

Ethnic Georgian Muslims: A Comparison of Highland and Lowland Villages

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Abstract

This article examines the differences among Muslim communities in highland and lowland areas of Adjara. The Muslims of the highland area tend to be more devout, while those in the lowland are more heavily influenced by the nearby urban culture of Batumi. Residents of the highland areas tend to have more free time to engage in religious activities, and often see religious educational institutions as a way to earn a living, while those in the lowland areas are more focused on secular education and careers.

Varieties of Muslims in Georgia

In an everyday discourse, Muslims living in Georgia are considered to be bearers of a homogeneous ethno-cultural and behavioral tradition. However, Muslims who live in Adjara are ethnic Georgians and they differ in their traditions from Muslims living in other parts of Georgia. There are even differences among the ethnic Georgian Muslims living in Adjara: depending on where they live and how close their homes and villages are to urban areas, a variety of local differences and peculiarities in the belief systems arise.

This article examines key aspects of the history, life and culture of ethnic Georgian Muslims using two ethnic Georgian Muslim communities in Adjara as case studies. These two communities—Ghorjomi and Khelvachauri—differ from each other not only in their locations, but also in their traditions and belief systems. Ghorjomi is a village in the high mountainous district of Khulo in Adjara, where Islam and its religious traditions are strongly preserved. Khelvachauri (comprised of the town of Khelvachauri and its adjacent villages) is a community in lowland Adjara close to the city of Batumi. Proximity to this urban area affects the attitudes and beliefs of the local inhabitants.

A Long History

To understand recent tendencies and differences among the Muslims in Adjara, it is important to briefly describe the evolution of Islam in this Georgian region. Islam spread to Adjara during the Ottoman Empire's occupation from 1552–1563 through 1878. Initially, the nobles were converted to Islam under the influence of various socio-economic and political factors. Islam then spread relatively slowly through the lower levels of society. The process of Islamization gathered momentum from the 18th century, when believers began to establish mosques in the region. An intense period of building mosques throughout Adjara started from the beginning of the 19th century.

From 1878, Adjara reunited with Georgia within the Russian Empire. One of the factors that hindered the consolidation of the Russian Tsarist regime in the Caucasus was religion. In this period, a significant num-

ber of mosques were built in Adjara. From 1921, when Georgia was occupied by the Soviets, until the strengthening of the Soviet government in the country during the 1930s, the Muslim spiritual organization along with religious schools and mosques continued to function. In the early Soviet period, the anti-religious campaign, which was gathering strength throughout the country, met with some resistance from the population. However, during the 1930s, the Soviet regime managed to wipe out the Muslim spiritual organization, forbid the performance of religious rituals and started to solidify observance of new Soviet traditions and rules. In parallel, at the “request of people,” the Soviet regime closed down spiritual institutions and buildings. From that time forward, they were used for economic purposes. During the 1940s, the Soviet government allowed the reconstruction of the mosque in Batumi. This was done in order to demonstrate to foreigners visiting that port town that the Soviet regime was tolerant of religion. Religious life across a variety of faiths revived from the end of the 1980s. In this period, many religious buildings were reconsecrated. The reconstruction and revitalization of religious life proceeded differently across communities. Most recently, many Turkish organizations have been active in financing mosques and religious education in Adjara.

The construction of the central mosque in Ghorjomi took place after the number of worshipers in the community grew. Local residents believed that building a large, ornate and distinctive mosque brought honor to the community. The inhabitants of this and adjacent villages built the mosque in Ghorjomi in 1900–1902. For a long time, it played a significant social and religious function. During Soviet rule, the mosque was closed down at “the request of the people.” The minaret was demolished and the building at various times was used as a club, a warehouse and finally, again at “the request of the people,” it was turned into a museum. In the 1990s, it resumed functioning as a mosque. Since then, several additional mosques have been built in the community.

The history of the Khelvachauri mosque is hard to reconstruct because during the Soviet era, the building

was used for a variety of purposes. What is known is that the mosque was built during the intense period of construction of Batumi mosques (1863–1866) at the initiative and with the participation of local nobles taking into account the interests and requests of worshippers. Other references to the history of the mosque have been lost over time. Under Communist rule, the building was used as a military installation, an office, a shop and a club. The building steadily lost any sign that it had once been a mosque. During the 1990s, religious services were restored and during the 2000s, renovations restored the building's appearance as a mosque.

Differences in the Two Communities

To better understand the different evolutions of the two Muslim communities, it is useful to briefly describe the two communities in which they are embedded. Both communities are comprised of several villages, but Ghorjomi is populated mostly by Muslims of Georgian ethnicity; whereas people of different nationalities and religions and families from various parts of Georgia live in Khelvachauri. The local inhabitants in Ghorjomi have limited contacts with the nearby town, due to the difficult terrain and the great distance involved. On the other hand, Khelvachauri does not have these problems; it is close to Batumi and the road is in good shape.

Locals in Ghorjomi mainly depend on semi-nomadic cattle breeding for their livelihoods. Such a lifestyle is dictated by the difficult climate and limited land resources, which also influence family incomes in the community. Living in Ghorjomi requires hard physical labor. Trade only has an supplementary significance. Neighbors and family play an important role in day-to-day life and problems are predominantly solved with the help of relatives and friends. The community is populated mainly by one ethno-religious group and endogamous marriages are commonplace. It could be said that “public opinion” in Ghorjomi is determined by the influence of respected individuals in the community, including spiritual leaders and local officials. Cultural life in the villages is mainly limited to religious, traditional and national celebrations. There is little diversity since everyone has the same background.

Such traditional economic activity does not play a major role in lowland Adjara. Here, the main income of the local population consists of salaries, pensions and other means. The life strategies of the local inhabitants are oriented towards receiving an education and finding a job. Family and neighborhood connections are insignificant and problems are resolved through formal mechanisms (legal and governmental institutions). Informal institutions also exist (respected public figures, widely-held beliefs), but mainly the mass media influences the

formation of public opinion. Khelvachauri is heavily influenced by the city of Batumi's cultural life and religious celebrations are not widespread here.

Differing Institutions

Religious education is one of the most important instruments for the development of religious institutions. The strong interest among the inhabitants of Ghorjomi to participate in religious services is driving increased demand for religious education. Moreover, such education has secured jobs and income for the local youth. Children become familiar with religious rites and rituals from an early age, especially during fasts and celebrations. Receiving a religious education is now common in the Ghorjomi community, where from the 1990s the majority of the male inhabitants received basic religious training. Since 2000, however, when the majority of the population had already received religious education, the number of pupils at religious schools gradually decreased. There are also boarding schools for more advanced levels, financed mainly by financial contributions received from Turkey. These schools fully cover the living expenses of the enrolled students; this is why demand is always high to enroll in these schools. Students there receive training for religious careers. After graduating from these schools, the students are sent to complete their education overseas, where they also acquire necessary social skills.

In Khelvachauri, a number of factors hinders the functioning of such Muslim spiritual institutions. Recently, a school opened at the mosque, but the majority of the students are not local residents. Local inhabitants in Khelvachauri have only a superficial or poor knowledge of religious rites and rituals. When there is a need, they are forced to invite and to pay religious clergy or other experienced people. Usually, such services are expensive. In Ghorjomi, people consider it a matter of honor and gratitude to perform religious services voluntarily and free of charge.

The operation of religious institutions requires relevant financial and material resources. Religious contributions in Adjara are completely voluntary and the residents of the region are in no way obliged to donate. The main sources of income for the clergy are charitable donations from the parish, payments for performing religious rituals, gifts from local and foreign philanthropists (usually from Turkey), sums offered by state institutions to rebuild religious buildings, income received during various religious celebrations and the religious tax. The more religious the person, the more obligations he takes to support the community's spiritual leaders, the mosque and the religious schools. For example, in Ghorjomi, community members are charged an unofficial tax called “vezife” or “shepherd of Jama” collected by the mejlis (assembly) of the mosque. Part of its income,

the mosque receives from contributions during religious celebrations and another part is donated in the form of charitable contributions. In lowland Adjara, there are no religious taxes at all. The main income of the mosque here is the cattle skin donated by worshipers during the Kurban-Bairam celebration. Recently, though donations to the Khelvachauri mosque have also increased and the Adjarian Muftiat supports it.

These days, mosques in Adjara have acquired not only religious significance, but also play an important social function. In Ghorjomi for example, the mosque represents a place where middle-aged and elderly men gather regularly to discuss problems of the community, and socio-economic and political developments in the country. Periodically, politicians also use mosques as political tribunes. In Khelvachauri, the mosque does not have such strong social functions. The parish is small and the role of the mosque in political processes is insignificant.

A minaret is a distinctive architectural feature of the mosque, from where the worshipers are called to prayer (Azaan). In Adjara, minarets are built mainly in the highland, although recently minarets have also appeared in the lowland. The minaret in Ghorjomi is used not only for calling to prayer, but also for disseminating important news within the community (for instance, news about a death and the day and time of a funeral). In Khelvachauri, construction of the minaret was accompanied by a whole range of problems and even provoked protests by the local residents. The local community was unhappy about the noise and the loud reading of Azaan or its poor performance. In some cases, protests led to a variety of incidents and sporadic violence. As a result, now Azaan is only recited in a relatively low voice during religious celebrations.

The worshipers usually are middle-aged or elderly men striving to perform all religious services and meet all requirements. The reason for such active religious and spiritual life lies in the copious amounts of free time that the local inhabitants have. At the same time, it is common in Adjara to start an active religious life after one reaches middle age. In some cases, we see former free spirits turning into very pious individuals. Some members of the community do not understand this transformation and such changes among their relatives and friends provokes their anger. The youth devotes itself to an active religious life only in highland Adjara. In Khelvachauri and in the lowland, young people are less interested in Islam.

Women are also a part of a parish. They mainly pray in the inner gallery of the mosque or in a place divided from the main prayer hall with a curtain. In general, women

pray at the mosques only during periods of fasting. During this time, they attend night prayers. In Ghorjomi, women go more often to the mosque, which is not the case in Khelvachauri. In Ghorjomi, women usually pray at home or make sure that conditions for performing religious services are met. There are several women's groups in the region that are well-trained in performing different religious services. In Khelvachauri, women less actively participate in the religious services and if they take part, it is only in their homes. In Ghorjomi, a woman's place in society is clearly determined, whereas in Khelvachauri gender roles are less well defined.

There are two groups of Muslim religious clerics in Adjara. The traditionalists usually are men past middle age, who received their religious education in the Soviet period. Usually, Soviet atheist propaganda, restrictions and repressions have deeply influenced their views and beliefs. These individuals received additional education and training only after Georgia's independence. The second group is the young generation, which has received the basic, as well as special religious education. It is equipped with the theoretical and practical knowledge that is highly popular and influential among worshipers. The majority of these young people are against preserving the folklore-type Islam of their fathers. Most of these young people reside in highland Adjara and preach there. It should be noted that in recent years they are also very actively working in the lowland villages.

Despite the fact that religious education is widespread, the majority of the religious clerics do not possess relevant theological knowledge. As a result, these religious leaders limit themselves to performing the religious rituals necessary for the village (weddings, funerals, prayer sessions). Very often, religious figures in the villages perform various functions at the same time (as a muezzin, cashier, guard etc). The bigger mosques employ several people to fulfill these different functions.

Often, the religious leaders participate in resolving community problems. For instance, in Ghorjomi, the local Imams are invited to work out agricultural or family disputes. In Khelvachauri, religious rituals are observed less frequently and religious leaders are preoccupied mainly with prayers, the performance of religious rituals, and participating in religious celebrations (mainly Mawlid).

Such is religious, everyday and cultural life in two Georgian communities where Muslims of Georgian ethnicity reside. The picture of these two communities, with only small deviations and variations, can be generalized to the majority of the populations in the highland and lowland districts of Adjara.

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