of the 19th century, the Russian administration began to make an effort to win the loyalty of Muslims in Georgia, one consequence of which was an end to policies promoting emigration. The Russian state financed the construction of mosques and the opening of new *madrasas* in Ajaria and elsewhere. As a result, some 400 mosques were built in Ajarian villages, while Batumi had three mosques, two of which belonged to Turks and one to Georgians. (Interestingly, the trustees of the Georgian mosque were members of the Abashidze feudal family, ancestors of the recently removed strongman of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze (Chichinadze, 1913; 21). State officials also began to support the Muslim clergy in the hopes that it "would be compelled to operate in accordance with the interests of the government, and the government in turn could supervise its actions and have constant control over it." (Acts, V. IX, 1884; 126). As early as 1870, imperial authorities passed regulations specifying the rights and duties of the clergy, and as time passed the government made additional efforts to bring the clergy under its control. It created a special administration to oversee the Islamic establishment; formed educational religious centers at the local level; and prohibited study in Muslim countries. In addition, it opened a special school in Tbilisi for the training of the both Sunni and Shiite mullahs, mullahs who presumably would serve the interests of the state. Finally, Muslim *khojas* (teachers) were appointed by the government and received state salaries.

The establishment of Soviet power and the creation of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in February 1921 were followed that June by the formation of Ajaria as an autonomous republic (ASSR) within the Georgian SSR. Interestingly, it was the only autonomous republic in the USSR that was established on a religious rather than an ethno-linguistic basis. The reasons were political, particularly the complex relationship between the USSR and Turkey in the early 1920s that resulted from the terms of the 1921 Treaty of Kars. Even to this day, the Treaty plays an important

role in influencing relations between Turkey, Russia, and Georgia. For example, while signing a Treaty of Friendship and Good Will with Georgia in 1992, the Turkish president demanded that Georgia provide proof that Tbilisi would abide by the Treaty's conditions (Abashidze, 1998; 265).

At the beginning of the Soviet era, there were 158 mosques in Ajaria (Archive of the State Committee of Ajaria; Fond I, Descr. 3, File 89, 5). In the years that followed, the number decline dramatically thanks to the regime's harsh campaign against religion. By 1936, only two registered mosques remained in Ajaria (Archive; 10). The state also undertook an aggressive campaign of propaganda in favor of atheism. A "Union of Atheists" was created in Ajaria in 1925, and two Soviet newspapers in were published in the region in 1920s and 1930s to promote the official line: *The Atheist* (*Bezbozhni*, which means "godless" in Russian), which came out in Russia, and *The Fighting Atheist*, which was published in Georgian. Islamic law (*shari'a*) and the muftiate (the religious affairs administration) were abolished in 1926.[4] Soviet authorities also tried to force the Muslim clergy to support Soviet rule in their religious *vaiazes* (sermons/preaching). Carrot and Stick policy marked the relations between authority and Islam during the whole Soviet period" (Meiering-Mikadze, 1999; 103).

Nevertheless, as noted earlier pressure on Islam diminished during and after World War II. Overall, Islamic practices region survived, although Islam remained depoliticized and Islamic practices were in many cases informal, carried out beyond the purview of the officially recognized religious establishment.

Today the evidence suggests that most Muslims in Ajaria have a respectful attitude toward Christians and Christianity. Doubtless in part this is because Ajarians afford their ancestors great respect, and many of those ancestors were Christians. Moreover, many younger Ajarians are embracing Christianity. However, it is impossible to know just how many conversions have taken place. What can be said is that re-Christianization has accelerated, although a significant number of Ajarians still consider themselves Muslims and carry out Islamic rites. The coexistence of two religions even in one family, where young are Christians and elders - Muslims, became usual in Ajaria.

Christianity enjoys substantial state support in Ajaria today. In a move of obvious political significance. Islam, in contrast, is not supported by local

[4] The muftiate, however, continued a semi-legal existence, and it has reemerged into the open in the post-Soviet period to become the region's official Administration of the Religious Affairs of Muslims.

authorities. During our expedition to the highlands of Ajaria in September 2003, local authorities went to great lengths to prevent me and his colleagues from contacting Muslims, at one point going so far as to demand that we show them a document giving us permission to proceed with our research. Similarly, the person in charge of Ajaria's religious affairs claimed that no mosque had been built in region in the last few years, although the research team saw many new mosques in Ajarian villages.

At least part of the funding for new mosques being built in Ajaria comes from Turkish citizens of Georgian heritage. Most were built using standard plans and have no value as architectural monuments. But there are also old mosques in the villages. Of special interest are those in the villages of Ghordjomi and Beghleti. The mosque in Ghordjomi was built in the 19th century, while the mosque of Beghleti dates from the beginning of the 20th century. Both are decorated inside and out with ornaments. And in both a vine tree is a major ornament – a traditional symbol of Georgian Christianity. In villages without mosques, small chapels or houses of believers serve as places of worship. There is an imams at the mosques of Khulo, Ghordjomi, and Batumi, although none has received a classical religious education.

There is only one mosque in Batumi. The central hall of the Batumi mosque can accommodate about 1,500 believers.

Islamic practices in Ajaria today fall into two categories: (1) purely religious rituals such as daily prayer, the recitation of the Koran, charitable donations (under different forms), sacrifice (*qurban*), and the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*mevlud* or *dhyrk*, which in different parts of the Muslim world is celebrated in different ways and on different days, and which in Ajaria entails visiting the tombs of relatives and the celebration of important events in the life of a family); and (2) Islamicized Ajarian traditions such as circumcision (*sunat*), burial ceremonies (*janazah*), and marriage contracts (*niqah*, *qalim*, *mahr*), including marriage of under-age girls. Many of these rituals can take place outside the mosque – in courtyards, fields, or private homes.

An important practice among Ajarian Muslims is the religious pledge – in order that Allah fulfils desires of believers, they cut qurban, execute mevlud, read the Koran. Fasting and special collective prayers (*taravi*) are recited during the holy month of Ramadan. *Taravi* offered in mosques is generally considered more pious than *taravi* in private homes, and as a result many believers come to Batumi at the beginning of Ramadan to

attend the mosque every evening. The end of fasting is celebrated by Bayram, when in the Batumi mosque as many as 4,000 believers gather (in Tbilisi the figure is only 400 to 500). Another important festival is Kuchuk Bayram ("Feast of Sacrifice").[5] In addition to ritual sacrifices tied to national traditions, there are Islamic occasions, such as when sacrifice (*qurban*) is performed in lieu of the *hajj*. Ritual sacrifice also takes place when disorder strikes a family or there is a joyous event to celebrate. And as in the rest of the Muslim world, a sacrifice is offered at the beginning of the *hajj*.

One of the most popular feasts in Ajaria Muslims is Khadir geja, which is usually celebrated on the 27th day of Ramadan to mark the day that Allah decides the destiny of believers. Another is Barati geja, which is usually celebrated during the fall and marks the moment when the souls of believers depart to the other world. Ashura, the feast marking the landing of Noah's ark that is of different significance to Shiites, is celebrated as well by Sunni Ajarians, although the ritual is different. Finally, the night of Eli Ekenji is celebrated on the 52nd day after a person's death, when as usual *mevlud* is read at the tomb.

The influence of national traditions on religious practices is the result of numerous factors – historical, national, religious, and psychological – as well as by social environment. Young believers who witness religious traditions from early in childhood play a particularly important role in preserving religious traditions that are unique to particular nationalities or even to individual clans and families.

Muslim religious practices in Ajaria are also intermingled with Christian ones. An example of these syncretic practices is the abundance of vine tree ornaments inside and outside Ajaria's mosques (wood or stone ornaments or oil-painted images). In the mosque of the village of Drvani, for example, images of grape clusters are carved into the *minbar* (pulpit) and painted on the walls. Again, this is a Georgian tradition linked to Christianity (Vashalomidze, 1976, 25). Indeed, Islam forbids pictures and most inscriptions on tombs – only Islamic formulas, names of the deceased, and dates of births and deaths are allowed, and all inscriptions must be in Arabic. But in Georgia portraits as well as inscriptions of various sorts written in Georgian, Russian, and Azeri can be found in many Muslim cemeteries.

[5] Among the Muslim population of Georgia Turkish forms of Islamic terms are widespread. We therefore prefer to use mostly Turkish instead of classical Arabic terms.

A considerable number of young Ajarian Muslims received religious education abroad during last decade. There are frequent complaints in local newspapers that the government has failed to monitor the quality of the education that young Ajarians are receiving in religious institutions abroad. As a result, there are fears that some young Ajarians are becoming "Wahhabi" in orientation (the more accurate label is "Salafite"). For Wahhabis, the practices that traditional to Islam in Ajaria are *bida* (perverse innovations). Some young Ajarians who have received religious training abroad do, in fact, seem to embrace Salafism to one degree or another (although it is important to appreciate that Salafism is a complex and diverse phenomenon). A generational conflict has thus emerged among Ajarian Muslims, with the older generation favoring traditional Islam and some elements of the younger generation favoring Salafism. The conflict, however, appears to be less acute in Ajaria than in many other Muslim-majority regions in the former Soviet Union.

Muslim Azeris of Georgia

Azeris constitute the largest Muslim community in Georgia. According to the last Soviet census of 1989, there were 303,600 Azeris in the republic, or some 5.7% of the total population (Jaoshvili, 1996; 293). They are concentrated in the region of Lower Kartli, where approximately 244,000 reside (including some 18,000 in Tbilisi), and in the eastern region of Kakhetia, which has some 33,600 Azeri residents. The remainder are scattered around other parts of the country.

By the 19th century, most were peasants living in villages, but some had become merchants and craftsmen in urban areas.

The Muslim population of Tbilisi in the 19th century was substantial – according to the census of 1897, there were 189,024 Muslims in the province of Tbilisi. It was also ethnically quite diverse, consisting of Persians, Turkic speakers (referred to later as Azeris), Dagestanis, and Volga Tatars, among others. Of these, the most numerous were the Persians, followed by Azeris. Both were Shiites, whereas the other Muslims in Tbilisi at the time were Sunnis, and relations between the two communities were tense (Anchabadze, Volkova, 1990; 248). They had different mosques and different places in the Muslim cemetery, and they avoided contact with each other.

As we already noted, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Russian imperial authorities tried to win the confidence of Georgia's Muslims,

which led them to cultivate relations with the Muslim clergy in particular. An Islamic seminary for the preparation of mullahs was opened in Tbilisi with state support, and mullahs educated at the seminar tended to support the state. By the time of Soviet authority was established in Georgia, there were 59 mosques serving the azeri community in the country, with some 500 mullahs conducting religious services in one district alone (Borchalo district, which was populated mostly by Azeris). By then, *muridism*[6] had become widespread among Georgia's Azeris due to the influence of North Caucasian Islam. There were also numerous *madrassas* serving the Azeri community, although they provided only a very rudimentary education.

High birthrates led to a rapid increase in the size of the Azeri population in Georgia throughout the Soviet period – between 1959 and 1989, for example, Georgia's Azeri population doubled. Districts with large Azeri populations – Gardabani, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Akhalkalaki, and Bogdanovka – have the highest birthrates in the country, and the Azeri villagers there have particularly large families. Marriages of Azeris with other nationalities are extremely rare.[7]

In Tbilisi, the 18,000-member Azeri community is split almost evenly between Shiites as Sunnis. Unlike the 19th century, however, relations between the two communities are good, as suggested by the fact that there is a single Friday mosque serving both. Until the early 1950s, the Tbilisi mosque served Sunnis only, but the city's only Shiite mosque (known as "the Blue Mosque"), which dated from the 16th century, was destroyed by the Communists in 1951. As a result, Sunnis and Shiites were forced to share the same mosque, and the arrangement appears to have strengthened ties between the two communities.[8]

There are mosques in other cities of eastern Georgia as well, including Mskhaldidi, Dmanisi, Bolnisi, and Marneuli. The Marneuli mosque, which opened a few years ago, is now the biggest in Georgia. In Mskhaldidi, a mosque built in 1985 that was soon closed and transformed into a warehouse, but it was reestablished in early 1990 and has been open for

---

[6] A variety of Sufism, which was spreaded in The North Azerbaijan and from here in the North Caucasus. Muridism is based on the ascetisizm and and the spirit of self-sacrifice.The special place occupies a strict hierarchy – relations between Master (teacher?) (murshid) and disciple (murid). The militarized form of muridism was ideological and organizatuion basis of the Imamat of Shamil (1841-1859) in the North Caucasus.

[7] For example, by 1989 a natural increase among the Georgian equaled 7.6 percent, and Azerbaijanis - 22.8 percent.

[8] The reason the mosque was destroyed was apparently official opposition to the Shiite practice of self-flagellation during Ashura. The practice continued nevertheless, and today Muslims in Georgia still mark Ashura with ritual flagellation, which they call Shahsei-vahsei and over which a mullah from Baku presides.

worship ever since.[9] There are also informal mosques in almost every Azeri village, even small ones, often in ordinary houses where prayers may be led by local believers, the so-called wandering *mullahs*, who perform religious rituals (in mosques as well as private homes), write magic formulas, prepare talismans, and so on (all of which is forbidden by orthodox Islam).

Many Azeri villages are also home to holy shrines and pilgrimage sites. Indeed, the worship of saints (or holy persons) is a widespread practice among Azeri believers. For example, the tomb of the "saint" Isa Efendi (a native of Dagestan, who died in the 1930s), which is located in the village of Kabal, is a place of pilgrimage, which is visited not only by Sunni Azeris but also Muslim Kists from Pankisi (see below) as well as by Shiite Azeris.

There is a particularly interesting intermixing of Sunni and Shiite practices and religious consciousness in the Lagodekhi region of eastern Georgia. Azerbaijani villages in the region, which include Kabal, Karadzhala, Gandzhala, and Uzuntala, have some 10,000 inhabitants. While the population of Kabal is Sunni, the other villages have Shiite majorities. The latter consider it their duty to perform religious ceremonies according to the Shafi'i *madzhab*: praying five times a day, the celebration of Qurban Bairam, the mevlud, performing the *zikr* (the Sufi ecstatic dance), and funeral ceremonies. Sufi *muridism* is also prevalent. The Sunni villagers of Kabal, as well as some Kists (Azeris in the region have frequent contact with Pankisi Kists and with Azeris across the border in Azerbaijan), are followers of the Sufi saint, Isa Efendi, and they make frequent pilgrimages to his tomb, particularly when giving a vow of some sort or when praying for the recovery of the sick. While at the shrine, believers pray, make charitable contributions, and ask the sacred soul of Isa Efendi for help. In the Shiite majority villages of Karadzhala, Gandzhala, and Uzuntala, believers practice many of the standard rituals of Shiism, including the celebration of Ashura. However, they also perform the *zikr* and make pilgrimages to the Sufi Isa Efendi's tomb. Only in villages where there are no Sunnis is it rare to see Shiites engaging Sunni rituals.

In general, however, the religiosity of the Georgia's Azeris is modest – few strictly follow all Islamic rituals. Attending a mosque and having a *mullah* lead prayer is connected mostly with burial rites. (However, for

[9] It must be noted that after September 11, 2001 the Georgian government ordered the suspension of the construction of 11 mosques under the suspicion that some of them might have been financed by foreign fundamentalist organizations.

many Azeris it is imperative that burials be performed according to religious strictures, including performance of the *zikr*.) In part low religiosity can be explained by the demands of prayer rituals. Many consider themselves believers, but they lack the time to pray regularly and dutifully. Our field research in Azeri villages indicated that only 13 percent of men and nine percent of women prayed five times a day (Sanikidze, Walker, 2004; 25). Observing Ramadan is more common – about 20 percent of Azeris fast during the month. And virtually all celebrate Bairam (the end of fasting), with many using the occasion to visit the tombs of relatives. Some participate also participate regularly in collective prayers, including in houses where a mullah is invited to read from the Koran. Most also practice ritual sacrifice (*qurban*).[10]

Islam has considerable influence over the national consciousness of Georgia's Azeris, many of whom equate religion with nationality. Thus one-third of those questioned in the field research considered Islam to be their nationality ("my nationality is Muslim") (Sanikidze, Walker, 2004; 25). Similarly, for many the Koran is part of their national culture, and reverence of the Koran and memorization of its chapters (*sura*) is an expression of faith to national tradition.

Islam in the Pankisi Gorge

The Kists of Georgia are descendants of Chechens and Ingush (who call themselves collectively "Vainakhs") who migrated to the region from the north beginning in the 1830s.

Like Chechens and Ingush, the religious practices of Kists are eclectic. As one authority has observed: "The Ingush were Christians in the past. After the weakening of Christianity in the region, they revived their pagan religion and later adopted Islam, then once again Christianity, and at the end, Islam again, while at the same time preserving pagan and Christian traditions – they eat pork, celebrate holy Sundays, respect Christian churches." (Bronevskii, 1843: 43) Another author concluded: "As we have seen, many Chechens were Christians (*kheristanash*) before embracing Islam in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and they incorporated not only pagan but also Christian traditions into their Islamic practices." (Laudaev, 1872; 27). There was no tension between Georgians, Osetians

[10] whereas mevlud is the most important ritual for Ajarians, for Azeris it is qurban. In Ajaria, moreover, the meat of the sacrificed animal is normally shared with neighbors (in conformity with Sharia requirements, which require that meat be distributed among neighbors, orphans and the poor). Among Azeris, however, there is no such practice of sharing. Sacrifice is offered both as a substitute for the pilgrimage to Mecca and during family events to attract Allah's attention.

and Kists over religion. In Pankisi, religious differences never prevented these communities from maintaining common sacred places and following common rites and traditions (Shubitidze, 2002; 92). Even today old Muslim Kists visit Christian holy places. "These places protect our country; how we can ignore them? . . .We sacrifice animals and switch candles for them" said a Kistian elderly.

As with most Georgians, Christian and Muslim alike, religion has as much a national meaning for many Kists as it does spiritual. Those who are Christian tend to identify themselves as Georgians (although they maintain their consciousness as Kists); those who are Muslim hold to a Vainakh identity, even in places where Georgian is their home language and the language of instruction in local secondary schools. Muslims also tend to maintain closer contacts with their relatives in Chechnya and Ingushetia than do Christians.

Among Kists, as with Chechens and Ingush, the Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqat*s) are well established. The Naqshbandiya *tariqat,* which originated in Bukhara under the inspiration of Sheikh Baha' al-Din Naqshband (d. 1389), became widespread in the North Caucasus during the nineteenth century North Caucasus War. In an unusual historical reverse, the Sufi orders in the Caucasus, far from waning, practically absorbed official Islam. Nearly all the "Arabists" [who knows Arabic language – G.S.] and *ulema* of Daghestan and Chechnya were members of a *tariqat,* and they identified themselves with the national resistance against Russian pressure. (Bennigsen and Wimbush, 1983; 21). It must be added that "between 1877 and the 1917 Revolution, almost all of the adult population of Chechny-Ingushetia belonged either to the Naqshbandiya or to the Qadiriya *tariqat*." (Salamov, 1964; 162).

The Naqshbandiya did not arrive in Pankisi until 1909, however, when Isa Efendi, a preacher from Azerbaijan, came to the region. Isa Efendi was an adept (*pir*) of the Naqshbandiya order, and he managed to convince many locals to join the *tariqat*. His tomb is located in the Azeri village of Kabal in eastern Georgia. Despite the fact that he was an Azeri, and that it is in an Azeri-majority region, Isa Efendi's tomb is considered a particularly holy shrine by the Kists.

The introduction of Qadiriya teachings in Pankisi came considerably earlier through the efforts of a shepherd, Kunta Hajji, who came from the village of Iliskhan in the Gudermes district of Chechnya. In certain regions of Pankisi, Qadiriya doctrine had taken Kunta Hajji's name. Shamil,

however, opposed Kunta Hajji's religious practices and forbade Qadiriya ritual dances like the *zikr (*or *dzikar),* which led Kunta Hajji to leave the North Caucasus. In 1927, another Sufi adept, Machig Mamaligashvili, who had spent several years in Ingushetia, helped spread the Qadiriya teachings of Kunta Hajji in the Pankisi region. In the Pankisi Gorge the Duisi village mosque is currently controlled by followers of Kunta Hajji and the Qadiriya *tariqat*. Members of the Naqshbandiya *tariqat* in the village gather every Friday (women during the first half of the day, men in the evenings) in a room where Isa Efendi lived until 1920.

During the Soviet period, in Pankisi, as in the other Muslim regions of the Soviet Union, the role of so-called "parallel" Islam increased considerably. The terms "parallel" or "out of mosque" Islam ("fundamentalist" and "integrist" were never used) encompassed a large spectrum of trends, currents, and movements represented by various conservative believers, who were united only by their desire to preserve the religious basis of their society and to maintain some elements of their specific Muslim way of life.

Parallel Islam embraced purely religious, educational and social activities. Its "independent unregistered clerics" -a Soviet euphemism for Sufi adepts-performed basic religious rites (marriage, burial, circumcision), conducted prayers at the homes of believers, and presided at various festivals and occasions (anniversaries, house-raisings, school graduations, and so forth). They maintained clandestine and illegal houses of prayer where believers met on Fridays and during the major Islamic festivals. Under Soviet law, these activities were reserved for the state-sponsored "official" clerics and mosques; therefore, those engaged in the practice of parallel Islam were always at risk. However, the activities of such "unregistered clerics" or "wondering mullahs" played an important role for the propagation and strengthening of the position of Islam in the Gorge. As a result, the conversion to Islam among the Pankisi's Kists took place even in the 1970s.

It is important to emphasize that the religious practices of the Kists are still enriched by pagan beliefs, and that Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya practices in Pankisi are therefore quite different from those of the Naqshbandiya and Qadariya elsewhere. In addition, *sharia* (Islamic law) in the region is intermixed with highlander customary law (*adat*), and the latter tends to prevail over the former.[11] As a result, the practices and beliefs of Kists who

[11] The importance of *adat* is suggested by the fact that there are cases where Kists who had served their prison sentences returned to their homes only to be put on trial again and punished in accordance with *adat*.

belong to the two *tariqat*s do not differ significantly (On the contrary, in the North Caucasus, Naqshbandis and Qadiris have strictly different profiles). Members of both, for example, arrange rosaries in shape of the number 99, a symbol of the divine names of Allah Moreover, while most Kists consider themselves Muslim, at least until recently many were largely indifferent to certain Islamic teachings. Most would eat pork, drink alcohol, sacrifice animals near the ruins of Christian churches, give their children Christian names, as well as marry Christians.

The religious fervor of the Kists appears to have grown considerably in recent years. In addition, there is evidence that Wahhabis are active in the region, although most do not appear to be Kists. Indeed, there are tensions between Wahhabis and those believers who adhere to traditional highlander forms of Islamic worship. Wahhabis call themselves the followers of pure Islam and oppose all practices not sanctioned by the Qur'an. They look at Sufi Islam as a deviation from the original Islamic rules. Wahhabis consider many of these traditional practices anathema, while for many locals, it is the Wahhabis themselves who are renegades betraying the faith of their Kist ancestors. It is not surprising, therefore, that there was considerable local opposition to the effort of Wahhabis to establish a *sharia* court in Duisi – for most locals, the court was an unwelcome and alien innovation. (Sanikidze, 2007 279).

In the Pankisi Gorge Wahhabis first appeared in the spring of 1997. Many newly converted Chechen Wahhabis arrived in Pankisi Gorge with the status of refugees and attempted to convert young Kists by preaching about "pure Islam." In pursuance of this goal, numerous citizens of Arab countries, financed by various Islamic organizations, settled in the Kist villages and began their activities.

The attitude towards Wahhabis among the Vainakhs is controversial. Most Chechen refugees and some Kists (especially younger ones) support them. Wahhabis control humanitarian aid distributions of the "Jamaat" society, which, according to the local Kists, are funded by Arab countries. One of their followers (a Chechen refugee) even said: "It would be better if Red Cross, the U. N. and other humanitarian organizations gave the Wahhabis a right to distribute their aid supplies. We are sure that they would distribute it fairly." (Khutsishvili, 2002; 167).

Nevertheless, most Kists (especially the elders) are against Wahhabis. For example, according to the one of them: We have the religion of our ancestors; Wahhabis say that we are blind and they are only people who

follow the true Islamic tradition. They are like Jehovah witnesses among you [Georgians – G. S.]. Chechens are also against them, but during the war, while they all were in difficult situation, Wahhabis gave them some money. They corrupted our youngsters. If one prays by their faith, they give one dollars. We believe that praying for money is unacceptable. Many young people who went from Duisi to Arab states were sent by Wahhabis. They want to convert young people who can use guns. They wear different clothes than we do. They have no respect for elders and are disloyal to our traditions.

Another Kist elderly adds: "Our faith is Islam that we got from our ancestors. Khattab imported his faith during the first Chechen war. There is an Arab who has bought a house in Duisi. He converted around twenty youngsters. They don't respect our traditions. They allow marriage between relatives (which is prohibited by *adat*). We are against them and we are even ready to shed some blood."

Wahhabis deny the role of the teacher, which for the Sufi is very important. They also deny the cult of the saints and pilgrimages to the saint shrines that are widespread among the followers of Sufi Islam. Among Kists and in general in the North Caucasus, the ritual of condolences is widespread. "When someone dies, there is a [particular] condolence ritual followed by the relatives [of the deceased] and by the entire village. But the Wahhabis think it is enough to bury a deceased person. They [think] it is useless to follow the [condolence] ritual. The inner link with God, typical for the Sufi followers, is denied by the Wahhabis."

Meetings against the Wahhabis were organized by local Kists, in which representatives from regional administration participated (for example in 2001 in Duisi), but none produced any significant results and none stemmed the tide of young Kisks turning to the Wahhabi.[12]

There are five mosques in the Gorge, all but one which have been built in recent years. The mullah of the new mosque in Duisi is an Arab. Perhaps the most notable structure in Duisi is a new-looking, rather tall red brick mosque. Author's attempt to take a snapshot of the mosque in June 2005 sparked a prolonged debate among locals over whether photography of the structure should be permitted.

Opened in 2000, the gleaming mosque at Duisi appears to have stolen the thunder of the old mosque. Situated on Pankisi's main road, it has been

[12] From conversations of author with local population during his visit in the Pankisi Gorge in June, 2005.

called a "Wahhabi" mosque. It was built by the Chechens, but financed by a sheikh from Saudi Arabia, who learnt of the existence of the Muslim minority in Pankisi as the result of a Kist's pilgrimage to Mecca. In addition to this mosque, "Jamaat" attempted to buy a land plot in the center of Duisi in order to construct another mosque. However, local administration, under pressure from the townspeople, denied permission.

In the sole religious school that remains open, Arabic lessons continue under the watchful eye of four local teachers who learnt Arabic in Saudi Arabia. Since 2003, however, pupils have become rare. Currently, there are just twenty pupils.

Despite the differences in religion, there were not any political problems with the Kists until the beginning of the 1990s. However, since December 1994, when war broke out between Chechen resistance fighters and the Russian central government, Pankisi has witnessed an influx of refugees from Chechnya. Among them were many families of the Pankisi Kists, who after the disintegration of the Soviet Union left for Chechnya. The tide of refugees picked up considerably after the collapse of the 1995 Russian-Chechen cease-fire agreement and the new round of violence that broke out in late 1999. Between September and December 1999, refugees began pouring into Chechnya's southern highland areas from northern parts of the republic, particularly Grozny, Urus-Martan, Achkhoi-Martan, Sernovodsk, and Samashki. When Russian military aircraft began bombing the villages of the Itum-Kale region, where the refugees were hoping to find shelter, the Chechen refugees started moving south once again, this time along the Argun Canyon where they used snow-covered cattle tracks to cross the Russian-Georgian border. They headed for the village of Shatili in Georgia's Khevsureti province, and from there proceeded to the Pankisi Gorge. There, local Kists ended up sheltering some 85 percent of the refugees. (Doctors Without Borders). The inflow of refugees in 1999 and 2000 aggravated an already difficult economic and social environment in the Pankisi region. In particular, crime worsened: drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and kidnappings became commonplace. Over the recent years, however, a considerable part of the refugees has left the Gorge. Today, only 2600 people have the official status as refugees in Pankisi villages. Georgian internal military forces had neither the equipment nor the training to restore central authority in the region. During the late 1990s and the early 2000s Chechens have been using the Georgian area of the Pankisi valley as a fall back base for their war inside Chechnya, training recruits

and medical aid were all possible because the Georgian government was not able to control the area.

As a result, Pankisi has become a source of acute tension between Russia and Georgia over the past several years. The Russian military wanted to enter Georgian territory to destroy the resistance fighters and their training camps, a move that would have been viewed in Tbilisi as a clear violation of Georgian sovereignty. The U.S. government wished to see the Pankisi crisis resolved peacefully, and as a result Washington financed a "Train and Equip Program" for Georgian counter-terrorism forces. These counter-terrorism forces eventually carried out what appears to have been a largely successful operation to restore order in the region. Many kidnapped individuals were freed, a number of criminals were arrested, and the region is apparently no longer being used by Chechen rebels or *jihadists*.

The most important problem for the international community is the rumors about the presence of al-Qaida's members in the Gorge**.** Western nations are becoming increasingly concerned that the al-Qaida terrorist organization has established a base of operations in Georgia. Although the number of terrorists hiding among the several hundred Chechen fighters in Pankisi is estimated to be fairly small, these terrorists are part of a broader network aiming to create Islamic states across the Caucasus and Central Asia.

According to the Russian specialist of Caucasian Islam, Aleksei Malashenko, "Islamic radicals constitute a minority in the Dagestani and Chechen populations, but they form a rather consolidated and organized force and, what is more, receive support from abroad, mainly from several international Muslim organizations, as well as from the Caucasian diaspora living in the Middle East that sympathizes with their struggle." (Malashenko, 2001; 166) The situation that existed in the Pankisi Gorge years ago reflected this statement. In November 2002, Philip Remler, the former U.S. Charge d'Affaires in Tbilisi, told a Georgian weekly, *Akhali Versia*, that the U.S. had obtained information that a few dozen al-Qaida fighters after fleeing Afghanistan had found refuge in the Pankisi Gorge. After a counter-terrorist operation, Georgia extradited fifteen Islamist fighters to the United States, who were then conveyed to Guantanamo.

In General, the situation in this small region of Georgia reflects developments occurring not only in the post-Soviet space, but also in the world as a whole.

In conclusion, that is a tradition of religious tolerance and eclecticism in Georgia that is the result of country's particular history and experiences and it must be said in the case of Islam.

REFERENCES

Abashidze, A. H., (1998), **Ajaria. History, Diplomacy, International Law. Moscow, Acts, v. IX** (1884) (in Russian), Tiflis.

Anchabadze, I., Volkova, N., (1990), **Ancient Tbilisi. City and Citizens in 19th Century** (in Russian). Moscow,

Archive of the State Committee of Ajaria.

Baramidze, I., (1996), "Muhajirism and the Problems Connected with Political Processes in South-West Georgia: Causes and Historical Aspects," Cultural and Historical-Ethnological Researches in Georgia, I **(in Georgian). Batumi.**

Bennigsen, A. and Wimbush M., (1985), **Mystics and Commissars. Sufism in the Soviet Union**. London: Hurst.

Chichinadze, Z. (1911), **History of the Georgian Muslims from former Ottoman's Georgia.** Batumi.

Chichinadze, Z. (1913), **Muslim Georgians and their Villages in Georgia.** Tbilisi, 1913.

Chichinadze, Z., (1913), **Muslim Georgians and their Villages in** *Georgia* (in Georgian). Tbilisi, 1913.

Datunashvili, I., (1989) "Religious Factors of the Creation of the Muhajir Movement in Caucasus," in O. Gigineishvili, O., ed. **History of the Near East Countries. New and Newest Period**, (in Georgian). Tbilisi, pp. 3-34.

De Tournefort, J. P., (1988) **The Voyage in Oriental Countries** (Translation in Georgian, introduction and commentaries by Mgaloblishvili, M.). Tbilisi.

Frenkel' A., (1879) **Essays on Churuk-Su and Batumi** (in Russian). Tiflis.

Iashvili, V., (1948), **Ajaria Under the Ottomans** (in Georgian). Batumi.

Jaoshvili, V, (1996). ***The Population of Georgia*** **(in Georgian), Tbilisi.**

Japaridze, G., ed., (1999), **Islam. Encyclopedic Dictionary** (in Georgian). Tbilisi.

Khutsishvili L., (2002), "Problems of the Religious Re-orientation in the Poliethnical Community," in Melikishvili L, ed., **The Pankisi Gorge,** Tbilisi.

Kurtsikidze, Sh. and Chikovani, V., (2002), **Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, An Ethographical Survey** (Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, Working Paper Series, 2002).

Laudaev, U. (1872) "Chechenskoe plemia," in: **Sbornik svedenii o kavkazskikh gortsakh,** Tiflis.

Malashenko, A., (2001), **Islamskie orientiry Severnogo Kavkaza,** Moscow.

Meiering-Mikadze E., (1999), "L'islam en Adjarie: trajectoire historique et implications contemporaines", **Cahiers d'études sur la Méditeranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien,** #27.

Ro'i, Y., (2000), **Islam in the Soviet Union.** London: Hurst & Company.

Salamov, A. A., (1964), "Pravda o sviatykh mestakh v Checheno-Ingushetii," **Trudy Checheno-Ingushskogo nauchno-issledovatel'skogo instituta pri Sovete Ministrov Checheno-Ingushskoi ASSR,** no. 9 .

Sanikidze, G. and Walker, E. W., (2004), **Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia,** (Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, Working Paper Series,).

Sanikidze, G., (2007) "Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Caucasian Region: 'Global' and 'Local' Islam in the Pankisi Gorge", in Uyama T., ed. **Empire, Islam and Politics in Central Eurasia,** Hokkaido University Press, pp. 263-282.

Shubitidze, V., (2002), "Security and Force of Adaptation of the Ethnic Culture in a New Social-Cultural Environment" (in Georgian), in Melikishvili L, ed., **The Pankisi Gorge,** Tbilisi.

Sichinava, V., (1958), **From the History of Batumi** (in Georgian). Batumi.

Vashalomidze, J., (1976), "Images of Plants in Ajarian Folk Ornaments," in **Everyday Life and Culture in Southwest Georgia, IV** (in Georgian), Tbilisi.