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Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies  
University of California, Berkeley  
Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies  
260 Stephens Hall #2304  
Berkeley, California 94720-2304

Tel: (510) 643-6737  
[bsp@socrates.berkeley.edu](mailto:bsp@socrates.berkeley.edu)  
<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~bsp/>

## **Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia**

*George Sanikidze and Edward W. Walker*

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George Sanikidze is the director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Georgian Academy of Sciences in Tbilisi. He was a visiting scholar at Berkeley during 2003–2004. Edward W. Walker is the executive director of the Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies and an adjunct associate professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley.



Like Russia, Georgia has been a majority Christian country for centuries—indeed Georgia was one of the first states to adopt Christianity as an official religion, doing so just a few decades after the Christianization of neighboring Armenia (301 CE) and some seven centuries before Russia (988 CE). In the centuries that followed, Georgia remained Christian despite the fact that for most of its history it was under the influence of powerful Muslim kingdoms and empires to the south, and indeed was occupied by Muslim conquerors on numerous occasions. As a result, Christianity plays a particularly important part in the Georgian national narrative and Georgian national consciousness, as suggested by the slogan of the nineteenth century Georgian national movement, “language, homeland, faith (Christianity).”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Georgia has long had a significant Muslim population. And like other Soviet successor states with significant Muslim populations, there is growing concern in the country about the possible politicization of Islam, particularly in view of the Islamicization of the Chechen resistance movement to Georgia’s north.

This article 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 in Georgia; 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” forms of Islam that are typically, although not necessarily accurately, referred to as “Wahhabism” in post-Soviet space.<sup>2</sup>

## **ISLAM IN GEORGIA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

In the Middle Ages and early modern period, intensive contact between Georgia and the Islamic world helped introduce Islam into Georgia. After the conquest of Tbilisi by Arabs in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the city became the capital of an Islamic emirate for some four decades. (Nisba<sup>3</sup> at-Tiflisi<sup>4</sup>, or at-Taflisi, as the city was called, is first mentioned in Arabic sources around that time.)<sup>5</sup> From that point on, there has always been a Muslim community in Tbilisi, even after

Georgia's King David IV (David the Builder) retook the city in 1122 and made it the capital of a reunified Georgian Christian state. Historically, Tbilisi's Muslims were usually afforded a variety of privileges by the Georgian state, including exemption from certain taxes.

Tbilisi's population remained true to their Christian faith even in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the 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.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, invasions by Muslim nomads and occupation by Turks and Persians inflicted considerable damage on the country's Georgian-speaking natives, to the point where in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Georgians as an ethno-linguistic community were on the verge of extinction. Particularly threatening was the practice of seizing Georgian youth and selling them as slaves to Muslim owners.<sup>7</sup>

It was during this period that Islam began to spread to segments of the rural population. It came first to the southwest region of Georgia (Samtskhe-Saatabago), when the Ottomans conquered the region and created the *pashalik* of Akhaltsikhe (Childir). Thereafter, other ethno-linguistic minorities in the country came to embrace Islam as well. In addition, waves of Turkic-speaking Muslims began to move into the country, migrants who became known as "Tatars" in the Tsarist era and would then be reclassified as "Azerbaijanis" under the Soviets.

For mostly strategic reasons, Russian imperial authorities attempted to change the demographic balance in some of Georgia's border regions in the nineteenth century by encouraging emigration of Christians. The attempt was only partially successful, however, and was soon abandoned. By and large, Russian imperial authorities were tolerant of Georgia's Muslims. By the end of the imperial period, the population of Georgia was some 20 percent Muslim.

Soviet authorities were considerably less tolerant. The militantly atheistic Soviet state launched a campaign against religious institutions and ecclesiastical authorities in the 1920s and 1930s. A measured accommodation was reached with the USSR's traditional religions during the Second World War, including Islam, at which point the Soviets established four Muslim Religious Boards (*dukhovnoe upravlenie*) to oversee Muslim affairs in the USSR. The one for the

entire South Caucasus region was based in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan.<sup>8</sup> Thus both official Islamic institutions and unofficial practices and religiosity survived the Soviet period. Georgia, like other parts of the Soviet Union, witnessed a notable “Islamic revival” in the Gorbachev era and the early post-Soviet periods.

The centrality of Orthodox Christianity in the Georgian national consciousness, however, has increased in recent years, indeed to the point where the national flag was changed after the “Rose Revolution” of November 2003 from the secular design of the first independent Georgian Republic (1917–1921) to one with five crosses, a change that the new authorities hoped would underline Georgia’s place in the Christian (that is, “Western”) world. Nevertheless, the Georgian national narrative celebrates the country’s traditional confessional diversity and tolerance, and its post-Soviet constitution provides for a secular state and freedom of religion. Today, the country’s “traditional” confessions (Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, Armenian Gregorian Christianity, Sunni and Shiite Islam, Judaism) are widely accepted, even by most Georgian nativists, as legitimate elements of Georgian society and history. There is, however, considerable popular hostility toward non-traditional confessions, such as the increasingly active Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baha’is, Seventh Day Adventists, and Hare Krishnas. Nevertheless, Georgia, unlike Russia, has not adopted a law on religion, although one has been under consideration by parliament for eight years. The law, particularly its provisions on non-traditional confessions, has been a topic of considerable controversy.

The size of Georgia’s Muslim population is difficult to estimate. The last Soviet census, which was conducted in 1989, gave the following breakdown of traditionally Muslim nationalities in the republic: Azeris (308,000), Abkhaz (96,000, although only a portion of Abkhaz were traditionally Muslim), Kists (12,000), Avars (4,200), Tatars (4,100), Kazakhs (2,600), Uzbeks (1,300), and Tajiks (1,200).<sup>9</sup> There are, however, significant numbers of Muslims among other nationalities in the republic, particularly among Georgian-speakers in the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria in Georgia’s southwest. The 1989 Soviet census did not inquire into religious identity or practices, and while a census was conducted in 2002, its results are considered unreliable

given the extent of disorder in the country. In short, the number of people who consider themselves adherents of Islam, whether among traditional Muslims 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 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 punishment. For them, fasting, the ritual of sacrifice (*qurban*), and recitation of religious passages (*mevlud*) mean that Allah will forgive their sins, which will allow them to 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 in the name of national tradition only. Finally, some are agnostic with respect to faith but nevertheless consider themselves to be “Muslim” in the sense that Islam is seen as part of their culture.

With these caveats in mind, Georgian scholars have estimated that the number of “Muslims” in the republic in 1989 was as high as 640,000, or 12 percent of Georgia’s population at the time (then some 5.4 million). Today, most estimates are considerably lower, at around 400,000, a decrease that results in part from emigration and, in part, from a more considered distinction between believer and non-believer.<sup>10</sup> The percentage of Muslims in the total population appears to have changed little, however, because the total population has declined by over one million (the 2002 census identified some 4.4 million Georgians).

## **ISLAM IN AJARIA**

The region of Ajaria was Islamized quite late. Until the 1770s, most Ajarians were Christian. Islamicization began after Ajaria was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the early seventeenth century and accelerated especially after the 1820s. When the Ottomans ceded Ajaria to Russia in 1878, some 6,000 Muslim Ajarians fled the region in search of refuge in Turkey.



Orthodox Christian missionaries also began actively proselytizing in the region in the late nineteenth century. The long-standing Christian presence in the region remains as such today.<sup>11</sup>

The Muslims of Ajaria are, virtually without exception, Sunnis. Sufism, however, is rare, despite its widespread presence in Turkey to the west and among other Muslims of Georgia. Moreover, in general Islamicization in Ajaria was rather superficial, as Islamic practices in the region intermingled with non-Islamic traditions often linked to Georgian Christianity.

For the most part, Ajarians have traditionally thought of themselves as “Georgians” (their native language was Georgian). Ethno-linguistic ties have prevailed over religious bonds in political affairs. However, during the period of Ottoman rule, Turkish authorities had some success in changing political identification. They did so in part through economic incentives and in part by promoting the use of Turkish in the region, particularly after the 1860s. Ottoman officials speculated at the time that it would take some 30 years for Ajarians to abandon Georgian completely.<sup>12</sup> The effort ultimately proved unsuccessful, however, and Turkish remained a foreign language for most.

There were no religious institutions of higher learning in Ajaria under the Ottomans. Instead, the children of the Ajarian nobility were often sent to religious schools in Turkey and other Muslim countries, and as a result, the clerical elite tended to have a pro-Turkish orientation. Most Ajarians had only limited opportunities to learn Turkish or Arabic, thus most continued to speak Georgian. 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 nineteenth century the population consisted almost entirely of Georgian-speakers, there was another *madrassa*, where again teaching was conducted in Arabic and Turkish.<sup>13</sup> Even so, Arabic was incomprehensible to most of the *madrassa*’s students, who typically memorized religious texts without knowing their meaning. The recitation of prayers and reading of holy texts in Arabic in mosques was not understandable even to many mullahs, let alone to lay worshippers.

The first mosques appeared in Ajaria in seaside regions when the Turks began to deploy military garrisons in the early nineteenth century. Over the years, their numbers gradually increased, although relatively few were built in mountainous regions, where Christianity maintained a strong presence.<sup>14</sup>

Tensions between Muslims and Christians in Ajaria appear to have increased in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1855, during the Crimean War, many Ajarians fought on the side of the Turks. During the Turkish-Russian war of 1877–78, Ajarians held a number of top positions in the Ottoman armed forces, and some 6,000 to 10,000 served as soldiers.<sup>15</sup> During World War I, Ajarian *muhajirs* (emigrants to Turkey) formed a division within the Turkish army.<sup>16</sup> An anti-Russian terrorist organization known as “The Avengers” appeared in Ajaria after the Turkish defeat in 1878. Financed by both the Ottomans and the British, the organization attempted to kill Russian officers and officials, along with Ajarians who collaborated with the imperial presence.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, many Ajarians during this period continued to identify politically with Russia, indeed to the point where some advocated unification with the tsarist state. During the war of 1877–78, the Russian general Komarov informed the commander-in-chief of the Transcaucasian army that the “disposition of Ajarians towards Russians is perfect, and the region is waiting to connect to Russia.”<sup>18</sup>

Ajaria was incorporated into Russia under the terms of the Treaty of Berlin of 1878, at which point Batumi was made into a free trade zone.<sup>19</sup> 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. As a result, many of the Muslims of the region began to emigrate (the *muhajiroba*), a process that continued through the end of the 1880s.

Russian sovereignty proved a hardship for many. Previously the Turkish border 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 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 forced dependant peasants to leave with them, while the local Muslim clergy encouraged emigration on religious grounds. (Eventually many reconciled themselves to Russian rule, however, calling on their congregations to cooperate with the new authorities.) The burning of Ajarian villages by departing Turkish troops also promoted Muslim emigration.<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult to estimate the number of emigrants during this period. Our best guess is around 10,000—6,000 of whom were Ajarians (many of the rest were Abkhaz—see below).<sup>21</sup> An indicator of the extent of the decrease in the Muslim population can be found in demographic data from Batumi. Of the 4,970 inhabitants in 1872, approximately 4,500 were Muslim (Georgian-speakers, Turks, Circassians, and Abkhaz). By the time the census of 1897 was taken, the city's population had grown enormously, but now the Orthodox Christian population was 15,495 (mostly Slavs). Muslims numbered only 3,156, some of whom were citizens of Turkey.<sup>22</sup> A similar picture comes from data for Georgia as a whole. According to official sources, a total of 150,000 individuals left the country for Turkey during the *muhajiroba*.<sup>23</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, as many as 200,000 to 250,000 Georgians lived in Turkey.<sup>24</sup> Today there are 242 villages in 15 *vilayets* (provinces) of Turkey with residents of Georgian heritage, 158 of which are populated by Georgians only.<sup>25</sup> Georgians live mainly in the Artvin, Rize, Kars, Samsun, and Sinop *vilayets*, but they are also present in significant numbers in Bursa, Izmit, Istanbul, and Ankara. Most are Sunnis of the Hanafi *madzhab* (school of Islamic law), although there are a small number of Georgians in Turkey who are Christian (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant).<sup>26</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, Russian officials began to try to win the loyalty of Georgia's Muslims, one consequence of which was an end to the policies that had spurred

emigration. The Russian state financed the construction of mosques and the opening of *madrasas* in Ajaria and elsewhere. Some 400 mosques were built in Ajarian villages as a result. 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).<sup>27</sup>

State officials also began to reach out to the Muslim clergy in the hopes it would “operate in accordance with the interests of the government, and the government in turn could supervise its actions and have constant control over it.”<sup>28</sup> As early as 1870, imperial authorities issued regulations specifying the rights and duties of the Islamic 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—for example, a certain *khoja*, Limon Efendi Kartsivadze, was given an annual salary of 100 Russian imperial rubles.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, state efforts in the latter half of the nineteenth century to promote Christianity in the region proved ineffective. Nevertheless, most Ajarian Muslims continued to identify as Georgian. As a result, during the First World War a “Committee for the Liberation of Muslim Georgia” was created in Tbilisi, with Memed Abashidze as its chairman (Abashidze had been the founder and editor of the newspaper *Muslim Georgia*). The goal of the organization was to “liberate” Muslim Georgia from Turkish rule. For some Ajarians, however, Islamic identity meant loyalty to Turkey. This was true even before the October Revolution, but the establishment of Communist authority in the region, and the threat it posed to traditional religious practices and nationalist sentiments, radicalized pro-Turkish elements in the Ajarian community. A pan-Turkish and pan-Islamist party, *Jemiet Islam*, was founded in 1921, which advocated Ajarian

unification with Turkey. Still others championed Ajarian nationalism, advocating the creation of an independent Ajarian state.<sup>30</sup>

During the brief period of Georgian independence (1918–1921), a pro-Georgian orientation prevailed in Ajaria. This was made clear in the final declaration of the special “Congress of the Ajarian People,” which convened in Batumi during the period of British occupation in the fall of 1918. The declaration asserted that while the people of the Batumi district were Muslim by religion, they were Georgian by virtue of history, origin, language, and culture. It also claimed that territorially and economically the region had always been part of Georgia.<sup>31</sup>

The establishment of Soviet power and the creation of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in February 1921 were followed by the formation of Ajaria as an autonomous republic (ASSR) within the Georgian SSR in June. Interestingly, it was the only autonomous republic in the USSR that was established on a religious rather than an ethno-linguistic basis (most Ajarians at the time spoke Georgian).<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

At the beginning of the Soviet era there were 158 mosques in Ajaria.<sup>34</sup> In the years that followed, the number declined dramatically thanks to the regime’s harsh campaign against religion. By 1936, only two registered mosques remained.<sup>35</sup> 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 were published in the region in the 1920s and 1930s to promote the official line: *The Atheist* (*Bezbozhni*, meaning “godless” in Russian), which came out in Russia, and *The Fighting Atheist*, which was published in Georgian. Islamic law (*Sharia*) and the muftiate (the religious affairs administration) were abolished in 1926.<sup>36</sup> Soviet authorities also tried to force the Muslim clergy to support Soviet rule in their religious *vaiazes* (sermons/preach-

ing). On January 10, 1930, an accommodation of sorts was reached when Khoja Iskander Artmeladze called on Muslims to obey Soviet authorities and not fall under the influence of anti-regime agitators.<sup>37</sup>

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

Today it appears that most Muslims in Ajaria have a respectful attitude toward Christians and Christianity. Doubtless this is partly because Ajarians afford their ancestors great respect, and many of those ancestors were Christians. Moreover, many young Ajarians have embraced Christianity, although it is impossible to know just how many. 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 the two religions in a single family (particularly cases where younger members of the family are Christians while their elders are Muslims) is now quite common.

Christianity enjoys substantial state support in Ajaria today. In a move of obvious political significance, the former strongman Aslan Abashidze converted to Christianity despite the fact that, as noted earlier, he is the descendant of a well-known Ajarian Muslim family that not only strengthened Georgian consciousness among the Ajarian Muslims after the region became a part of the Russian Empire in 1878, but also promoted the strengthening of Islam.<sup>38</sup>

Islam, in contrast, is not supported by local authorities. During an expedition to the highlands of Ajaria in September 2003, local authorities went to great lengths to prevent Sanikidze and his colleagues from contacting Muslims, at one point going so far as to demand that they show them a document signed by Abashidze himself giving them permission to proceed with their 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 construction of these new mosques comes from Turkish citizens of Georgian heritage. Most are 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 nineteenth century, while the mosque of Beghleti dates from the beginning of the twentieth 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 are imams at the mosques of Khulo, Ghordjomi, and Batumi (see below), although none has received a classical religious education.

There is only one mosque in Batumi, whereas there are 14 Christian churches (12 Orthodox, one Armenian Gregorian, and one Catholic). The central hall of the Batumi mosque can accommodate about 1,500 believers. According its mufti, Avtandil (his Islamic name is Mahmud) Kamashidze, about 200 believers visit the mosque every day, a number that goes up to 400 on Fridays. He also claimed that as many as 4,000 attend during religious feasts, most of whom assemble in the mosque's courtyard. However, Sanikidize visited the Batumi mosque twice, and each time there were only 15–20 believers in the courtyard and central hall, which suggests that the figure of 200 daily worshippers everyday is exaggerated. There also appeared to be few foreign or young worshippers at the mosque.

Nevertheless, unlike its counterpart in Tbilisi, the Batumi mosque is open every day. During the month of Ramadan women have the right to enter it and pray in the women's chapel on the second floor. The mosque also offers courses in Koranic studies. While there have been rumors about the construction of a new mosque in Batumi, reportedly with funding from Turkish businessmen, it appears that the idea has been dropped because there are so few worshippers in the city. According to the mufti, the existing mosque is more than adequate to meet current needs. However, a new minaret has been constructed for the Batumi mosque, which has been financed by Turks.

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 underage girls. Many of these rituals take place outside the mosque, in courtyards, fields, or private homes.

An important practice among Ajarian Muslims is the religious pledge. In addition, to ensure that Allah fulfills the desires of believers, they carry out *qurban*, celebrate *mevlud*, and 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 Bairam, 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 Bairam (Feast of Sacrifice).<sup>39</sup> 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 when there is a joyous event to celebrate. And as in much of the rest of the Muslim world, a sacrifice is offered at the beginning of the *hajj*.

One of the most popular feasts in Ajaria is Khadir geja, which is usually celebrated on the twenty-seventh 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 particular 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 fifty-second day after a person's death when *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 social environment. Young believers who witness religious traditions in early childhood play a particularly important role in preserving religious traditions. Because younger Ajarians have been converting to Christianity in significant numbers, preserving the Muslim traditions unique to Ajaria is becoming increasingly difficult.

Muslim religious practices in Ajaria are also intermingled with Christian ones. A large number of “Muslim” toponyms, for example, have Christian roots. As the Georgian art historian Ekvtime Takhaishvili noted at the beginning of the twentieth century: “There is a tradition of going to *ziareti* in Muslim Georgia that corresponds to the Christian feast of the worship of icons. *Ziareti* are places for prayer, which in a majority of cases are old churches or places where Christian crosses are erected.”<sup>40</sup> Another historian, Dmitri Bakradze, who visited Ajaria during the last years of Turkish domination, similarly observed, “Although Georgian churches were demolished a long time ago, the population considers their ruins as sacred ... many Muslim Ajarians pray on their former Christian icons.”<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> 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 written in Georgian, Russian, and Azeri can be found in many Muslim cemeteries.<sup>43</sup>

A considerable number of young Ajarian Muslims received their religious education abroad during the last decade. The religious administration of Turkey, *Diyanet*, is especially active in this regard.<sup>44</sup> 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 foreign religious institutions. There are fears that some young Ajarians are becoming “Wahhabi” in

orientation (the more accurate label is “Salafite”). For Wahhabis, the practices that are 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). Sanikidze met one such a person, a young man who behaved quite aggressively in conversation (his main argument was that Christians should not interfere in the business of Muslims). 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 certain other Muslim-majority regions in the former Soviet Union.

## **ISLAM IN MESKHETIA**

Like Ajaria, Meskheta is located in southwestern Georgia. Its population is ethnically diverse. Until the eighteenth century, a majority of the population was Georgian, but in the eighteenth century Turkic peoples, who had begun moving in earlier, migrated to the region in large numbers. After the Russian-Ottoman war of 1828–1829, Armenians began to settle in the region, and they became the largest community in Meskheta by the end of the nineteenth century.

Islam came to Meskheta in the sixteenth century with the arrival of nomadic tribes of Turkish origin. Thereafter, the establishment of the Ottoman landowner system in the region aided Islamicization. To preserve its power and wealth, the dominant feudal family in the region, the Jaqeli, converted to Islam, and a member of the Jaqeli family almost continuously held the title of Pasha until the abolition of the Akhaltsikhe *pashalik* in 1829. Other Meskhetaian feudal families followed the Jaqeli’s lead.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, according to the Georgian historian Vakhushti Batonishvili, at the beginning of the eighteenth century most Meskhetaian peasants were still Christians, while the nobility was mostly Muslim.<sup>46</sup>

The region was incorporated into the Russian empire in 1829, but a census was conducted in the region only once, in 1897. Unfortunately, the census did not provide a clear picture

of religious or political identities.<sup>47</sup> According to the 1897 census, the population of Meskhetia (Samtskhe-Javakhetia) consisted of 18,664 Georgians, 67,683 Armenians, and 43,367 “Tatars” and “Turks.”<sup>48</sup> “Georgians,” however, included Orthodox, Catholics, and Muslims, so the number of “Georgian” Muslims is impossible to determine.<sup>49</sup> Further, religion was generally used at the time as an indicator of national identity, which meant that Georgian speakers who were non-Christians were almost certainly undercounted.<sup>50</sup> But there were also Georgian-speaking Muslims who regarded religion as their primary political identity and who accordingly would be counted in the census as Tatars or Turks. Indeed, many Georgian Muslims changed their Georgian family names to Turkish ones because they assumed that “Georgian” was synonymous with “Christian.”<sup>51</sup>

While the number of Muslims in the region is difficult to assess, what does seem clear is that state-led efforts to Christianize the Muslim population in Meskhetia were generally unsuccessful. In 1880, for example, there were only 77 baptisms among Muslim Georgians in Meskhetia, a figure that did not increase notably in later years.<sup>52</sup>

After the establishment of Communist rule, Georgian-language secondary schools were replaced by Azeri schools in areas with Georgian-speaking Muslim majorities. In addition, official documents increasingly ignored the linguistic and cultural affiliations of Georgian-speaking Muslims. Georgian-speaking Muslims were referred to as Turks, Muslims, Tatars, or (eventually) Azeris. People of Turkish origin in Georgia typically referred to themselves, however, as Muslims and would only rarely appropriate the label “Turks,” while Christians tended to refer to them as “Tatars.” In 1937, the Soviet state decided that all people of Turkish origin in the South Caucasus would be categorized officially as “Azeris.” The bilingual (Turkish-Georgian) Muslims of Meskhetia, who were of mixed origin, were also identified as Azeris. There was, thus, a dramatic increase in the number of Azeris registered in Meskhetia in the census of 1939. Likewise, there was a sudden drop in Azeris in the 1959 census because of the deportation of the so-called “Meskhetian Turks,” many of whom were in fact Georgian-speakers of ethnic Georgian heritage.<sup>53</sup>

The deportation, which took place during World War II, forced all Muslims of Meskhetia into internal exile, mostly to Central Asia. The number of deportees was on the order of 100,000, although once again it is difficult to establish the exact number. The Meskhetian Turks managed to preserve a high level of religiosity while in internal exile.<sup>54</sup> High birth rates also led to rapid population growth.

A second deportation took place in 1989, this time from Central Asia. Currently the re-deported live mainly in the Saridabad region of Azerbaijan and in Krasnodar krai in southern Russia. Many hope to return to the homeland of their ancestors in Meskhetia. Most also continue to insist that they are Turks, not ethnic Georgians. They are, therefore, referred to sometimes as “Turks of Meskhetia” rather than “Meskhetian Turks” because “Meskhetian” implies ethnic Georgian to most Georgians. Some scholars prefer an even more precise phrasing: “deported Meskhetians of Turkish orientation” (although some are not, in fact, of Turkish origin).<sup>55</sup> Still others distinguish between two groups of deported people—”Turks” and “Georgians.” Finally, the “Meskhetian Turks” themselves distinguish between a pro-Turkish part of the population, which is represented by the movement Vatan, and a pro-Georgian part, which is represented by the movement of Khsna (Salvation). Members of the latter typically consider themselves Georgians. They are critical of Vatan for being insufficiently aware of the complex ethnopolitical situation in the region, as well as for what they consider an unrealistic political agenda of Meskhetian Turkish nationalism. As one Khsna activist explained, what is most important is to return to the homeland of their ancestors, not national orientation.<sup>56</sup>

The first Muslim Meskhetian returnees arrived in 1969. They were soon forced to leave by local authorities, however. Between 1982 and 1989, 1,972 Meskhetians returned, but again most left due to fears about personal security, the unsupportive or even hostile attitude of local authorities, isolation from their kin, and economic hardship. Since 1993, the government in Tbilisi has taken measured steps to assist repatriation, and small groups of Meskhetian students have been admitted from CIS countries. In 1994, a Repatriation Service was established under the Ministry of Refugees and Settlement to assist returnees and coordinate efforts for further repatriation.

Nevertheless, Tbilisi has continued to drag its feet in creating a comprehensive framework for promoting repatriation. The primary reason is that repatriation is extremely unpopular with the Georgian public. When Georgia became a member of the Council of Europe, Tbilisi promised to make greater efforts to facilitate repatriation—it wanted above all to demonstrate that it was committed to liberal values and “European” norms. There has also been consistent pressure from human rights organizations to recognize the right of the deported to return. Nonetheless, not a single political party or national politician has been willing to incur the political costs of championing repatriation. On the contrary, most have given in to the temptation to win political capital by publicly opposing it. This is especially true of politicians from nearby Samtskhe-Javakheti, for whom a strong anti-repatriation stance is a political necessity.<sup>57</sup>

It would be unfair, however, to ascribe the resistance to repatriation simply to populism and selfishness. There are in fact many serious practical reasons why repatriation must be handled with care. The size of the Meskhetian Turk population increased considerably after the deportation, and it is, therefore, even more difficult for financially strapped Tbilisi to provide for the returnees financially and resolve property claims.<sup>58</sup> In addition, Meskhetia is today an ethnically and religiously diverse region, with significant populations of Georgian Orthodox, Georgian Catholics, Armenian Gregorians, Armenian Catholics, Russian Dukhobors, and Ajarian Muslims resident on its territory. The arrival of an additional ethno-religious community would almost certainly lead to increased political tensions.

## **THE GEORGIANS OF FERIDUN, IRAN**

In the 1970s, the descendants of Georgians who had been deported to Iran’s Feridun region at the beginning of the seventeenth century began to return to Georgia. Despite having converted to Islam centuries earlier, the Feridun Georgians managed to preserve their traditional language and customs. From 1972–74, eighteen large families returned, but reintegration into Georgian society proved difficult, and as a result many returned to Iran within a few years. Today about 120–130 Feridunis live in Kakheti and Tbilisi.<sup>59</sup> While some are still Muslim, most have reconverted to

Christianity. In either case, however, the Feridunis are typically not very religious. It is worth noting, however, that the newly Christianized often continue to perform Islamic rituals as part of their religious practices. Many, for example, visit Christian Churches, where they light candles, even as they perform *namaz* (Muslim prayer) and celebrate *navruz*, the Persian New Year, at home.

In June 2004, the new Georgian president, Mikhail Saakashvili, visited Iran's Feridun region. Feridun's Muslims, who still speak Georgian and adhere to many Georgian traditions, gave Saakashvili a warm welcome, which included waving of the new Georgian national flag with its five crosses.

## **ISLAM IN ABKHAZIA**

Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, Islam co-existed in Abkhazia with Christian and local pagan beliefs. With the establishment of Ottoman rule, however, the Turks attempted to weaken Christianity's position in the region, and they accordingly set about demolishing Abkhazia's churches and chapels.<sup>60</sup> Islam became more widespread as a result, at least until the *muhajiroba* of the 1860s when many Muslims were driven out of Abkhazia into Turkey by Russian imperial authorities.<sup>61</sup>

*Despite the muhajiroba*, observers at the time observed few signs of tension between the religious communities in Abkhazia. Christian missionaries reported that most Muslim Abkhaz practiced Islamic rites and observed Islamic celebrations, including fasting during the month of Ramadan and the celebration of the *qurban*. They would also invite mullahs to preside over burial ceremonies. But most embraced various Christian traditions as well, including the celebration of Christmas and Easter and commemoration of the holy days of the Virgin Mary and Saint George.

According to reports by the Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus, efforts to propagate Islam in Abkhazia increased in the late nineteenth century.<sup>62</sup> At the time, however, many Muslims were also converting to Christianity. According to data gath-

ered by the Society, between 1866 and 1902 a total of 21,336 Muslim Abkhaz became Christian. Moreover, the missionaries complained that marriages between Christians and Muslims were common, even more so in Abkhazia than in other parts of the Caucasus. As a result, they argued that the most salient cleavage for the Abkhaz was social status, not religion.<sup>63</sup>

There was also little evidence during the Soviet period of religiosity among the Abkhaz. As Nestor Lakoba, the Communist Party first secretary of the autonomous republic of Abkhazia in the 1920s and 1930s, remarked, “Religion for the Abkhazian is meaningless. The Abkhaz by his nature and historically is an atheist and nonbeliever.”<sup>64</sup>

The ongoing struggle over sovereignty between the Abkhaz and Tbilisi make it impossible to study the religious situation in the region today. In the last few years, ties to Muslim communities in the North Caucasus, as well as the return of the descendants of the *muhajirs* from Turkey, appear to have led to a modest increase in the role of Islam among the Abkhaz. Nevertheless, there is little evidence of the presence of Islamist extremists in the region. Again, however, we should reiterate that it is very difficult to confirm this in the absence of field research.

## **THE MUSLIM AZERIS OF GEORGIA**

As noted earlier, Azeris constitute the largest Muslim community in Georgia. According to the census of 1989, there were 303,600 Azeris in the republic, or some 5.7 percent of the total population.<sup>65</sup> The number appears to have declined significantly in the period since, however. An estimate from 2003 concluded that there might be fewer than 280,000 Azeris in Georgia today, in large part because of emigration. They 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 Kakhetia, which has some 33,600 Azeri residents. The remainder are scattered around other parts of the country.

The first “Azeris” (in fact, Turkic-speaking Muslims) to arrive in Georgia were nomadic

Turkish tribes (*eli*) that began settling in the region in the eleventh century. A second wave came in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when another group of nomadic Turks (*Juruqs*) established themselves in southern Georgia. At the same time, so-called Qizilbash tribes moved into the eastern part of the country.<sup>66</sup> During the early modern period, these nomads became settled and underwent a process of adaptation to state service. By the nineteenth century, most were peasants living in villages, but some had become merchants and craftsmen in urban areas.

The Muslim population of Tbilisi in the nineteenth century was substantial. According to the census of 1897, there were 189,024 Muslims in the province of Tbilisi.<sup>67</sup> The community 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 Persians, followed by Azeris. Both were Shiites, whereas the other Muslims in Tbilisi were Sunnis. Relations between the two communities were tense.<sup>68</sup> 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 nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russian imperial authorities tried to win the confidence of Georgia's Muslims, including the "Tatars," 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.<sup>69</sup> By the time Soviet authority was established in Georgia, there were 59 mosques serving Georgia's Azeri community, with some 500 mullahs conducting religious services in one district alone (Borchalo district, populated mostly by Azeris). By then, *muridism*<sup>70</sup> had become widespread among Georgia's Azeris, due to the influence of North Caucasian Islam. There were also numerous *madrasas* serving the Azeri community, although these provided only a rudimentary education—at the beginning of the Soviet era, 96.3 percent of Azeris in Georgia were illiterate.<sup>71</sup>

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. The population has since diminished, however, mostly due to emigration. Non-official estimates are that as many as 50,000 Azeris have left, permanently or temporarily, due to eco-



conomic difficulties and social conditions. Nevertheless, Azeri birthrates are still high. Districts with large Azeri populations—Gardabani, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Akhalkalaki, and Bogdanovka—have the highest birthrates in the country, and Azeri villagers there have particularly large families. Marriages between Azeris and other nationalities are extremely rare.<sup>72</sup>

In the late Gorbachev and early post-Soviet periods, Georgia's Azeris became politically active. An Azeri organization, Kairat, was established, which demanded greater autonomy for Azeri-majority regions. It soon lost its mobilizing potential, however, and today there is little evidence of Azeri nationalist or separatist sentiments. In general, Azeris show what might be called “indirect loyalty” to the Georgian state—that is, their attitude toward the national state depends mostly on the relationship between their “national homeland” (Azerbaijan) and their country of residence (Georgia).<sup>73</sup>

In Tbilisi, the 18,000-member Azeri community is split almost evenly between Shiites and Sunnis. Unlike during the nineteenth century, however, today 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.<sup>74</sup>

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 was soon closed and transformed into a warehouse, but it was reestablished in early 1990 and has been open for worship ever since.<sup>75</sup> 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. These so-called wandering mullahs 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, and the worship of saints (or holy persons) is widespread. One such place of pilgrimage is the tomb of the Sufi “saint” Isa Efendi, a native of Dagestan who died in the 1930s. The site, which is located in the village of Kabal, is visited not only by Sunni Azeris, but also Muslim Kists from Pankisi (see below) and by Shiite Azeris.

There is a particularly interesting intermixing of Sunni and Shiite practices and religious consciousness among Azeris in the Lagodekhi region of eastern Georgia. Azeri villages in the region, which include Kabal, Karadzhala, Gandzhala, and Uzuntala, have around 10,000 inhabitants. While the population of Kabal is Sunni, the others have Shiite majorities. The latter consider it their duty to perform religious ceremonies according to the Shafi’i *madzhab* (school of law): praying five times a day, the celebration of Qurban Bairam, the *mevlud*, performing the *zikr* (the Sufi ecstatic dance), and funeral ceremonies.<sup>76</sup> 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 as well as 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. But 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. For many Azeris, it is imperative that burials be performed according to religious strictures, which often include 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. In 1990, field research in Azeri villages indicated that only thirteen

percent of men and nine percent of women prayed five times a day.<sup>77</sup> Observing Ramadan is more common—about twenty percent of Azeris fast during the month. And virtually all celebrate Bairam, 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 practice the ritual of sacrifice (*qurban*).<sup>78</sup>

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 1990 field research considered Islam to be their nationality ("my nationality is Muslim").<sup>79</sup> 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.

## GEORGIA'S AVARS

Avars are native to Dagestan, where most continue to live today, but there is also a small population in eastern Georgia in the Kvareli district. An initial migration of Avars into Georgia took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, while a second occurred in the late 1950s. Most live in villages, and they maintain close contact with Avar villagers in Dagestan as well as with Avars in the Belakani and Zakatali districts of Azerbaijan.<sup>80</sup> Secondary schools in Avar villages in Georgia teach mostly in Russian, and as a result, most Avars do not speak or read Georgian.

Avars are Sunnis of the Shafi'i *madzhab*. They practice the *zikr* and *mevlud*; make frequent pilgrimages to holy sites (most sites are in Dagestan); observe *nikah* (*mahar* in Avar, or receipt of an official document of marriage signed by a mullah); and perform *qurban*. Avars also have a particularly powerful cult of saints. Religiosity is quite high among older Avars—some seventy to eighty percent, by our estimation, pray five times a day and fast for the full thirty days of Ramadan.

Avar villages typically contain unregistered mosques as well as cemetery chapels. In recent years, Avar mullahs have become more politically active in Avar communities. However,

as is typical of Northern Caucasus *muridism*, non-clerical elders are typically the most authoritative figures in village life, in particular in their role as adjudicators of private disputes.

## **THE MUSLIM KISTS OF PANKISI**

Georgia's Kists (or Vainakhs) live mostly in and around the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia's north-east. According to official data, there are 12,000 in Georgia currently, although non-official figures put the number at no more than 8,000. Of these, some 6,000 live in Pankisi. Unemployment and difficult economic conditions induced many younger Kists to immigrate to Russia during the 1970s and 1980s, but in the past decade the number of residents in the region has at least doubled due to an influx of refugees from Chechnya. Currently there are six Kist villages in Pankisi: Duisi, Dzibakhevi, Jokolo, Shua Khalatsani, Omalo, and Birkiani (the latter was at one time populated by Christian Georgians known as Tush). The first village to be settled was Duisi, which was originally named Pankisi (Pengiz in the Vainakh language), from which the region took its name. As is the case with Chechens and Ingush to the north, clans (*teipy*) are an important line of cleavage and identity for Kists. Nevertheless, the Pankisi Kists are currently divided loosely into two communities, which correspond with membership in one of two Sufi brotherhoods. Each community is present in each village, and each community is led by a separate elder. There is no evidence of tension between the two communities. The same, however, cannot be said of relations between them and adherents of "Wahhabism," whose numbers have increased in recent years.

The Kists are descendants of Chechens and Ingush (who call themselves collectively "Vainakhs") who migrated to the region from the north beginning in the 1830s.<sup>81</sup> One reason for the migration was economic hardship; another was a desire to escape the consequences of blood feuds. In addition, the leader of the highlanders in the North Caucasus War, Imam Shamil, strictly enforced Islamic law in areas under his control, which some Chechens and Ingush found oppressive. As a result, they fled to the south. Finally, some arrived from the neighboring Georgian district of Tianeti, where they had settled in the early nineteenth century.<sup>82</sup> They moved to

Pankisi because of a decision by tsarist authorities to concentrate all of Georgia's Kists in a single area. Villages formed quickly, and new village settlements were established as late as 1860. Other families moved into the area thereafter, but not in large enough numbers to justify new settlements.

After arriving in Georgia, most Kists quickly began acculturating, as suggested by the fact that many have added Georgian endings to their family names (e.g., "shvili," which means "son of" or "daughter of" in Georgian). Examples include Qavtarashvili (of Qavtar), Musashvili (of Musa), and Bakhashvili (of Bakha).<sup>83</sup>

Most of the original migrants were pagan, although there were also Christian elements in their practices. Since the early Middle Ages, Georgian Christian missionaries had been disseminating both Christianity and Georgian culture among the Vainakhs, and Christian faith helps explain the close ties between Vainakhs and Georgians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, during the reign of Catherine the Great, Russian imperial authorities began promoting the Christianization of the highlanders in the North Caucasus, using both financial incentives and political privileges to encourage conversion.<sup>85</sup>

Once in Georgia, the Kists were again pressured by state authorities to embrace Christianity—indeed to the point of coerced conversion in some instances. As a result, by 1866 most the villagers of Jokolo and Omalo had been Christianized. According to data from the Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus, between 1864 and 1910 there were numerous baptisms of Kists.<sup>86</sup> As a result, Islamic faith was less prevalent in Pankisi than among Chechens and Ingush in the North Caucasus.

Nevertheless, in 1902 local Muslims began to construct a mosque in the village of Duisi, using their own money to finance the project. The Russian imperial government refused, however, to register the mosque because of concerns about the political implications if recently converted Christian Kists returned to Islam. The mosque was closed after the October Revolution, and it would not be reopened until 1960. Still, Islamic faith strengthened among the Kists in the Soviet period, in part because of the successful proselytizing of "wandering" mullahs.

Thus, while considerable numbers of Kists became Christian over the years, most of those who did later reconverted to Islam. Even so, until around 1970 a considerable number of villagers in Jokolo, Omalo, and Birkiani were Christian. A Christian chapel was built in Omalo in the 1960s.<sup>87</sup> In the 1970s, many Christians in Jokolo and Omalo were Islamicized. As noted earlier, only Birkiani has a majority Christian population today. There is also a small community of Kists in Kakheti (a region of Georgia bordering on the Gorge), mainly in the city of Telavi. They consider themselves Georgian and Orthodox Christian.<sup>88</sup>

Like Chechens and Ingush, the religious practices of Kists are very 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.”<sup>89</sup> The same was true of the Chechens. As we have seen, many Chechens had been 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.<sup>90</sup>

Among Kists, as with Chechens and Ingush, the Nakshbandiya and Qadiriya Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqats*) are particularly well established. The Nakshbandiya *tariqat*, which originated in Bukhara under the inspiration of Sheikh Baha ud-din Nakshbandi (d. 1389), became widespread in the North Caucasus during the North Caucasus War in the nineteenth century. It did not arrive in Pankisi, however, until in 1909, when the above-mentioned Isa Efendi, who was a preacher from Azerbaijan, settled in the region. Isa Efendi was an adept (*pir*) of the Nakshbandiya order, and he managed to convince many locals to join the *tariqat*. As noted earlier, his tomb is located in the Azeri village of Kabal in eastern Georgia. Despite the fact that he was Azeri, and despite the fact that his tomb is in an Azeri-majority region, his burial site is a particularly holy shrine for the Kists.

The introduction of Qadiriya teachings to Pankisi came considerably earlier through the efforts of a shepherd, Kunt Hajji, who came from the village of Iliskhan in the Gudermes district

of Chechnya. In certain regions of Pankisi, Qadiriya doctrine has taken Kunt Hajji's name. Shamil, however, opposed Kunt Hajji's teaching practices and forbade Qadiriya ritual dances like the *zikr*, which led Kunt Hajji to move to Pankisi.<sup>91</sup> In 1927, another Sufi adept, Machig Mamaligashvili, who had spent several years in Ingushetia, helped spread the Qadiriya teachings of Kunt Hajji in Pankisi. The Duisi village mosque is currently controlled by followers of Kunt Hajji and the Qadiriya *tariqat*. The Nakshbandiya 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.

Like other highlanders of the North Caucasus, the religious practices of the Kists are enriched by pagan beliefs. Nakshbandiya and Qadiriya practices in Pankisi are, therefore, quite different from those of the Nakshbandiya and Qadiriya elsewhere. In addition, *Sharia* (Islamic law) in the region is intermixed with highlander customary law (*adat*), and if anything the latter tends to prevail over the former.<sup>92</sup> As a result, the practices and beliefs of Kists who belong to the two *tariqats* do not differ significantly. Members of both, for example, arrange rosaries in the shape of the number 99, a symbol of the divine names of Allah (the hundredth name of Allah is not known to anyone). In addition, while most Kists consider themselves to be Muslim, at least until recently many were largely indifferent to many Islamic teachings. Most would eat pork, drink alcohol, sacrifice animals near the ruins of Christian churches, give their children Christian names, marry Christians, and so on.

The religiosity of the Kists appears to have grown considerably in recent years, however. There is also evidence that Wahhabis are active in the region, although most do not appear to be Kists. Indeed, there are tensions between Wahhabis and believers who adhere to traditional highlander forms of Islamic worship. Again, Wahhabis consider many of the traditional practices of the latter to be anathema, while for many locals, Wahhabis are renegades who betray 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.<sup>93</sup>

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

As noted earlier, there has been a large influx of refugees from the Chechen conflict into Pankisi. Pankisi was home to a Vainakh population, and the refugees assumed they would find shelter among their ethnic kin. But Chechen resistance fighters as well as non-Chechen *ihadis* from different Muslim countries have also used the region for training and as a base from which to carry out operations against Russian federal forces. The region also fell under the influence of criminal clans—as in Chechnya, drug trafficking and kidnapping became key sources of income. Georgian internal military forces had neither the equipment nor the training to restore central writ in the region.

As a result, Pankisi has become the source of acute tensions 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 was viewed in Tbilisi as a striking violation of Georgian sovereignty. The US 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, some criminals were seized, and the region is apparently no longer be used by Chechen rebels or *ihadists*.

## CONCLUSION

There is a tradition of religious tolerance and eclecticism in Georgia that is the result of country’s particular history and experiences. Government officials in Tbilisi nevertheless worry that



outside influences, particularly Islamist ideology and the ongoing conflict in Chechnya, will lead to the politicization of Islam in the country, which could in turn further destabilize Georgia politically and even precipitate new rounds of internal violence. Fortunately, the government appears to be aware that a heavy-handed approach towards Georgia's Muslim minority would be entirely counterproductive. It is accordingly trying to preserve inter-confessional amity in the country.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In an effort to strengthen the Georgian national consciousness, the last part of the slogan was omitted after Ajaria was transferred to Russian imperial sovereignty and became part of Georgia in 1878. As discussed below, most Ajarians were Muslim.

<sup>2</sup> The practice of labeling virtually any form of politicized or radical Islam as “Wahhabi” goes back to the Soviet period. The term is eschewed by most radical or militant Muslims themselves.

<sup>3</sup> The supplement of a person’s name in the Islamic world, which indicates his origins or the place of his activities, and sometimes the profession of his ancestors.

<sup>4</sup> This is an Arabic pronunciation of the city’s name. It was the way the city’s name entered into the Russian language (Tiflis), and from there into West European languages. Tiflis was thus used as the official name of city until the beginning of the twentieth century when the traditional Georgian “Tbilisi” was re-appropriated.

<sup>5</sup> G. Japaridze, “The Emirate of Tbilisi,” *Islam. Encyclopedic Dictionary* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1999), 73.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph P. De Tournefort, *The Voyage in Oriental Countries*, translation into Georgian by M. Mgaloblishvili (Tbilisi, 1988), 64.

<sup>7</sup> G. Japaridze, “Introduction,” *Islam. Encyclopedic Dictionary* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1999), 6.

<sup>8</sup> See Mark Saroyan, *Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Edward W. Walker (Berkeley, CA: International and Area Studies, UC Berkeley, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> *National’nyi sostav naselniia SSSR: Perepis’ naseleniia* (Goskomstat SSR, Moscow, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> On the ethnic structure of the population of Georgia, see V. Jaoshvili, *The Population of Georgia* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> A. Frenkel, *Essays on Churuk-Su and Batumi* (in Russian), (Tiflis, 1879), 62.

<sup>12</sup> Z. Chichinadze, *History of the Georgian Muslims from former Ottoman’s Georgia* (in Georgian), (Batumi, 1911), 165.

<sup>13</sup> Z. Chichinadze, *Muslim Georgians and their Villages in Georgia* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1913), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, when Georgia became independent after the collapse of the USSR, the opposite occurred. In coastal regions Christianity quickly pushed aside Islam, but in mountainous areas of Ajaria Islam revived.

<sup>15</sup> V. Iashvili, *Ajaria Under the Ottomans* (in Georgian), (Batumi, 1948), 138.

<sup>16</sup> I. Datunashvili, “Religious Factors of the Creation of the Muhajir Movement in Caucasus,” in *History of the Near East Countries. New and Newest Period* (in Georgian), ed. O. Giginishvili, (Tbilisi, 1989), 14.

<sup>17</sup> See Sh. Megrelidze, *About the Past of Ajaria* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1964), 15–18.

<sup>18</sup> A. H. Abashidze, “Ajaria” in *History Diplomacy, International Law* (Moscow, 1998), 105.

<sup>19</sup> Porto-franco (duty-free trade) in Batumi had been cancelled in 1886 under the order of the Russian emperor.

<sup>20</sup> A. H. Abashidze, op. cit., 107.

<sup>21</sup> During the *muhajiroba*, some Muslim Abkhaz moved to Ajaria, which as noted earlier was then part of the Ottoman Empire. Among them were approximately 300 families who settled near Batumi. Of these, 146 chose to remain after Ajaria's incorporation into Russia (Sichinava, op. cit., 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 of those who remained, however, left after the Abkhaz conflict broke out in 1992.

<sup>22</sup> These figures are quoted in V. Sichinava, *From the History of Batumi* (in Georgian), (Batumi, 1958), 110.

<sup>23</sup> On emigration from Ajaria to Turkey, see I. Datunashvili, op. cit.; and I. Baramidze, "Muhajirism and the Problems Connected with Political Processes in South-West Georgia: Causes and Historical Aspects," in *Cultural and Historical-Ethnological Researches in Georgia*, vol. I (in Georgian), (Batumi, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> M. Svanidze, *Georgians in Turkey* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1996), 16.

<sup>25</sup> P. A. Andrews, *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden, Germany, 1989), 89.

<sup>26</sup> Ts. Batsashi, "About the Question of the Settlement of Georgians in Turkey" in *History of the Near East Countries: New and Newest Period* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1989), 19.

<sup>27</sup> Z. Chichinadze, *Muslim Georgians and their Villages in Georgia*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Acts 9* (in Russian), (Tiflis, 1884), 126.

<sup>29</sup> Z. Chichinadze, op. cit., 309.

<sup>30</sup> A. H. Abashidze, op. cit., 242.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> The "Jewish" autonomous area established in what had been Birobidzhan was an autonomous oblast, not an autonomous republic. Moreover, Soviet ethnographers claimed that the Jews were a separate ethno-linguistic community because many spoke Yiddish. The Muslims of Ajaria were Georgian speakers.

<sup>33</sup> See A. H. Abashidze, op. cit., 265. See Article I of the Kars Treaty between Turkey and Russia (3/16/1921) and Article VI of the Kars Friendship Treaty between Armenian SSR, Azerbaijan SSR, and Georgian SSR (10/13/1921).

<sup>34</sup> Archive of the State Committee of Ajaria, Fond I, Descr. 3, File 89, 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> 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.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Descr. 1, File 1256, 80. See also E. Meiring Mikadze, "L'islam en Adjarie: trajectoire historique et implications contemporaines," in *Cahiers d'études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien* 27 (January-June 1999).

<sup>38</sup> As Memed Abashidze put it, "... our identity is Georgian. We want to reestablish our national unity with Georgia. But we remain Muslims." (Abashidze, M. *Autobiography* [in Georgian], [Tbilisi, 1931].)

<sup>39</sup> 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.

- <sup>40</sup> Takhaishvili, E. *Muslim Georgia* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1991), 46.
- <sup>41</sup> Bakradze, D. *Archaeological Travel in Guria and Ajaria* (in Georgian), (Batumi, 1987), 72.
- <sup>42</sup> See J. Vashalomidze, “Images of Plants in Ajarian Folk Ornaments,” in *Everyday Life and Culture in Southwest Georgia*, vol. 4 (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1976).
- <sup>43</sup> While conducting field research in Ajaria in 2003, Sanikidze spoke with the mullah of a newly built mosque in a mountain village. The mullah showed him a place in the mountains where an aperture in the shape of a cross (hardly a traditional Islamic symbol) had been formed in the rock. The mullah then explained that the cross resulted from a landslide some years ago, and he proudly noted that the rock was situated between the villages of Diakvnisi (which means “village of the vicar”) and the village of Jvari (which means “cross”). Thus, both names, as well as the symbol, had Christian origins.
- <sup>44</sup> For a description of the activities of *Diyanet*, see E. Meiering Mikadze, op. cit., 41–42.
- <sup>45</sup> On the Meskhetian population in early modern times, see *Essays in the History of Georgia*, vol. 4 (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1973); M. Svanidze, *Essays on the Georgian-Ottoman Relations* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1990); Idem., *From the History of Relations between Georgia and Ottoman Empire in 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> c.* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1971).
- <sup>46</sup> B. Vakhushti, *Description of the Georgian Kingdom* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1973), 660–661, 672.
- <sup>47</sup> V. Lortkipanidze, *Samtskhe-Javakhetia, Problems of Demographical Development in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> c.* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1994), 23.
- <sup>48</sup> *First General Census of the Population of the Russian Empire of 1897*, vols. 5, 19, The Province of Tiflis (in Russian), (St. Petersburg, 1905), 77–80.
- <sup>49</sup> Catholic missionaries succeeded in converting some of the Meskhetian Georgian population in the early modern period.
- <sup>50</sup> The difficulty of establishing religious affiliation and ethnicity is suggested by the fact that the records of the Statistical Committee of Tbilisi province on local populations have only a question mark across from Akhaltiskhe *mazra* (*mazra* is the Georgian word for a region or district in the Russian Empire). See also B. Totadze, *Demographical Portrait of Georgia* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1993), 163.
- <sup>51</sup> S. Makalatia, *Meskhetia-Javakhetia* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1938), 67.
- <sup>52</sup> M. Gnolidze-Swanson, “Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church among the Muslim Natives of Caucasus in Imperial Russia,” *Caucasus and Central Asia Newsletter* 4 (Summer 2003): 13.
- <sup>53</sup> R. Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia: Space, Society, Politics* (London, 1995), 92.
- <sup>54</sup> P. Karam, *Allah apres Lenin. La revanche de l’Islam dans L’Ex-empire russe* (Paris, 1996), 254.
- <sup>55</sup> See for example: N. Gelashvili, “Muslim Meskhetians - Painful Problem Remains Unsolved” (in Georgian) *7 dre* (May 9–13, 1993).
- <sup>56</sup> *Meskhetian Turks, Solutions and Human Security* (New York: The Open Society Institute, 1998), 43–45.
- <sup>57</sup> “Ethnic-Confessional Groups and Challenges to Civic Integration in Georgia, Azeri, Javakheti Armenian and Muslim Meskhetian Communities,” ed. G. Nodia (Tbilisi: Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy, and Development, 2002) 54–55.
- <sup>58</sup> By different estimation their number varies from 90,000 to 300,000. See R. Gachechiladze, op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> About Iranian Georgians see Z. Sharashenidze, “Gurjs of Feridun” (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1979); G. Chipashvili, *Georgians of Feridun* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1990); Idem., *Georgian Population of Iran* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1990); G. Gotsiridze, *Marriage among Georgians of Feridun* (Tbilisi, 1987).

<sup>60</sup> See *Essays on History of Abkhazian ASSR*, vol. 1, ed. G. A. Dzidzaria (in Russian), (Sokhumi, 1960), 118–119.

<sup>61</sup> See G. A. Dzidzaria, *Muhajirisme and Problems of History of Abkhazia of 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (in Russian), (Sokhumi, 1975).

<sup>62</sup> About the activities of this Society see M. Gnolidze-Swanson, op. cit., 9–20 ; and A. Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Montreal, 2003). Jersild stresses that Russians, Georgians, and many others emphasized the foreign, non-indigenous, and therefore illegitimate character of Islam (in the Northern Caucasus). The provocative notion of “restoration” was part of the name of the missionary society founded in 1860. (42)

<sup>63</sup> A. Platonov, *Survey of Activity of the Society for Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus, 1860–1910* (Tiflis, 1910), 170–174. Quoted in M. Gnolidze-Swanson, op. cit., 13.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in A. Krilov, “Traditional Institutes of Abkhazes: Past and Present” in *Identity and Conflict in Post-Soviet Countries* (in Russian), (Moscow, 1997), 194.

<sup>65</sup> V. Jaoshvili, op. cit., 293.

<sup>66</sup> About the settlement of nomads of Turkish origin in Georgia, see V. Gabashvili, *Feudal System of Georgia in 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1967).

<sup>67</sup> See R. Suleimanov, *Vestiges of the Islamic Religion in Georgia* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1973), 39.

<sup>68</sup> I. Anchabadze and N. Volkova, *Ancient Tbilisi: City and Citizens in 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (in Russian), (Moscow, 1990), 248.

<sup>69</sup> At the same time, however, the Turks were wooing Turkic-speaking peoples in Georgia by propagating pan-Turkish and pan-Islamic ideas. A pan-Islamic party, Mudafie, was created in 1907 in Tbilisi. (*Documents about Russian Politics in Transcaucasia*, vol. I [in Russian], [Baku, 1920], 54–55.)

<sup>70</sup> A variety of Sufism, which originated in northern Azerbaijan and spread from there to the North Caucasus. The distinguishing elements of Muridism are asceticism, self-sacrifice, and a strict hierarchy in relations between a master or adept (*murshid*) and his disciple (*murid*). A militarized form of *muridism* served as the ideological basis of the *immamat* established by Shamil (1841–1859) in the North Caucasus during the long struggle against Russian imperial forces.

<sup>71</sup> Central Archive of Georgia, Fund 14, Descr. 1, File 2884, 24.

<sup>72</sup> For example, by 1989 the natural increase among the Georgians was 7.6 percent, while for Azeris it was 22.8 percent.

<sup>73</sup> Op.cit., 11.

<sup>74</sup> 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.

<sup>75</sup> 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.

<sup>76</sup> There are four main legal branches of Sunni Islam: Shafi'i (which is traditionally more accepting of Sufism), Hanafi'i, Hanbali'i, and Maliki'i.

<sup>77</sup> G. Sanikidze, *Islam and the Muslims in Georgia Nowadays* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1999), 40.

<sup>78</sup> 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 state 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.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> It must be noted that the Zakatali district of Azerbaijan is partially settled by Muslim Georgians—Ingilos.

<sup>81</sup> "Vainakh" is the common name for Chechens and Ingush.

<sup>82</sup> L. Margoshvili, "About the Question of the Emigration of Kists on the Territory of Georgia," in *Georgian-North Caucasian Relations* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1978), 121.

<sup>83</sup> Margoshvili, L., op. cit., 61.

<sup>84</sup> Sh. Kurtsikidze and V. Chikovani, "Georgia's Pankisi Gorge: An Ethnographic Survey" (Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series, Spring 2002), 26.

<sup>85</sup> P. Butkov, *Materials for the New History of Caucasus*, vol. I (in Russian), (1869), 267–273

<sup>86</sup> *Survey of Activity of the Society for Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus, 1860–1910* (Tiflis, 1910), 85.

<sup>87</sup> L. Margoshvili, *Customs of the Pankisi Kists and Modernity* (in Georgian), (Tbilisi, 1985), 45.

<sup>88</sup> See N. Von Twickel, "Die Kisten—georgische Patrioten" in *Mitteilungsblatt der Berliner Georgischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 1 (1997), 56.

<sup>89</sup> S. Bronevski, *Newest Geographical and Historical Notices about Caucasia*, vol. 2 (in Russian), (Moscow, 1824), 43.

<sup>90</sup> U. Laudaev, "Chechen Tribe," in *Collection of Notices about Caucasian Highlanders* (in Russian), (Tiflis, 1872), 27.

<sup>91</sup> For Vainakhs of Northern Caucasus, the term *dziarat* means reverence of a sacred place, and *dzikar*, execution of religious ritual. Among the Pankisi Kists, the term *dzikar* means singing, and *dziarat*, execution of religious ritual. (L. Margoshvili, op. cit., 214.)

<sup>92</sup> The importance of *adat* is suggested by the fact that there are cases where Kists who had served out their prison sentences returned to their homes only to be put on trial again and punished in accordance with *adat*.

<sup>93</sup> Sh. Kurtsikidze and V. Chikovani, op. cit., 26.

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