

COMPETING ISLAMIC TRADITIONS IN THE CAUCASUS

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Abstract

The common dichotomized classification of Islam in the Caucasus (“traditional” versus “fundamentalist”) does not take into account all major processes taking place in the region. The Sufi-Wahhabi discourse simplifies the social interactions between Muslims and suggests homogeneity of each of these categories. In this paper I would show how the term “Wahhabi” has been employed by the local community of Muslims who live in the Georgian Pankisi gorge to express their resistance towards new and radical ideas and practices. In this social conflict, Sufi brotherhoods assume the role of the defenders of traditional order, while the reformists attempt at changing not only religious but also social structures.

Keywords: *Islam, Caucasus, Georgia, Sufism, Wahhabism, Pankisi*

The Problems of the Sufi-Wahhabi Discourse

It is a common over-simplification to view post-Soviet Islam in the framework of a dichotomy between an age-old “traditional” Islam and the so-called “Wahhabism”. Such a perspective consists of an opposition between the “liberal”, “tolerant” Islam, espoused mainly by Sufism, and the “integrist”, “backward”, “terrorist” fundamentalism that poses a serious threat to the already unstable social and political situation in the Caucasus. Such labels, constantly employed by journalists, political analysts, and scholars are misleading for a number of reasons. Firstly, they imply homogeneity inside each of these groups, while even only Sufism embraces a diverse range of brotherhoods, spiritual practices, or political stances. Then, the historical developments such as the Sufi inspirations of the Chechen resistance movement to Russia’s colonization in the nineteenth century are being ignored. Moreover, this view, supported by official authorities in the North Caucasian republics, does not take into consideration other groups of Muslims, one of them being the reform-oriented Chechens inspired by the global Islamic movements, who are far from engaging in terrorist activities. Classified as Wahhabists, they have been forced either to emigrate from Chechnya or to conceal their real identity. Lastly, there are Sunni Muslims who neither support the reformists nor practice Sufi rituals. These sorts of empirical cases are evidence of the ambivalence which question the sharp division between “traditional” and “Wahhabi” Islam.

This simple categorization—a pragmatic tool employed by the pro-Moscow Chechen politicians has also been accepted by the Muslims living in the Caucasus. The Russian rhetoric of the

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“Wahhabi threat” has been appropriated to underline the local resistance to new, alien, non-traditional ideas and practices. It is intended to summarize the attitude towards those Muslims who endeavor to deeply transform existing social order with the traditional authority of the elders, social norms of behavior, and Sufi religious practices.

I have conducted anthropological research among Muslims in the Georgian Pankisi gorge. Located in the immediate vicinity of the Georgian border with Chechnya, in the Akhmeta district, the Pankisi region is inhabited by the Kists—Georgians of Chechen descent and by the Chechen refugees who arrived there in a large number in the wake of the Second Chechen War. Both groups belong to a wider Vainakh group, which encompasses people of the North Caucasus who use the Nakh language.¹ Besides the Chechens who came directly from their territory, some Kists also visited Chechnya in the 1990s, mostly between the wars. Some of them had the intention to set up a new life there, but the violent events after August 1999 made them join the escaping Chechens and come back to Pankisi as refugees.

Looking particularly for the transformations of Muslim discursive traditions, I have also examined the social organization of a Muslim village, as well as specific economic, political and cultural contexts. In a brief analysis of the processes taking place in that particular place, I intend to throw some light on the general “big picture” of Islam in the Caucasus.

Specifically, I would like to show that the popular category of Wahhabism has been adopted by the Muslims themselves in order to designate the religious and social non-traditional practices and beliefs that appeared in the Caucasus in the 1990s and pose a serious threat to the existing norms, values, and customary law (*adat*). The strong connotations of the term Wahhabism are a useful discursive device to express the hostile attitude towards this phenomenon. In the community I have studied, however, the so-called “evil” - Wahhabi Islam - is not linked to terrorism. Moreover, I want to underline the inner diversity and historical dynamics of Islamic traditions in the Caucasus. The function of propagating Islamic revival was once (in the nineteenth century) linked with Sufism; nowadays it has been used by various reformist groups, who strongly oppose the Sufi tradition.

The Wahhabi Revolution

In Pankisi, the term Wahhabism emerged in the public discourse in the context of the Chechen wars. Suddenly, as the local people recall, in all Pankisi villages young bearded men and women in hijabs appeared. Besides a palpably distinct appearance, the newcomers also held beliefs about social life that were unacceptable for the majority of Pankisi traditional dwellers. The different stances towards Islamic law were another point of disagreement. Moreover, instead of joining Kist Muslims in prayers, the other Muslims built their own mosques (“Wahhabi mosques”) headed by independent religious leaders.

The “Wahhabi revolution” in Pankisi was directed against traditional Islam of the Kists, influenced by Sufi practices as well as by syncretic rituals typical of multiethnic and

¹Apart from Chechens and Kists, also Ingushs and Bats belong to the Vainakhs. Some interesting remarks about the historical development of this ethnic group can be found e.g. in Nunuev, Said-Khamzat Makhmudovich, “Ob Etnicheskoy Istorii Vaynakhov”, in: Kh. V., Turkaev (ed.) “Kul’tura Chechni. Istoriya i sovremennyye problemy” (Moskva: Nayka, 2002), pp. 30–57.

multireligious milieux. However, following the principle that “Islam is the blueprint of a social order”,² the newcomers embarked upon a project of introducing Sharia law, which governs basically all aspects of a Muslim’s life. Although this attempt failed, the “Wahhabis” have not given up their propaganda and persist in criticizing traditional customs. Their radicalism and complete disregard for the traditional social order made the Sufi-oriented Kists and Chechens employ the label Wahhabi in regard to this phenomenon. The connotation is that it is a threat to the social stability of the community that cannot be ignored. What should be stressed again, in the Kists’ views, is that these revolutionary ideas and practices are not linked to any kind of terrorism or political extremism. Indeed, at present, no political activism is publicly visible among the “newly pious” bearded men.

The accusations of terrorist activities, links with Al-Qaeda, and of the functioning of the training camps for *jihadists* in Pankisi were raised by the Russian authorities and led to Moscow’s direct engagement in this Georgian region. In 2001, Russian military aircraft dropped a bomb in the gorge area. In fact, at the turn of the century, Pankisi villages became home to diverse groups. Alongside the Chechen and Kist refugees escaping from the war, in this Georgian region appeared also radical Muslims from many countries, either with an intention to take part in the Chechen “holy war” or just to take advantage of a general chaos and to spread the ideas of various reformist wings of Islam. A Japanese reporter Kosuke Tsuneoka depicted the activities of the Chechen warlord Ruslan Gelaev’s group in the Pankisi gorge in 2001.³ In his account of the situation in the region, Tsuneoka stressed that the extremists’ influence on the local orders was significant to such an extent that the Pankisi elders consulted them on important issues.⁴

The missionary activities expanded and shortly the effects were widely visible. More local young people went abroad to study Islam, and after the return they joined the Muslim emissaries in their critique of the traditional Kist religious leaders. The reformers, unanimously classified by the Kist majority as Wahhabis, took an uncompromising stance in the dispute over the interpretation of Islam. They used to claim that the local people were not true Muslims.

These radical ideas labeled simply as Wahhabi, or sometimes Salafi, do not refer to the original religious ideology created by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century on the Arabian Peninsula. In the discourse of the Russian and pro-Russian Chechen and Dagestan authorities, these terms are exchangeable with “terrorists”, “extremists”, “Islamists”, etc. However, a distinctive feature common to al-Wahhab’s movement and to contemporary Caucasian reformers is the condemnation of Sufism.

The Socio-Religious Conflicts

When the war chaos diminished, most foreigners left Pankisi. Nevertheless, the ideology of “pure” Islam gained ground mostly among the unemployed, frustrated, and deprived of any perspectives Chechen and Kist youth. The slogans of following the example of the prophet Muhammad and turning to the sources of Islam—the Koran and the Hadith—have become attractive in the post-Soviet social reality. The reformists called for an instant and radical change

²Gellner, Ernest, “Muslim Society”, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 1.

³“Japanese Journalist Tells a Story of Pankisi Hideout”, Civil Georgia, March 06, 2003, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=3300>.

⁴Ibid.

of life promising not only benefits after death, but also their tangible support. The money from abroad enabled them to raise new mosques, madrasas and to send some young people abroad to study Islam in the Arab countries. Some Kists even claim that those visiting “Wahhabi mosques” could even expect allowance or benefits.

The socio-economic factors may not be the most significant, yet they constitute the context for the religious actions and contribute to the spread of radical attitudes. In addition to the general harsh situation of Georgian economy, Pankisi community experienced an arrival of refugees during the Russian-Chechen violent conflict. According to the UNHCR estimations, around 8,000 people from the Russian territory have sought safety in Georgia.⁵ Although most of them have already left Georgia, a few hundred still live there. Helping them to get by has placed a financial burden on the Kists and worsened their already tough situation. In many cases they shared with the Chechens their homes and food without taking any money in return. The help of humanitarian organizations, although valuable, was only a drop in the ocean. At that time, an unprecedented rise in the number of crimes became evident.

The radicalism of the reformist group in Pankisi manifests itself in rejection of hitherto accepted religious practices and social norms of the Kist community. As far as religion is concerned, the main points of controversy are the Sufi symbols and rituals. What for many Kists constituted the center of their practice and understanding of Islam, is currently being labeled as improper, erroneous, “un-Islamic”. The reformist wing vehemently rejects such practices as *zikr* (ceremonial activity of the remembrance of God’s name), saints veneration, or pilgrimages to *ziyarat*s (tombs of sheikhs). Such rituals, the “Wahhabis” pointed out, are not part of an orthodox Islam, as no reference to them is made neither in the Koran nor in the Hadith. Furthermore, the critique carried on, Islam in the Caucasus has accommodated a range of influences, such as syncretic religious celebrations. Indeed, even nowadays there are older Kists who recollect their visits to the Alaverdi Cathedral dedicated to Saint George, an important place of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the Kakheti region. One elder woman from a Refugee Center in Duisi reminded herself of taking part in the important religious holidays when she was a child. Similar cases of common Christian-Muslim religious celebrations in the Central Caucasus are known from the ethnographic literature. The pagan rituals and Zoroastrianism also shaped the highlanders’ religious life.⁶

Since the emergence of the Islamic renaissance in the late 1980s, most Christian and pagan elements of the Kist culture have been discarded by the Kists themselves. The Sufi tradition has nonetheless survived, becoming the most crucial target of the reformists’ attacks. In fact, the Orthodox Muslims’ arguments resemble those used by the Soviet authorities. Traditional Islam, also called “popular Islam” or “folk Islam” in the public discourse, is often seen as burdened with superstitions and relics. However in the view of the reformists, Sufism is more than that; it encompasses practices which were not mentioned by the Prophet Muhammad and his followers, and therefore are not Islamic. Sufi rituals and beliefs distract attention from the “real” Islam.

Rejection of the local traditions, manifested mostly through the religious sphere, may be also seen as a search for a new, more global identity. Reformist Islam—a world-wide phenomenon—accentuating the unity of the *umma* (Muslim community) and equality of all Muslims, proposes a

⁵A Report of the Human Rights Information and Documentation Center (HRIDC), Spring 2006, www.proasyl.de. It gives an account of the poor conditions of refugees’ life.

⁶Kurtsikidze, Shorena; Chikovani, Vakhtang, “Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge: An Ethnographic Survey”, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies. Working Paper Series, Spring 2002, p. 25.

more attractive frame of reference than the ritual practices of the elders. This homogenizing trend is being reinforced in the Caucasus, among others, by the increase in the knowledge of the Arabic language. The holy language of Islam is the gate to the holy scriptures, but also strengthens the sense of global Muslim unity.

The symbolic marker of the reformists' opposition to the Kist tradition is the appearance—beards in the case of men and veils tied under the chin and long-sleeved dresses, shirts or tunics worn by women. The majority of Kists seem to oppose especially the “Wahhabi” women's type of clothing and claim that it is “unnatural” and not prescribed by Islam. It should be noted that the headscarf itself has neutral meaning for most of the Kists and Chechen refugees. In fact, it is traditionally worn by married women living in Pankisi, and is treated as a sign of marital status rather than in religious terms.

The conventional approach to Chechnya identifies it as the land of Sufis. Historically, Sufi Islam is the earliest expression of Islam in the North Caucasus, where the Kists (at that time “normal” Chechens) had dwelled before their migration to Georgia in the nineteenth century. However, along with Sufism, canonical Sunni Islam of the Shafi‘i or Hanafi theological schools (*madhhabs*) is also widespread in the Chechen society.⁷ Unlike the usual understanding of Sufism as Islamic mysticism which involves following by an adept (*murid*) the path towards God, the contemporary Sufis in the Pankisi gorge seem to be more concerned with the rites recommended by Sufi orders. At present, there are no significant Sufi sheikhs or any other charismatic personalities that could “revive” the Sufi values and beliefs. The most significant people of the brotherhoods, *tkhaamad* (head) and *turakh* (deputy)⁸ are more the leaders of the rituals than Sufi masters of a typical brotherhood.⁹ Those who practice *zikr* refer to themselves as members of a brotherhood, without actually using the word “Sufism”. In reality, *zikr* turns out to be the most significant element of the Kists' religious identity. This celebration in that community consists chiefly of the collective singing of religious formulas. It is followed by silent prayers, when the believer tries to establish a more personal relationship with God. The latter aspect is raised as an argument against the reformists. For the practitioners of *zikr*, the reformists are neglecting the personal relationship with God, putting too much emphasis on the correct execution of the rituals.

Imam Shamil and the Dynamics of Islam

In order to assess the role of the so-called Islamic revival in the post-Soviet space, it is valuable to explore not only the forms of religious practices and institutions, but also the historically changing socio-religious functions. Such a perspective also makes the dichotomized categories of moderate and peaceful traditional Islam and radical reformist Islam irrelevant, as it does not take into consideration the dynamics inside various traditions in Islam.

Let us start with the discussion of Imam Shamil and the Imamate he established in the nineteenth century. This charismatic Muslim leader is regarded as the most prominent symbol of the Islamic

⁷Vatchagaev, Mairbek, “The Kremlin's War on Islamic Education in the North Caucasus”, in: *North Caucasus Weekly*, vol. 7(34), September 08, 2006.

⁸Kurtsikidze, Shorena; Chikovani, Vakhtang, “Georgia's Pankisi Gorge: An Ethnographic Survey”, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies. Working Paper Series, Spring 2002, p. 29.

⁹For a brief overview of Sufism see e.g. Makris, G.P., “Islam in the Middle East. A living Tradition”, (Blackwell Publishing), pp. 142–154.

prosperity and of the resistance against Russians. The time of his rule is often described as “the golden age of Islam”. The reference to the first Islamic revival is currently made in the Caucasus by diverse groups: secular nationalists, Islamic clergy, and leaders of Sufi brotherhoods, Islamists and reformists.¹⁰ Although many Caucasian Muslims praise Shamil as a hero, the present interpretations of his actions and ideas vary to a large extent.

For the adherents of the Sufi tradition, the most crucial fact was that Imam Shamil was chiefly a Sufi sheikh and therefore a prominent Muslim leader. The distinct Sufi affiliation of the leader of the theocratic state in the North Caucasus is currently underlined. In fact, the most influential Sufi groups—the *Naqshbandiyya* and the *Qadiriyya*—made a weighty contribution to the spread of Islam among the mountain tribes in that region. Moreover, they influenced the “modern Islamic reformation, known as ‘Neo-Sufism’”.¹¹ Both these brotherhoods are nowadays active among Pankisi Muslims; the former is commonly referred to as the “Sheikh Efendi”, the latter—“Kunta Hajji” brotherhood.

Recently, Islam in Pankisi has resumed old meanings and has become, as in Chechnya and Dagestan, a “factor of unification and consolidation”.¹² This time, however, the Sufi-oriented Kists and Chechens appropriated the ideas of social protest against revolutionary changes propagated by the “Wahhabists”. The social and religious networks and brotherhoods facilitate the spread of ideas of resistance against drastic changes in the local tradition. While in the nineteenth century the Sufi movement, led mainly by Imam Shamil, aimed at transforming the fundamental social and cultural principles of mountainous communities and challenging the old structures of authority, the contemporary Muslim brotherhoods take an opposite stance: it is the tradition passed on from generation to generation that should be preserved and protected.

Interestingly, Imam Shamil is also a celebrated by those Muslims with a reformist outlook. What they find attractive in the Imamate’s heritage is the attempt at creating the theocratic state, even at the cost of traditional laws and customs. The Shamil’s uncompromising attitude gains admiration among rebellious youth, looking for a real change in their life. Although the imam was indeed Sufi, he nonetheless put a strong emphasis on the need of the adherence to the Islamic law.

Conclusion

There is a need to reconsider the conventional and widespread conceptual approach to Islam in the Caucasus. The dichotomized perspective, though it seems to put some order to the chaotic social reality, does not lead to adequate understanding of the local processes and their constant dynamics. Particularly the diversity of Islamic practices and meanings attached to them call into question the usefulness of the sharp division between so-called “Sufis” and “Wahhabis”. Exploring the real interactions inside each of this group and examining their discourses can lead to a more nuanced picture of Caucasian Islam. I have attempted to show that the category “Wahhabism” has been employed by the Muslims in Pankisi to express their protest against

¹⁰Zelkina, Anna, “Jihad in the name of God: Shaykh Shamil as the religious leader of the Caucasus”, in: *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 21: 3, pp. 249–264.

¹¹Zelkina, Anna, “In Quest for God and Freedom”, (London: Hurst and Company, 2000), p. 8.

¹²Sanikidze, George, “Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Caucasian Region: ‘Global’ and ‘Local’ in the Pankisi Gorge”, in: Tomohiko Uyama (ed.) “Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia”, *Slavic Eurasian Studies*, no. 14, 2007, Slavic Research Center.

foreign, revolutionary ideas that appeared in the region in the context of the wars and political instability in Chechnya. The meaning of this alien ideology for the Vainakhs who support traditional rules in their communities differs however from that propagated by pro-Russian authorities in the Caucasian republics and by Russians. In the contemporary Pankisi region, Wahhabism is not associated with terrorism, but rather with socio-cultural radicalism that threatens the existing social order.

Lastly, it is worth remembering that the social role of Sufi movements changes. Although today they are regarded as the representatives of “peaceful”, “moderate” Islam, in the past those same brotherhoods constituted the base for violent resistance to Russian conquest of the Caucasus and promoted the ideology of *jihad*. Moreover, it was a Sufi sheikh that called for a radical transformation of existing customs and for establishing the state ruled by Sharia law.