



Islam in Georgia

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When it comes to religion in Georgia, it is about Christianity, the Orthodox Church and the ancient Christian culture. This is not a big surprise, as Christians account for 83 per cent of the country's population. However, few know that the second largest religion after Christianity in Georgia is Islam (9.9 per cent). Georgian history is strongly intertwined with Islamic countries through interchanging protective wars and inter-cultural relations spanning over centuries.¹

Modern Islam in Georgia has diverse manifestations, numerous traditions and cultures, different levels of integration with the mainstream Georgian society, etc. Muslims inhabiting the south-western Adjara region are ethnic Georgians and Sunni Muslims. In Kvemo Kartli, south of the capital Tbilisi, we find ethnic Azeris and they are Shia Muslims. Besides these two regions, Muslims also reside in Tbilisi and in a few villages of eastern Georgia. Ethnically, they are Azeris, Chechens and Avars. In each of these regions, Islam emerged and developed from different historic developments and preconditions.

This paper aims at introducing the modern Islam in Georgia in the light of diverse historical and cultural backgrounds, looking at the challenges faced by Muslims in contemporary Georgia and the situation for freedom of religion.

¹In Medieval Georgia, the Quran was also known as Kuran or Mushaf. Polemic tractates (by Arsen Ikaltoeli, Bagrat Batonishvili et al.) criticizing specific provisions of the Quran are found in the old Georgian literature. These tractates sometimes provide the translation of some quranic verses indicating that the Georgian scholars were familiar with the text of the Quran. The first translation from French belongs to Petre Mirianashvili (1906) and the second one, including commentaries, was translated by Giorgi Lobzhanidze in 2007.

Historic Traits – Spread of Islam in Georgia

The spread of Islam in Georgia goes back to the so-called Arab Era (VII-IX cc), when Arabs entered the Georgian and Armenian territories, between 644-645 AD. The Certificate of Protection, also known as the Book of Incorruptibility, given by the Arabs to the citizens of Tbilisi, was used to regulate relations between the Muslim Arabs and Christian citizens of Tbilisi.

With the defeat of the Tbilisi Emirate in 1122, the last Arab representation in Georgia, by the Georgian King David Aghmashenebeli (David the Rebuilder) (1073-1125), began a new era in Georgian history, known as the Golden Age. Interestingly, after the completion of military operations, the king issued a decree prohibiting any act of discrimination against Muslims. According to Arab and Turkish historians, Muslim citizens of Tbilisi were granted certain privileges of tax payments, slaughtering of pigs was prohibited in the districts of the city populated by Muslims, while coins specifically cut for Muslims showed the names of Allah, his prophet and of caliphs (Sanikidze/Walker 2004, 4; Papuashvili 2008).

In southern Georgia (Adjara, Tao-Klarjeti and Samtskhe-Javakheti) XVI-XVIII cc, the so-called Osmanian Era saw an intensified islamisation.² In the south-west of Georgia, as the Ottomans founded the Pashalik of Akhaltsikhe (Childir), they gave rise to the spread of Islam in the region.³ Followers of Islam were predominantly among the nobilities of the region, while the grassroots remained faithful

²Among the Georgian kings of that time, there were also those who had accepted Islam (i.e. Constantine I, Rostom Khan, Vakhtang V Shahnavaz, David Imamkulikhan) because of either self-survival or for protecting the country. Nevertheless, there were few who turned to Islam as a voluntary choice.

³This very period also saw the spread of Islam in Abkhazia, also conquered by the Ottomans.



to local religious traditions. Thus, Turks, Muslim Georgians, Catholic Georgians, Jews and Orthodox Georgians resided side by side in Akhaltsikhe of the 19th century.

In XIX, Muslim Georgia (Samtskhe-Javakheti, Adjara and Tao-Klarjeti) under Turkish rule was reunited with the rest of the country (Pashalik of Akhaltsikhe, following the Treaty of Adrianople, and Adjara in 1878, after the Treaty of Berlin). For Muslim Georgians separated from their countrymen through centuries it was difficult to feel themselves as a part of the country while alienated mainstream Georgians called them strangers – Turks or Muslims. The statesmen of the 19th century, led by Iliā Chavchavadze, Jakob Gogebashvili and Zakaria Chichinadze, tried to overcome this estrangement, to accept their Muslim community, and not to be compelled by the religious differences.

Since 1921, after the invasion of Georgia by the Soviet troops, atheism gained predominance in the country. Islam was equally affected by antireligious policies as were other religions in Georgia. 1926 saw the abolition of Sharia, and numerous mosques, madrasas and djāmi's, many of them masterpieces of art, were destroyed.

Under the Soviet rule, the Georgian Muslim community was legally responsible to the Caucasus Board of Muslims (CBM) – in Azerbaijan called QMI - founded in 1943 in Baku. The Adjara muftiate and the Tbilisi muftiate were considered its representatives.

The merge of Batumi based Sunni and Tbilisi based Shia organisations resulted in the emergence of a new independent Muslim union – The Muslim Board of the Whole of Georgia, covering the country's whole territory. This Georgian Board of Muslims split off from the Caucasus Board of Muslims. The amendments to the law of 5th July 2011 granted to religious organisations the right to be registered as a legal entity of public law. The Georgian Board of Muslims was the first religious organisation exercising this right.⁴

4 In 2010 the Muslim Board of Adjara was founded with a status of a non-governmental organisation. There are other Muslim organisations, including the Union of Georgian Muslims founded in 2008.

Regional and Ethnic Characteristics of Islam in Georgia: The Example of Adjara

Inhabiting the south-western region of Georgia along the Black Sea coast, Adjarian Muslims are Sunnis and they are ethnic Georgians. Adjarians were predominantly Christians up to 1770. Until the 19th century, the process of islamisation was comparatively soft and Islam was widespread mostly among the nobilities (Baramidze 2010, 11). Since the 1820s, Islamisation became more active, backed up by the social and tax systems administered by the Ottomans (Akhvlediani 1943, 21).⁵ Mountainous parts of Adjara did not boast many mosques as some Christian traditions were still present in this area. Islam in Adjara was strongly interlinked with non-Islamic and Christian traditions.

Adjara became a part of the Russian Empire under the Treaty of Berlin and thus returned to Georgia.⁶ Many Adjarian Muslims did not perceive themselves to be the part of the Russian Empire, and the latter chose to employ a more liberal approach towards them, allowing mosques and madrasas to be built and function in Adjara. Therefore, most mosques (approximately 400) in rural Adjara were built at the end of the 19th century (Sanikidze/Walker 2004, 6). The majority of Adjarians considered themselves Georgians.

Following the establishment of the Soviet order in Georgia (1921), Adjara acquired the status of an autonomous republic. By the end of the 1930s, all functioning madrasas in Adjara were shut down (Baramidze 2010, 14).

During the years of revitalisation of the independence movement, nationalistic ideas gained a momentum. The period of national awakening was strongly linked to the rise of religion. The 1990s saw baptising taking place publicly. At the same time, in Adjara, one of the first actions taken towards reinforcing the Abashidze regime was to provide

5 Akhvlediani, Kh.: Sections from the Adjarian History (XVI-XIX cc), Batumi, 1943, p. 21.

6 The Imperial Russian government declared to the Muslims of the reunited parts that they had three years to move out to Turkey, as a result of which many Muslim Adjarians and Abkhaz left the territory. These peoples are known as the Muhajirs. This process continued till 1880. Sakhokia, Tedo: The Journeys (Guria, Adjara, Samurzakano, Abkhazia), Batumi, 1985, p. 189.



support to creating a semi-autonomous muftiate (Baramidze 2014, 13). In Adjara, both Christian and Islamic movements were revitalised in parallel. 20 spiritual education facilities were opened and the number of youth who left the country mainly for Turkey to seek Islamic religious education increased. In the time to follow, the Georgian state structures and political institutes started gaining strength and so did the role of Christianity for self-determination and for identifying themselves as loyal Georgians.

The key components of the Islamic practice of modern Adjarian Muslims are to fast and follow religious rites (Nizharadze 2010, 34). To characterise this briefly, Islamic life in Adjara consists of daily lent, reading Quran, charitable donations, and visiting graves of relatives on the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Many of the religious rites in Adjara are performed outside mosques (Sanikidze/Walker 2004, 15). Here, Muslim religious practices are often intertwined with Christian ones and many Muslim toponyms have Georgian roots. Ornaments depicting vineyards found on the wall paintings in the mosque of the village Drvani is a good example of the linkage between the two traditions (Cf. Sanikidze/Walker 2004, 15).

The Example of Kvemo Kartli

The community of ethnic Azeri Muslims is the largest ethnic and religious minority group in Georgia. They compactly live in the Kvemo Kartli region.⁷ Their ancestors came to settle in Georgia in different periods: the first wave was one of nomadic Turkish tribes entering the Georgian territory in the 11th century, to be followed by other Turkish tribes in the 16-17th centuries. Today, this community faces multiple economic, social and integration challenges. Besides the religious barrier, there is also a linguistic barrier to be overcome so that the community can fully integrate. The Azeri chose to send children either to Russian or Azeri schools for secondary education.

⁷They are concentrated in the region of Lower Kartli, where approximately 244.000 reside (including some 18.000 in Tbilisi), as well as in the eastern region of Kakheti, which has some 33.600 Azeri residents (Sanikidze/Walker 2004, p. 21).

Further, more intense relations with Azerbaijan (relatives) and Russia (economic ties) impeded the process of integration into the Georgian society.

The Azeri community is not very religious and is considered as passive, that is, religion mainly serves as a cultural identity for them. However, Islamic burial rite is strictly followed by every Azeri, and Zikr ("remembering" of God), the ritual prayer or litany practiced by Muslim mystics (Sūfīs), is also often followed (Sanikidze/Walker 2004, 23). Additionally, the trend of increasing religiosity is also relevant to the Azeri community. Generally, madrasas and mosques in Kvemo Kartli serve the Shia and the Sunni Muslims. Both Adjara and Kvemo Kartli regions are frequented by missionaries from abroad, mostly from Iran, and few young people even leave for abroad to attend higher religious education (Prasad 2012, 6).

After the Rose Revolution of 2003, the Georgian Government seriously took over protecting rights of religious and ethnic minority groups and their integration. In 2010, under President Saakashvili's initiative, Novruz Bairami (the Zoroastrian New Year, celebrated in Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan) was declared a public holiday. The Azeri community is loyal towards Georgia, on the one hand, and to Azerbaijan, as a historic homeland, on the other.

The Example of the Kists in Georgia

Besides the Kvemo Kartli region, Muslim communities, few in number, reside in the villages of Kakheti.⁸ They are mostly of Dagestan origin – Lezgians and Kists – and are Sunni Muslims. The Kists (totalling approximately 6000) residing in the Pankisi Gorge (Akhmeta Municipality) are linguistically and ethnically related to Chechens,⁹

⁸Muslim Meskhs – they are often called Turk Meskhs or Meskhetians of Turkish Orientation. Historical Samtskhe-Javakheti reunited with Georgia in 1832, Georgian or non-Georgian Muslims representing the majority of its population. They called themselves Turks, which mostly meant not ethnicity, but the Sunni tradition of Islam. Most of Muslim Meskhs had Georgian surnames. The Soviet government perceived these people as Turkey's potential allies during the Second World War and decided to clean the territory from its Muslim population. On 15-16th November 1944, almost all Muslims (more than 100.000) were deported to Central Asia. In 2007 the Georgian parliament passed a law on the return of the displaced persons.

⁹The Kists inhabiting the territories within modern day Chechnya



and the Dagestan-Chechen-Ingush Sunni practices are influenced by ascetic-mystical Sufism. Spiritual life of the Caucasian mountain people had painlessly mingled with Sufi practices, resulting in a mix of paganism and popular Islam. Most of the Kists drink alcoholic beverages and eat pork. It is not rare that Caucasian Christians and Muslims celebrate and pray during the same religious holidays. That is why the local shrines are often called “shrines of Christians and non-Christians”.

Wahhabism is the most frequently debated religious issue among the Kists, as the number of Wahhabists is steadily increasing in the region. This trend (also vivid in Adjara) has become a generational issue. The older generation prefers to stick to the traditional Islam inherited from their forefathers and confront the youth because of their inspirations and their passion for Wahhabism

Islam and Challenges to Freedom of Religion in Modern Georgian Society

Freedom of religion is the central theme of the ongoing public debate about human rights in Georgia. In society as a whole, there were different attitudes towards religious minorities. Islam belongs to the so-called “traditional religions” in Georgia and therefore fears and stereotypes attached to it have only recently emerged. Fear in Georgia used to be felt only towards the unfamiliar, such as Protestant groups and Jehovah’s Witnesses movements.

One of the most recent public disputes was sparked by a proposal to rebuild a mosque in Batumi. The reactions to the reconstruction among the broad public made it clear that an enemy’s image can easily emerge on a bare soil. Two opposing views were expressed regarding the reconstruction.¹⁰ One was voiced by the Georgian Orthodox Church and its supporters, who strongly objected to the proposal,

moved to Georgia mainly in the 1820-1830s, group by group. They were mostly Christians following a popular, paganised Christianity with occasional practice of church Christianity. When Tsarist Russia began to invade the North Caucasus, they turned their attention to Islam, as a protest against Russia and a resource to maintain their unique identity.

¹⁰ According to the agreement, Georgia was given the opportunity to restore four Christian Georgian churches on the territory of Turkey, while Turkey was given the right to restore 3 mosques and build one new mosque in south-western Georgia, where the majority of Georgian Muslims are concentrated.

arguing that the emergence of a new mosque could ‘provoke a conflict between the Orthodox and Muslim communities of Georgia’. The other view, shared by cultural workers, human rights organisations and the government, was that Georgia should respect freedom of religion, arguing that along with Orthodox churches, mosques were also part of the Georgian cultural heritage. The protest coming from certain groups of the Church and the public is seemingly strange, considering the fact that in Georgia, where Muslims reside, mosques are frequented and are also built. In this case, the wave of protests stemmed from the efforts of the Georgian Orthodox Church to be included in the decision-making process related to such issues, on the one hand, and echoed the religious-nationalist-radical tendencies gaining momentum in the broader Georgian public, on the other¹¹.

In 2012, the local Orthodox communities of the villages Nigvziani, Tsitskaro and Samtatskaro fiercely protested against the commencement of religious services in the newly built mosque and were trying to prevent the Muslim believers from performing Friday’s traditional religious service under intimidation, threats and coercion.¹² This case cannot be evaluated without a proper consideration of the political context and the Church’s position towards religious pluralism. Policies of religious tolerance and an open fight against extremism were one of the pillars of the previous Georgian government, serving as a preventative mechanism against religious intolerance. The wave of radical religious nationalism gaining momentum in the society and the political changes in 2012 has somehow stimulated the expression of religious intolerance. These incidents are a strong indication that despite traditionally good relations with the Muslim communities, there are always threats that a conflict may fuel up on religious-cultural grounds.

The most important event that succeeded in uniting numerous Islamic organisations in the country took place on 29th August 2014, when led by the Georgian Board of Muslims, Muslim religious

¹¹ The Annual 2013 Report of the Public Defender of Georgia on the Human Rights and Freedoms.

¹² The families of Adjarian eco migrants have been living in the village Samtatskaro since 1978.



organisations signed a declaration on the duty to peace and welfare as a response against ‘extremism and violence under the aegis of religion’, widely spread in the Near East.

Conclusion

The special character of Islam in Georgia is that it coexists for many centuries already in a predominantly Christian country. The followers of Islam in Georgia are from various backgrounds: Georgians, Azeri, Chechen, and Dagestani. The Islamic practices themselves are characterised by a great diversity, too. Besides Shia and Sunni practices, numerous Islamic rites are intertwined with local Georgian, popular and pagan religious rituals. Islam was equally affected by the religious awakening following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its anti-religious policies. The specific of religious rise in Adjara is that the new generation is turning to Christianity as to the religion of their ancestors who lost this religion 200 years ago, and at the same time for some other representatives of youth, mostly residing in the high mountain areas of Adjara, Islam is equally considered as the ‘religion of the forefathers’.

The most critical challenge faced by the Muslim communities in today’s Georgia is a lack of integration into the modern Georgian society. Understanding modern religious pluralism stands out as a challenge for the modern Georgian society. The difficulty to accept their fellow countrymen as full members and citizens of their country, regardless of their ethnic background and faith, also fans the fire. Addressing this issue requires setting up state policies aiming at protecting religious freedom, as well as using educational and public resources to support and nourish a culture of tolerance within the society and fight against the emergence of new stereotypes and images of new enemies.

So the rise of religion, both among Christians and Muslims, can make it difficult for religious practitioners to overcome the barriers built out of cultural and religious differences. At the same time traditional tolerance in both religions is a possible resource to corroborate the just mentioned political agenda.

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