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George SANIKIDZE

## *Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Caucasian Region: “Global” and “Local” Islam in the Pankisi Gorge*

In recent years, the Pankisi Gorge, a small mountainous region of Georgia, has been under constant attention from the international community. Such an interest has been conditioned by a number of factors, including instability in the North Caucasus and war in Chechnya (resulting in a flow of refugees from Chechnya who have settled in the Pankisi villages), propagation of radical form of Islam by emissaries from Middle Eastern countries, the Gorge's inclusion in the global network of Islamic terrorism, the problem of drugs trafficking, and other problems. The Pankisi Gorge has a reputation of lawlessness and has long been a source of tension in Georgian-Russian relations. At the same time, the United States actively supports Georgian government in their efforts to resolve the problem of the Gorge.

My principal goal is to show the role and the place of religion in the Gorge and discuss the following questions: why and how has the situation changed in the Gorge since “the religious revivalism” in the post-Soviet space first emerged after the collapse of the former USSR and the wars in Chechnya. I will show that unlike Chechnya and Dagestan, until recently, Islam was never a “factor of unification and consolidation” in the Pankisi community. The present situation in the North Caucasus, where the imported, “pure Islam” or so-called “Wahhabism” con-

fronts with traditional Islam of the highlanders, to a certain degree resembles the period of Shamil's imamate in the nineteenth century when he tried to unify North Caucasian peoples on the basis of Islam (or rather a local version of it, even though purified from pagan beliefs and based on Shari'a). It is clear that an absolutely new reality, one that has no connection with the past and is not only a reflection of events taking place in the North Caucasus, but also that of global developments, is presently developing in the Gorge. To understand this reality, it is useful to compare "global" and "local" forms of Islam in the Gorge and outline possible causes of opposition between these two.

About eight miles long and two and a half miles wide, the Pankisi Gorge is located just south of the Georgian-Chechen border in the Georgian district of Akhmeta. Georgia's Kists (local name of descendants of Chechens and Ingush in Georgia), who constitute a part of the Vainakh people, live mostly in and around the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia's north-east. According to official data, there are 12,000 Kists residing in Georgia presently, 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.

According to statistical figures from 1989 (the most recent official census of population in Georgia), the Kists represented 43 percent of total population in the Pankisi Gorge; Georgians accounted for 29 percent and Ossetians, 28 percent. However, the ethno-demographical situation has changed significantly since the early 1990s. As a result of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, sections of the Ossetian population immigrated to the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic of the Russian Federation. Moreover, after the influx of refugees from Chechnya, who now have settled in the Pankisi villages, the Vainakhs became the largest ethnic group in the Gorge.

Currently there are six villages in Pankisi populated by Kists: Duisi, Dzibakhevi, Jokolo, Shua Khalatsani, Omalo, and Birkiani (the last one was formerly populated by Christian Georgians known as Tush). The first village established 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 (*teips*) are an important line of cleavage and identity. Nevertheless, the Pankisi Kists are currently divided loosely into two communities, corresponding to their belonging to one of the two Sufi brotherhoods. Both communities are present in each village and are headed by separate elders. There is no tension present between these two communities, but this is not true of their relations with adherents of so-called “Wahhabism,” whose number has increased considerably in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

## **The History of the Kists and Their Religious Beliefs**

To understand the current situation, it is necessary to begin with the consideration of the causes of emigration of the Kists from Chechnya, the history of Kist population of the Gorge<sup>2</sup>, as well as the peculiarities of their religious beliefs.

The Kists of Georgia are descendants of Chechens and Ingush (who call themselves collectively “Vainakhs”) who migrated to the region from the north beginning in the 1830s. One reason for the migration was economic hardship; another was a desire to escape the consequences of blood feuds. A third—the tradition of *bayatalvaakkhar* was another cause.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the leader of the highlanders in the North Caucasus

1 More details concerning the “Wahhabism” will come later in the essay.

2 About the history of the Kist population in the Pankisi Gorge see Kh. Khangoshvili, *K'istebi* [The Kists] (Tbilisi, 2005); Shorena Kurtsikidze and Vakhtang Chikovani, *Georgia's Pankisi Gorge: An Ethnographic Survey* (Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, Working Paper Series, 2002); L. Margoshvili, “K'istebis gadmosakhlebis sakit'khisat'vis Sak'art'velos teritoriaze” [About the Question of the Emigration of Kists on the Territory of Georgia], in *K'art'ul-ch'rdilokaokasiuri urt'iert'obebe* [Georgian-North Caucasian Relations] (Tbilisi, 1981); G. Sanikidze, *Islami da musulmebi t'anamedrove Sak'art'veloshi* [Islam and Muslims in Georgia Today] (Tbilisi, 1999); Nikolaus von Twickel, “Die Kisten georgische Patrioten,” *Mitteilungsblatt der Berliner Georgischen Gesellschaft*, e. V. 56 (1997); S. K. Chkhenkeli, “K voprosu o pereselenii chechentsev v Pankisskoe ushchel'e,” in *Materialy po istorii Gruzii i Kavkaza*, 3rd ed. (Tbilisi, 1973); L. Sharashidze, “Kisty: antropologicheskie zapiski,” in *Trudy Instituta eksperimental'noi morfologii* (Tbilisi, 1962).

3 *Bayatalvaakkhar* is the Vainakh custom according to which all members of a tribe shared pastures equally. If any member of the tribe exceeded a certain level of wealth, i.e., owned

War, Imam Shamil, strictly enforced Islamic observance in areas under his control, which some Chechens and Ingush<sup>4</sup> found oppressive and as a result fled south. Finally, some arrived from the neighboring Georgian district of Tianeti,<sup>5</sup> where they settled in the early nineteenth century. The repeated emigration of Vainakhs was conditioned by the decision of the central administration of the Russian Empire to settle all Vainakhs together in Georgia. Village settlement took place quickly and continued until the end of 1860. Other families moved into the area in the following years, although not in large enough numbers to justify new settlements.

After arriving in Georgia, most Kists adapted and quickly began acculturating, as suggested by the fact that many added Georgian endings to their family names (e.g., “shvili,” which means “son of” or “daughter of” in Georgian). Examples of Kist family names include Qavtarashvili (of Qavtar), Musashvili (of Musa), and Bakhshvili (of Bakha).<sup>6</sup>

Most of the original migrants were pagan, although there were also elements of Christianity in their practices. Since the early Middle Ages, Georgian Christian missionaries had disseminated both Christianity and Georgian culture among the Vainakhs, and Christian faith was the most important factor explaining the close ties between Vainakhs and Georgians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Beginning with Cath-

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more than a certain number of cattle or sheep, or other livestock, the elders of the village would gather and make a decision to confiscate the excess property from the owner and distribute it among the other members of the society. See Kurtsikidze and Chikovani, *Georgia's Pankisi Gorge*, p. 7; L. Margoshvili, *Pankiseli k'istebis ch'veulebebi, tradits'iebi da qoveldghiuri ts'khovreba* [Customs, Traditions and Contemporary Life of the Kists of Pankisi], (Tbilisi, 1985), pp. 30–31.

4 It must be said that even during Shamil's repression, “in Ingushetia... the population was nominally Muslim with continued strong attachment to polytheist practices.” Firouzeh Mostahari, “Colonial Dilemmas: Russian Policies in the Muslim Caucasus,” in Robert P. Geraci and Michael Khodarkovsky, eds., *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 249.

5 Margoshvili, “K'istebis gadmosakhlebis sakit'khisat'vis,” p. 121.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

7 Kurtsikidze and Chikovani, *Georgia's Pankisi Gorge*, p. 26. About the propagation of Christianity among Vainakhs during the Middle Ages see M. A. L. Comneno, “Le Caucase et l'Islam (VIIIe–XVIIIe siècle),” *Caucasia: The Journal of Caucasian Studies* (Tbilisi) 1 (1998), pp. 109–116; L. Margoshvili, *Kul'turnye i etnicheskie vzaimootnosheniia mezhdru Gruziei i Chencheno-Ingushetiei* (Tbilisi, 1990); A. R. Shikhsaidov, *Islam v srednevekovom Dagestane* (Ma-

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erine the Great, Russian imperial authorities also began actively promoting the Christianization of the highlanders in the North Caucasus, using both financial incentives and political privileges to encourage conversion.<sup>8</sup> Once in Georgia, the Kists were again pressured by state authorities to embrace Christianity – indeed in some cases to the point of coerced conversion.<sup>9</sup>

The propagation of Orthodox Christianity and Georgian culture among the Kists is associated with the activities of the Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> By the initiative and the support of the Society, a St. George church was constructed in Jokolo and several elementary schools in the Kist villages opened. Georgian was the language of religious service and instruction in the schools. In 1866, by the decision of religious authorities in Georgia, a mass baptism of pagan and Muslim Kists took place. All of these factors resulted in most of the villagers in Jokolo and Omalo being Christianized by 1866. 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>11</sup> As a result, Islamic faith was less prevalent in Pankisi than among Chechens and Ingush in the North Caucasus.

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khachkala, 1969); S. Umarov, "Nekotorye osobennosti etnizatsii raznykh khristianskikh kul'tov v Chechne i Ingushetii," in *Arkheologiia i voprosy etnicheskoi istorii Severnogo Kavkaza* (Grozny, 1979), pp. 125–131.

8 P. Butkov, *Materialy po novoi istorii Kavkaza*, vol. 1 (Tbilisi, 1869), pp. 267–273

9 The Cristianization of Caucasian highlanders was often superficial. One report delivered to General Ivan Paskevich, administrator in chief of the Caucasus (1827–1831), openly admitted that there were no differences between the baptized and nonbaptized highlanders. Baptized highlanders continued to abide by their polytheistic customs and were Christian in little more than name. See V. N. Ivanenko, *Grazhdanskoe upravlenie Zakaokaz'em ot prisoedineniia Gruzii do namestnichestva velikogo kniazia Mikhaila Nikolaevicha* (Tiflis, 1901), pp. 196–198.

10 See *Obzor deiatel'nosti obshchestva vosstanovleniia pravoslavnogo khristianstva na Kavkaze, 1860–1910* (Tiflis, 1910); see also: Manana Gnolidze-Swanson, "Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church among the Muslim Natives of Caucasus in Imperial Russia," *Caucasus and Central Asian Newsletter* (University of California, Berkeley) 4 (2003); Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

11 *Obzor deiatel'nosti obshchestva*, p. 85.

Nevertheless, in 1902 local Muslims began construction of 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 they were concerned about the political implications if recently converted Christian Kists began reconverting to Islam. The village of Duisi, both historically and presently, was considered an Islamic center of the Kists. According to M. Albutashvili, Orthodox priest of Kistin origin,<sup>12</sup> the founders of Duisi were Muslim fanatics.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, he wrote, despite their Muslim faith, many Kists observed Christian rites, which was the religion of their ancestors.<sup>14</sup>

It must also be noted that there were no traces of Muridism<sup>15</sup> among the Kists,<sup>16</sup> which means that in difference of Chechnya and Dagestan, the Kists had nothing to do with Shamil's Caucasian Islamic Umma and the process of the introduction of "pure Islam" (or "common Islam")

12 Mate Albutashvili was himself a Kist from Pankisi. After graduating from the Tbilisi Theological (Orthodox Christian) seminary in 1893, Albutashvili worked as a priest in the St. George Church of the village of Joqolo in Pankisi. Until 1921, he was also director of the nearby elementary religious school established by the Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus in 1866. Albutashvili knew the life of the Pankisi Kists extremely well. He was passionate about his work and made great efforts to raise their level of education. Like Georgian publicists of the latter half of the nineteenth century who gathered around newspapers such as *Iberia* and *Droeba*, Albutashvili became interested in collecting folklore and ethnographic materials. He published several dozen letters in *Iberia* between 1901 and 1904, and in 1898, wrote *A Description of the Pankisi Gorge*, a detailed historical and ethnographic survey of the region. About activities of M. Albutashvili see Kurtsikidze and Chikovani, *Georgia's Pankisi Gorge*, p. 13; G. and N. Javakhishvili, "Shesavali [Introduction]," in M. Albutashvili, *Pankisis kheoba* [The Gorge of Pankisi, Historical-ethnographical and Geographical Description], ed. with introduction and commentaries by G. and N. Javakhishvili (Tbilisi, 2005).

13 Albutashvili, *Pankisis kheoba*, p. 118.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

15 A variety of Sufism, which spread in North Azerbaijan and from there to the North Caucasus, Muridism is based on the asceticism and the spirit of self-sacrifice. Strictly hierarchical relations between Master (*murshid*) and disciple (*murid*) have particular importance. The militarized form of muridism was ideological and organizational base of the Imamate of Shamil (1841–1859) in the North Caucasus. About Muridism in the North Caucasus see, for example: Z. D. Muradiev, *Severokavkazskii miuridizm: istoki i sovremennost'* (Leningrad, 1989); N. I. Pokrovskii, *Kavkazskie voiny i imamat Shamilia* (Moscow, 2000); N. A. Smirnov, *Miuridizm na Kavkaze* (Moscow, 1963).

16 Albutashvili, *Pankisis kheoba*, p.160.

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into the North Caucasian region.

After the October Revolution, the mosque of Duisi was closed, and it would not be reopened until 1960. Still, the position of Islam strengthened among the Kists in the Soviet period, in part because “wandering” mullahs continued to proselytize and managed to persuade many to convert to Islam, a process that continued into the 1970s.

In sum, over the years considerable numbers of Kists became Christian, but most of those who did later reconverted to Islam. Even so, until around 1970, a considerable part of the villagers of Jokolo, Omalo, and Birkiani were Christian, and a Christian chapel was built in Omalo in the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> In the 1970s, however, many Christians in Jokolo and Omalo returned to the Islam faith. 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, who consider themselves Georgians and Orthodox Christians.<sup>18</sup>

After settling in the Pankisi deserted villages, the Kists, unlike other peoples of the Caucasus (among them, the Azeris or Ossetians), preserved local toponyms. However, they pronounced those toponyms with the Vainakh phonetic peculiarities (for example Omalo is pronounced as Uamal, Dzibakhevi becomes Dzibakhie, and Khadori is Khoodur). In very rare exceptions did the Kists invent their own toponyms, which happened only in the cases that they established new, by then uninhabited places (as in the case of Duisi, which was named after its founder, Dui).<sup>19</sup>

There was a kind of bicultural consciousness among the Kists: on the one hand, they had always belonged to a common Vainakh culture (by organization of society, system of beliefs, rites, and common homeland); on the other, the influence of the Georgian culture (language, elements of Orthodox Christianity, and rites) had always been apparent among the Kist communities.

Like Chechens and Ingush, the religious practices of Kists are eclectic. As one authority has observed: “The Ingush were Christians in the past. After the weakening of Christianity in the region, they revived their pa-

17 L. Margoshvili, *Pankisel k'istt'a tses-ch'veulebebi da t'anamedroveoba* [Customs of the Pankisi Kists and Modernity] (Tbilisi, 1985), p. 45.

18 See Twickel, “Die Kisten.”

19 See Margoshvili, *Pankisel k'istt'a tses-ch'veulebebi*, pp. 93–95.

gan 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>20</sup> Another author concluded: “As we have seen, many Chechens were Christians (*kheristanash*) before embracing Islam in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and they incorporated not only pagan but also Christian traditions into their Islamic practices.”<sup>21</sup> There was no tension between Georgians, Osetians and Kists over religion. In Pankisi, religious differences never prevented these communities from maintaining common sacred places and following common rites and traditions.<sup>22</sup> Even today old Muslim Kists visit Christian holy places. “These places protect our country; how we can ignore them? . . . We sacrifice animals and switch candles for them” said a Kistian elderly.

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

## Sufi Orders in the Pankisi Gorge

Among Kists, as with Chechens and Ingush, the Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya Sufi<sup>23</sup> brotherhoods (*tariqats*)<sup>24</sup> are well established. The

20 S. Bronevskii, *Noveishie geograficheskie i istoricheskie svedeniia o Kavkaze*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1843), p. 43.

21 U. Laudaev, “Chechenskoe plemia,” in *Sbornik svedenii o kavkazskikh gortsakh* (Tiflis, 1872), p. 27.

22 About interethnic relations in the Pankisi Gorge see V. Shubitidze, “Usap’rt’kheoba da etnikuri kulturis adaptats’iis dzala akhal sots’ialur-kulturul garemoshi” [Security and Force of Adaptation of the Ethnic Culture in a New Social-Cultural Environment], in L. Melikishvili, ed., *Pankisis kheoba* [The Pankisi Gorge] (Tbilisi, 2002), p. 92.

23 Sufism, a corpus of techniques concerning the “journeying” of a mystic adept toward God, appeared in the first centuries of Islam. In the beginning, it was a purely individual



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Naqshbandiya *tariqat*, which originated in Bukhara under the inspiration of Sheikh Baha' al-Din Naqshband (d. 1389), became widespread in the North Caucasus during the nineteenth century North Caucasus War.<sup>25</sup> In an unusual historical reverse, the Sufi orders in the Caucasus, far from waning, practically absorbed official Islam. Nearly all the "Arabists" [who knew Arabic language—G.S.] and *ulama* of Dagestan and Chechnya were members of a *tariqat*, and they identified themselves with the national resistance against Russian pressure.<sup>26</sup>

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experience based on the personal relationship between the disciple, or *murid*, and his master, variously called *sheikh*, *murshid*, *pir*, *ustad*, or *ishan*. The master alone was responsible for the progress of the student along the path, or *tariqat*, to God. For centuries, Sufis assumed the role of defenders of the faith, and Sufism swelled into a popular mass movement of organized brotherhoods of adepts, who were grouped around a master and bound by compulsory rules that regimented every aspect of their life. In the North Caucasus and in those areas where Russian conquest was met by massive popular resistance, Sufi brotherhoods played the primary role in inspiring, organizing and leading the resistance. Sufi activities in these areas were similar to that elsewhere in the world at around the same time: in North Africa against the French, in Java against the Dutch, in Punjab against the Sikhs and the British, and in Xinjiang against the Chinese. "Partly as a result of its role in popular resistance, Sufism in these regions never acquired the same élitist character as it did elsewhere. Rather, it preserved and extended its popular roots." Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (London: Hurst, 1985), p. 4.

24 About Sufi brotherhoods in the North Caucasus see V. Akaev, *Sheikh Kunta-Hadzhi: zhizn' i doktrina* (Grozny, 1994); Alexandre Bennigsen, "The Qādiriyyah (Kunta Ḥājji) *Tariqah* in the North-East Caucasus: 1850–1987," *Islamic Culture* 62, no. 2–3 (1988), pp. 63–78; Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars*; Paul B. Henze, "Fire and Sword in the Caucasus: The 19th Century Resistance of the North Caucasian Mountaineers," *Central Asian Survey* 2, no. 1 (1983), pp. 5–44; Paul B. Henze, *Islam in the North Caucasus: The Example of Chechnya* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1995); Chantal Lemerrier-Quellejey, "Sufi Brotherhoods in the USSR: A Historical Survey," *Central Asian Survey* 2, no. 4 (1983); Anna Zelkina, *In Quest for God and Freedom: The Sufi Response to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus* (London: Hurst, 2000).

25 The Naqshbandiya is considered the most important of all Sufi brotherhoods. Naqshbandi groups exist all over the Muslim world, from Morocco to Indonesia and from China to East Africa.

26 Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars*, p. 21. It must be added that "between 1877 and the 1917 Revolution, almost all of the adult population of Checheno-Ingushetia belonged either to the Naqshbandiya or to the Qadiriya *tariqat*." A. A. Salamov, "Pravda o sviatykh mestakh v Checheno-Ingushetii," *Trudy Checheno-Ingushskogo nauchno-issledovatel'skogo instituta pri Sovete Ministrov Checheno-Ingushskoi ASSR* 9 (1964), p. 162.

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

The introduction of Qadiriya<sup>27</sup> teachings in Pankisi came considerably earlier through the efforts of a shepherd, Kunta Hajji, who came from the village of Iliskhan in the Gudermes district of Chechnya. In certain regions of Pankisi, Qadiriya doctrine had taken Kunta Hajji's name. Shamil, however, opposed Kunta Hajji's religious practices and forbade Qadiriya ritual dances like the *zikr* (or *dzikar*),<sup>28</sup> which led Kunta Hajji to leave the North Caucasus. In 1927, another Sufi adept, Machig Mamaligashvili, who had spent several years in Ingushetia, helped spread the Qadiriya teachings of Kunta Hajji in the Pankisi region. The Duisi village mosque is currently controlled by followers of Kunta Hajji and the Qadiriya *tariqat*. Members of the Naqshbandiya *tariqat* in the village gather every Friday (women during the first half of the day, men in the evenings) in a room where Isa Efendi lived until 1920.

During the Soviet period, in Pankisi, as in the other Muslim regions of the Soviet Union, the role of so-called "parallel" Islam increased consid-

27 The Qadiriya was founded in Baghdad by 'Abd al-Qadir al-Ghilani (circa 1166) and is by prestige and influence the second most important of the Sufi orders.

28 The *zikr* ceremony consists of the regular recitation of litanies founded on the Qur'an, fixed phrases repeated in the mind or aloud in ritual order accompanied by a complicated technique of posture, breathing control, and in some cases rhythmical movements. The silent (or "inner" or "mental" *zikr*), is directed and controlled by a sheikh. It is traditionally practiced by the Naqshbandis. Soviet authors sometimes use the terms "Sheptunyy" (whisperers)—meaning Naqshbandis, who practice a silent *zikr*—and "Priguny" (jumpers)—referring to the Qadiris, whose *zikr* involves considerable physical movement. Also "for Vainakhs of the North 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." See L. Margoshvili, "Religiuri gadmonash'ebi pankisel k'istebshi [Religious Vestiges among Pankisi Kists]," *Matsne, Istorii, ark'eologii, et'nografiisa da khelovnebis istoriis seria* [Bulletin of History, Archaeology, Ethnology and Art History] 2 (1978), p. 214.

erably. The terms “parallel” or “out of mosque” Islam (“fundamentalist” and “integrist” were never used) encompassed a large spectrum of trends, currents, and movements represented by various conservative believers, who were united only by their desire to preserve the religious basis of their society and to maintain some elements of their specific Muslim way of life.

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

It is important to emphasize that the religious practices of the Kists are still enriched by pagan beliefs, and that Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya practices in Pankisi are therefore quite different from those of the Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya elsewhere. In addition, *sharia* (Islamic law) in the region is intermixed with highlander customary law (*adat*), and the latter tends to prevail over the former.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the practices and beliefs of Kists who belong to the two *tariqats* do not differ significantly.<sup>30</sup> Members of both, for example, arrange rosaries in shape of the number 99, a symbol of the divine names of Allah (the hundredth name of Allah is not known to anyone). Moreover, while most Kists consider themselves Muslim, at least until recently many were largely indifferent

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

30 On the contrary, in the North Caucasus, Naqshbandis and Qadiris have strictly different profiles.

to certain Islamic teachings. Most would eat pork, drink alcohol, sacrifice animals near the ruins of Christian churches, give their children Christian names, as well as marry Christians.

### **“Wahhabis” and “Traditionalists” in the Pankisi Gorge**

The religious fervor of the Kists appears to have grown considerably in recent years. In addition, there is evidence that Wahhabis are active in the region, although most do not appear to be Kists. Indeed, there are tensions between Wahhabis and those believers who adhere to traditional highlander forms of Islamic worship. Wahhabis call themselves the followers of pure Islam and oppose all practices not sanctioned by the Qur’an. They look at Sufi Islam as a deviation from the original Islamic rules. Wahhabis consider many of these traditional practices anathema, while for many locals, it is the Wahhabis themselves who are renegades betraying the faith of their Kist ancestors. It is not surprising, therefore, that there was considerable local opposition to the effort of Wahhabis to establish a *sharia* court in Duisi—for most locals, the court was an unwelcome and alien innovation.<sup>31</sup>

It must be noted that the term “Wahhabism” in the post-Soviet territories, including Georgia, is used in a large sense for designation of different kinds of politicized Islam and extremist Islamic movements. Many researchers distinguish different streams in the Islamic movements and choose for them names that are more concrete: salafites,<sup>32</sup> adherents of a “pure” Islam, jihadists or simply terrorists. In recent years Wahhabism has become a common term by which most of the contemporary Islamic movements whose principal goal is the restoration of “the Ideal Society of the Primitive Islam,” or *status quo ante*, is designated.

Wahhabism is occasionally the own name of religious groups (especially of Chechnya and Dagestan), but more often this name is given to

31 Kurtsikidze and Chikovani, *Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge*, p. 26.

32 Many scholars prefer to use the term *al-Salafiya* for the designation of so-called “Wahhabi groups.” At the same time, “citizens of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia called themselves not Wahhabis, but *Salafiyuns*.” O. P. Bibikova, “Vakhkhabism v SNG,” in G. V. Mironova, ed., *Islam i politika* (Moscow, 2001), p. 91.

different religious groups by their political opponents (in the post-Soviet territories, for example, the case of Central Asia).<sup>33</sup>

Officially, the history of Wahhabism in the post-Soviet era begins in 1989, when “pure Islam” was first preached in Dagestan.<sup>34</sup> The Wahhabis’ influence became stronger in Chechnya after the Russian military campaigns in the republic. Many years of war impoverished and destabilized Chechen society, and the Wahhabis used this situation to their advantage.

In the Pankisi Gorge Wahhabis first appeared in the spring of 1997. It was at that time that a cross was taken away from the Church of Duisi.<sup>35</sup> Many newly converted Chechen Wahhabis arrived in Pankisi Gorge with the status of refugees and attempted to convert young Kists by preaching about “pure Islam.” In pursuance of this goal, numerous citizens of Arab countries and Turkey, financed by various Islamic organizations, settled in the Kist villages and began their activities.

The attitude towards Wahhabis among the Vainakhs is controversial. Most Chechen refugees and some Kists (especially younger ones) support them. Wahhabis control humanitarian aid distributions of the “Jamaat” society, which, according to the local Kists, are funded by Arab countries. One of their followers (a Chechen refugee) even said: “It would be better if Red Cross, the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations gave the Wahhabis a right to distribute their aid supplies. We are sure that they would distribute it fairly.”<sup>36</sup>

33 See G. V. Miloslavskii, “Vakhkhabism v ideologii i politike musul'manskikh stran (k evolutsii vozrozhdencheskogo techeniia v islame),” in Mironova, *Islam i politika*, pp. 70–85. Some scholars find parallels between Naqshbandiyya and Wahhabi ideology. The rigorous doctrine and the rejection of various Sufi practices is common for them. As a Russian Orientalist G. V. Miloslavskii noted: “For example, Official clerics in the Central Asian countries often accuse Naqshbandis of being Wahhabis. Mullahs of “parallel Islam,” including so called Wahhabi groups, are sheikhs or murids of this [Naqshbandi] tariqat.” Miloslavskii, “Vakhkhabism v ideologii,” p. 76.

34 Amri Shikhsaidov, “Islam v Dagestane,” *Tsentral'naia Azia i Kavkaz* 4 (1999).

35 G. Chikovani, “Dasakhlebis struk'turuli ts'vliilebi, konp'lik'turi situats'iebi da mat'i regulats'iis tradits'iuli mek'anizmebi” [Structural Changes of Settlement, Conflict Situation and Traditional Mechanisms of their Regulation], in Melikishvili, *Pankisis kheoba*, p. 123.

36 L. Khutsishvili, “Religiuri reorientats'iis problemebi polietnikur sazogadoebashi” [Problems of the Religious Re-orientation in the Polyethnic Community], in Melikishvili,

Nevertheless, most Kists (especially the elders) are against Wahhabis. For example, according to the one of them:

We have the religion of our ancestors; Wahhabis say that we are blind and they are only people who follow the true Islamic tradition. They are like Jehovah witnesses among you [Georgians—G.S.]. Chechens are also against them, but during the war, while they all were in difficult situation, Wahhabis gave them some money. Khattab<sup>37</sup> was their chief. They corrupted our youngsters. If one prays by their faith, they give one dollars. We believe that praying for money is unacceptable. Many young people who went from Duisi to Arab states were sent by Wahhabis. They want to convert young people who can use guns. They wear different clothes than we do. They have no respect for elders and are disloyal to our traditions.<sup>38</sup>

Another Kist elderly adds: "Our faith is Islam that we got from our ancestors. Khattab imported his faith during the first Chechen war. There is an Arab who has bought a house in Duisi. He converted around twenty youngsters. They don't respect our traditions. They allow marriage between relatives (which is prohibited by *adat*). We are against them and we are even ready to shed some blood."<sup>39</sup>

Wahhabis deny the role of the teacher, which for the Sufi is very important. They also deny the cult of the saints and pilgrimages to the saint shrines that are widespread among the followers of Sufi Islam. Among Kists and in general in the North Caucasus, the ritual of condolences is widespread. "When someone dies, there is a [particular] condolence ritual followed by the relatives [of the deceased] and by the entire village. But the Wahhabis think it is enough to bury a deceased person. They [think] it is useless to follow the [condolence] ritual. The inner link with God, typical for the Sufi followers, is denied by the Wahhabis."<sup>40</sup>

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*Pankisis kheoba*, p. 167.

<sup>37</sup> Amir Ibn al-Khattab, citizen of Jordan (according to some sources—of Saudi Arabia), perhaps of Circassian origin, was one of the most prominent figure of the Chechen resistance. He was considered a leader of "Wahhabis." Khattab was killed by Russian federal military forces in 2002.

<sup>38</sup> From conversations of author with local population during his visit in the Pankisi Gorge in June, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Caucasian Region*

Many Kist parents try to subdue their youngsters and force them to cut their beards (having a beard is considered a sign of Wahhabi). Many claim that Wahhabis pay young people \$100–150 every month to secure their support. The elders say: “This is no religion, because they pay money to buy souls.”<sup>41</sup> Among the members of “Jamaat,” there are also some Chechens. Most of the members are young. Wahhabis attempt to convert Georgians as well (by paying \$100 to men and \$50 to women for entering and praying in the mosque).<sup>42</sup>

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

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

Opened in 2000, the gleaming mosque at Duisi appears to have stolen the thunder of the old mosque. Situated on Pankisi’s main road, it has been called a “Wahhabi” mosque. It was built by the Chechens, but financed by a sheikh from Saudi Arabia, who learnt of the existence of the Muslim minority in Pankisi as the result of a Kist’s pilgrimage to Mecca. In addition to this mosque, “Jamaat” attempted to buy a land plot in the center of Duisi in order to construct another mosque. However, local administration, under pressure from the townspeople, denied permission.

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

Despite the differences in religion, there were not any political problems with the Kists until the beginning of the 1990s. However, since December 1994, when war broke out between Chechen resistance fighters

41 L. Khutsishvili, “Religiuri reorientats’iis,” p. 167.

42 Ibid.

and the Russian central government, Pankisi has witnessed an influx of refugees from Chechnya. Among them were many families of the Pankisi Kists, who after the disintegration of the Soviet Union left for Chechnya. The tide of refugees picked up considerably after the collapse of the 1995 Russian-Chechen cease-fire agreement and the new round of violence that broke out in late 1999. Between September and December 1999, refugees began pouring into Chechnya's southern highland areas from northern parts of the republic, particularly Grozny, Urus-Martan, Achkhoy-Martan, Sernovodsk, and Samashki. When Russian military aircraft began bombing the villages of the Itum-Kale region, where the refugees were hoping to find shelter, the Chechen refugees started moving south once again, this time along the Argun Canyon where they used snow-covered cattle tracks to cross the Russian-Georgian border. They headed for the village of Shatili in Georgia's Khevsureti province, and from there proceeded to the Pankisi Gorge. There, local Kists ended up sheltering some 85 percent of the refugees.<sup>43</sup>

The inflow of refugees in 1999 and 2000 aggravated an already difficult economic and social environment in the Pankisi region. In particular, crime worsened: drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and kidnappings became commonplace. Over the recent years, however, a considerable part of the refugees has left the Gorge. Today, only 2600 people have the official status as refugees in Pankisi villages. Georgian internal military forces had neither the equipment nor the training to restore central authority in the region. During the late 1990s and the early 2000s, Chechens were using the Georgian area of the Pankisi valley as a fall back base for their war inside Chechnya. Training recruits and medical aid were all possible because the Georgian government was not able to control the area.

As a result, Pankisi has become a source of acute tension between Russia and Georgia over the past several years. The Russian military wanted to enter Georgian territory to destroy the resistance fighters and their training camps, a move that would have been viewed in Tbilisi as a clear violation of Georgian sovereignty. The US government wished to

43 Doctors Without Borders / Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), "Interviews with Chechen Refugees in Georgia," December 1999 [[http://www.amina.com/article/int\\_wrefug.html](http://www.amina.com/article/int_wrefug.html) (valid as of January 29, 2007)].



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see the Pankisi crisis resolved peacefully, and as a result Washington financed a "Train and Equip Program" for Georgian counter-terrorism forces. These counter-terrorism forces eventually carried out what appears to have been a largely successful operation to restore order in the region. Many kidnapped individuals were freed, a number of criminals were arrested, and the region is apparently no longer being used by Chechen rebels or *jihadists*.<sup>44</sup>

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

According to the Russian specialist of Caucasian Islam, Aleksei Malashenko, "Islamic radicals constitute a minority in the Dagestani and Chechen populations, but they form a rather consolidated and organized force and, what is more, receive support from abroad, mainly from several international Muslim organizations, as well as from the Caucasian diaspora living in the Middle East that sympathizes with their struggle."<sup>45</sup> The situation that existed in the Pankisi Gorge years ago reflected this statement. In November 2002, Philip Remler, the former US Charge d'Affaires in Tbilisi, told a Georgian weekly, *Akhali Versia*, that the United States had obtained information that a few dozen al-Qaida fighters after fleeing Afghanistan had found refuge in the Pankisi Gorge.<sup>46</sup> After a counter-terrorist operation, Georgia extradited fifteen Islamist fighters to the United States, who were then conveyed to Guantanamo.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the problem remains and as confirmation of such, one may quote statements of US officials concerning the hypothetical presence of al-Qaida members in the Gorge even in 2005.

44 George Sanikidze and Edward W. Walker, *Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia* (Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, Working Paper Series, 2004), p. 30.

45 A. Malashenko, *Islamskie orientiry Severnogo Kavkaza* (Moscow, 2001), p. 166.

46 *Akhali Versia*, December 1, 2002.

47 *Washington Post*, January 2, 2002.

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## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the situation in this small region of Georgia reflects developments occurring not only in the post-Soviet space, but also in the world as a whole. Today, as one of the results of the globalization process, the efforts of different Islamic movements (both radical and more moderate) to create, by using different means, a new Islamic unity based on their own interpretation of religion, conflicts with local, traditional forms of Islam, which as these Islamic movements see it, does not correspond to the spirit of "pure Islam." Global radical Islam has become one of the main sources of instability in today's globalized world. This concerns Pankisi Gorge as well, as it also can be considered a party to a global political game.