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Religious Brotherhoods in Chechnya
Their Relevance for the Chechen Conflict

Yavus Z. Akhmadov
Stephen R. Bowers
Marion T. Doss, Jr.
Valeria Ciobanu

2000

Maps of Chechnya

How this study was prepared

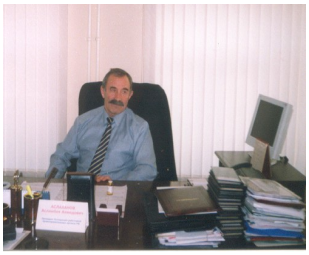
In 1997, Professors Stephen R. Bowers and Marion T. Doss, Jr., began an effort to promote the systematic study of the problems of political violence. The result of their initiative was the creation in 1998 of the William R. Nelson Institute for Public Affairs, a research and service institute that functioned on the campus until 2005 when it was transformed into the Center for Security and Science.

Valeria Ciobanu at the Caucasus Forum

As part of an effort to advance studies of the former Soviet Union, Bowers and Doss established a Moldova branch of their organization in February, 2000. The operating philosophy governing the opening of the Moldova office was that such a base would enable us to involve local scholars in our research, thus producing internationally based studies that would reflect both the U.S. and the non-U.S. perspectives. The first action of Valeria Ciobanu, the Director of the Moldova office, was to contact individuals who were involved the FSU's historic transition in a scholarly capacity. Our early efforts enabled us to develop working relationships with academics and professionals in Moldova, Moscow, Kazakhstan, and the Caucasus region.

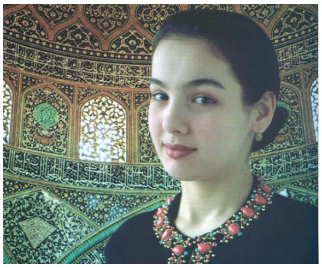
Valeria Ciobanu meeting with Chechen refugees

Development of this study of the Chechen Sufi brotherhoods demonstrates our ability to consult a wide range of scholars whose primary insights represent a unique combination of perspectives. The primary authors are specialists based in Russia, Moldova and the United States (James Madison University. Their work is complemented by other individuals residing in the former USSR.



Aslambek Aslahanov

Work on this document began in March when Valeria Ciobanu traveled to Moscow and Kazakhstan in order to meet with people directly involved in studies of religious brotherhoods in Chechnya. The next month, at the invitation of the Caucasus Forum, Ms. Ciobanu participated in a conference in Kislovodsk, Russia, that brought together representatives of 53 organizations interested in a variety of north Caucasus issues.



Laila Timurkayeva

Most notable among those individuals who provided assistance to us in the preparation of this study were Aslambek Aslahanov, President of the Chechen Association, Laila Timurkayeva, of the Russian Legal Workers Association, petroleum engineer Albert Avduev, and several members of the Chechen diaspora in the former USSR. The analysis that follows Professor Akhmadov's paper is, to a great extent, a result of their collective contributions.

The Chechens

In the introduction to her study "Who Are the Chechen?", Johanna Nichols explains that the term "Chechen" is a Russian ethnonym, based on the name of a village, Chechen-aul, rather than the name used by these people to describe themselves. Rather than "Chechen", they call themselves either as "Nokhchi" or, more frequently in recent years, as "Vainah," a term best translated as "my nation, my people." Like their neighbors, the Ingush were also given their name by the Russians. They were named after the village of Angusht. The Ingush refer to themselves as the Ghalghay, They took this name from an association of three major families which shared the common surname Ghalghay. The Chechens are the largest North Caucasian group and the second largest Caucasian group after the Georgians. Although most Chechens are literate in Russian, at least 97% of them claim Chechen as their first language. [i]

[i] Johanna Nichols, "Who Are the Chechen?", Linguist List, http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/63/077.htm , pp. 1-2. Nichols, pp. 3-5.

The Chechen people have occupied their north Caucasian homeland for several millennia prior to the Russian arrival. Their society was characterized by no social or class distinctions and the only meaningful categories of rank were based on age, kinship and social honor. And although they had no formal governmental structures, they saw themselves an independent nation with their own language and territory.

Since the Russian entry into the region, the Chechens have suffered deportations, the suppression of linguistic and religious structures, and the attempt to destroy their culture through programs of Sovietization. The Russian-Chechen relationship has been characterized by partnership, periodic explosions of nationalism, violent military clashes, brutal suppression, and economic desolation.

Major Russian-Chechen Wars

For over six millennia, Chechens have lived in and defended their North Caucasian homeland against the inroads of successive invaders, including Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Buddhists, Turks and Russians. Converted to Islam at about the same time as the Russian conquest (from the late 1500s to mid-1800s), the Chechens have waged successive wars against the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Republic, first to avoid conquest and then to achieve independence. The following table illustrates the relentless nature of this ongoing, intermittent warfare.

Synopsis of the Russian-Chechen conflicts

Period	Chechen Leader(s)	Sufi Order Involved	Result
Late 1700s	Sheik Mansur Ushurma	Naqshbandi	Russians defeated in 1785 battle of Sunzha River
1824-1859	Series of Imams, best known is Sheik Imam Shamil	Naqshbandi	Short-lived Islamic state
1864-1865, 1877, 1879, 1890s	Various followers of the Chechen Ghandi, Qadiri Sheik Kunta Hadji Kishiev	Qadiri along with Naqshbandi	Contested Russian rule through WWI
1917-1925	Sheik Uzun Hadji, et al Sheik Ali Mitaev	Naqshbandi Qadiri	Uprising suppressed in 1925
1929-1936			Soviet purge of Sufi adepts continues until eve of WWII
1940, 1943	Hassan Izrailov		Entire nation deported to Siberia in 194, returned to Chechnya in 1957. New Sufi brotherhood Vis Hadji or Vakhab formed during exile
1990	President Jhokhar Dudaev	Quasi-Qadirist	Struggle for independence 1992-1994, mobilization
1994-1996	President Jhokhar Dudaev	Quasi-Qadirist	War with Russia and de facto independence
1999-2000	President Aslan Maskhadov Shamil Basaev	? Vakhab	Current war begun by Vakhab Islamic conservatives also known as Chechen Fighters

What Is Sufism and Why Is It Important?

In their book *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union*, Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush argue that Sufism is an important aspect of Islam throughout the world and is becoming increasingly important in what was the USSR when they wrote their book. In that study, they provide an introduction to Sufism, analyze the structure of Sufi brotherhoods, describe the recruitment of adepts, and examine the make-up of the brotherhoods and the inner life of those associations [ii].

[ii] Alexandre Benningsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985, pp. 1-2.

More recent studies have indicated that the revival of interest in Chechen culture has been accompanied by a conversion to the Sunni branch of Islam. Most adhere to the Sufi form of Islam and join together in brotherhoods of 10 to 40 disciples (or disciples). They believe that practitioners of the faith can achieve a mystical union with God through the *zikr*, a ceremony that consists of a recitation of prayers that may be accompanied by vigorous dancing that will induce an ecstatic state. Islam did not replace traditional Chechen culture but became a part of it, thus preserving the identity of the Chechen nation [iii].

Chechen Zikr

[iii] Edward Kline, "Chechnya After the War", *ASF New Documents*, http://www.wdn.com/asf/cgi/ ASF, October, 1998, accessed on May 1, 2000.

Sufism is significant because it is a popular rallying point and, to the external world, it is not obvious who is or is not a member of these clandestine brotherhoods. Sufism gives its adherents an organizational basis that is somewhat like that of the early communist party during its revolutionary stage of development. Sufism is the predominant form of Islam in Chechnya.

During the Soviet era, authorities worked to control the formal religious structures seen as necessary for the practice and persistence of Islam. Consequently, there was an "official Islam," supported by the state but maintained at a clearly inadequate level of support. While Soviet officials believed that this condition would lead to a deterioration of Islamic religious life, the real impact was the nurturing of a system of "parallel Islam" totally beyond the reach of state control. This parallel system supported the de facto expansion of Islam during a time of anti-Islamic policy [iv].

[iv] Bennigsen and Wimbush, pp. 85-86.

Kunta Hadji

There are twenty-seven religious movements operating in Chechnya today. Kunta Hadji is one of the most important of these and is associated with the Qadiriya brotherhood, generally regarded as the second most important of the Soviet-era brotherhoods. As Professor Y. Z. Akhmadov explains, the Kunta Hadji movement is the most significant form of Sufism in Chechnya.

Soviet and Czarist efforts to suppress this movement were intense. One consequence of the suppression of the Kunta Hadji movement is that no official portraits of Kunta Hadji exist. Professor Akhmadov recounts a meeting that he had in Elishan-Jurt, the village in which Kunta Hadji was born. The local murid said that during his prayers, he had a vision of Kunta Hadji. Later, someone showed him a picture and, based on the vision from his prayers, he declared that it was the founder of this movement. Efforts to find an artistic conception of what Kunta Hadji looked like have been very difficult. It is apparent that no such photograph or portrait can be found anywhere in Chechnya or the surrounding region. Based on what initially appeared to be a promising lead, our contacts conducted a search in Uzbekistan but, to date, have failed to locate the Sufi saint's picture.

KUNTA-HADJI AND THE KUNTA-HADJISTS

The Kunta-Hadji Chechen Religious Movement

Y.Z. AKHMADOV
Chechen Academy of Sciences

In Chechnya's long history of national-liberation movements and wars, an important role was played by events connected with the name of the Sheik Kunta-Hadji. His name and the movement linked to it acquired special relevance in the 1990's, when a new attempt to politicize this religious brotherhood took place. For many people, Kunta-Hadji became the "Chechen Gandhi."

No fearsome Chechen warrior such as Mansur, Ghazi-Mohammed, Shamil, or even the legendary brave men Baibullat Taimiev, Bdysangur Benoyevski, *et cetera* has been able to exercise such powerful influence on the spiritual life of the Chechen people as this modest peasant-worker, "miska" (man of God not of this world). The name of the Sheik is so holy that people considered it a "taboo." In Chechnya, people call him "The Sheik from Eliskhan-Yurt", "Son of Kisha", or simply "Hadji". He is considered to have reached a "hidden state of existence" and the details surrounding his death are not believed.

Throughout its existence, the atheist Soviet regime conducted a fierce ideological war against the "Son of Kisha" and his followers. Despite great effort, the Soviets lost this war; the name of the Sheik is still being worshipped by the people of Chechnya, and the number of his followers has grown up to this day. Currently, the number of active murids[1] (adepts) in the Islamic brotherhood (Order) of the "Sheik from Eliskhan-Yurt", who actively practice the dictates of the Order amounts to some 20 to 25 thousand in Chechnya. However, the total number of those who accept the Order (i.e. recognize the Sheik as their ustaz[2], although without performing active duties) numbers several hundred thousand followers.

Consequently, the Order of the Son of Kisha is the largest, most influential, and, most importantly, the most dynamic, fastest growing organization in the contemporary Chechen Republic. This allows us to conclude that the phenomenon of the famous mid-19th century Chechen Sheik has not yet been exhausted.

The “Hadji movement,” in both its political and religious contexts, essentially has not been studied. While writing this article, I used facts published by representatives of the Czarist administration—A. Ippolitov and

[1] Muridism – the most militant movement in Islam. Murids were obliged to follow blindly the orders of sheikhs and imams. The extreme expression of muridism is the idea of “gazavat” – the war against “non-believers.”

[2] “Ustaz” – religious teacher

G. A. Vertepov, and carefully reviewed works of authors of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, such as H. D. Oshayev, A. A. Salamov, A. D. Yandarov, V. H. Akayev, and M. M. Moustafinov. It is important to note the role of the latter author, whose doctoral dissertation on the Order of Kunta-Hadji and its followers has been particularly helpful. The monographic work on Kunta-Hadji has been compiled by V.H. Akayev.

From sources related to the above-mentioned movement, we could name documents found in various archives in Caucasian cities, particularly Grozny, Vladikavkaz, Tbilisi, Makhachkala, as well as publications of preachings of the "Son of Kisha" undertaken before the Soviet revolution in the Daghestani town of Temirkhak-Shura. I have personally gathered a small field material—local stories, legends, including video and audio recordings.

There are also materials on the topic by several American and British researchers—G. C. Lemercier-Quelquege, A. Benningsen, G. E. von Grunebaum, and G. C. Trimmingham, all of whom have written on various Sufi movements in the Caucasus and the USSR.

It is necessary to caveat this research with the following important explanation. The author finds it impossible to characterize here the entire complicated world of Sufi teachings, the intricacies of various currents and theological interpretations, or to explain the phenomenon of "Sheikdoms" in Chechnya. For that purpose, a different author should be sought, and most likely such material would be geared towards a different audience. I would dare to generalize by saying that nearly all contemporary researchers are educated in the spirit of rationalistic knowledge; the religious cognition has its own world, its own values, its own universe. In order to understand it, one needs to accept the dogma of miracles, admit that the laws of nature are subject to change. We limit our goals to describing the course of events from the outside perspective of this movement, and not from the inside.

Therefore, according to our data, Kunta was born by the end of the first third of the 19th century[3], in the family of a Chechen named Kisha from the village Melchi-Khi (Istee-Sou). Kisha's family belonged to the clan of Gukhoy, one of the 120 Chechen clans. This comparably small family drew its roots from the Andic society of Daghestan, as well as from the eastern part of Chechnya and Ichkeria. According to data from informative sources, when the then future Sheik turned 7, his parents moved to a relatively small village of Eliskhan-Yurt on the river Michik, which subsequently gave name to the entire Chechen society (Michigonic).

The story goes that even prior to the birth of the future saint, various unusual phenomena took place, which were keenly observed by his mother Khedi. And indeed, since early childhood the boy attracted attention due to

[3] By the time he was captured in 1864, Kunta-Hadji was 35-40 years old.

his extraordinary natural wisdom, his ability to read people's minds, and his ability to see into the future. At the same time, he was unable to receive a rigorous religious education, although there are sources indicating that he could recite the entire Koran by age 12. Establishing a family, the future Sheik was primarily engaged in agricultural work and raising bees. His wife was, according to certain sources, the daughter of a famous Chechen warlord—Baibullat Taimiev ("the terror of Caucasus" in the words of the renowned Russian poet A.S.Pushkin, who apparently was acquainted with him), who reportedly died in the early 1830's. This fact suggests the importance of the "Son of Kisha" in the society, despite his poverty. His physical disability, along with his keen mind, deep religious zeal, and exceptional gift of prophecy drew him to the teachings of Sufism, which had already been circulating throughout the North Caucasus for some centuries. It is known he first learned of Sufism sometime during the fourth decade of the 19th century from a famous Nahib and Sheik Tashu-Hadji of the Naqshband religious current. Tashu-Hadji, just like Shamil[4] himself, had been an apprentice of Mohammed Yara, a popular preacher of the so-called "Caucasian Muridism," which demanded of its followers to approach God not only in prayer, but also on the battlefield as warriors against the "non-faithful". It is quite probable that Kunta had met other Naqshband Sheiks from Chechnya, such as Umalat-Hadji and Ghezn-Hadji, especially in the period of the Caucasus war[5].

Imam Shamil

[4] Imam Shamil (1797-1871)-religious and secular leader of imamate; considered to be a legendary hero of the Chechens and some other ethnic groups in the Caucasus

[5] The Caucasus War (1817-1864) resulted in the conquest of Caucasus by Russia

In the meantime, the Caucasus war, which had begun yet in 1817, was close to an end. The Imamate of Shamil[6] was showing signs of weakness, after 25 years of resistance against Russia, a great world power at the time[7]. This weakness had to do not only with external circumstances. The problem also stemmed from the fact that the Imamate government itself had become a burden for the mountaineers, who were unaccustomed with the discipline of law; permanent military incursions, high taxes, and ever increasing duties had exhausted the population. Despair and opposition were starting to gain momentum in the Imamate.

[6] Imamate – theocratic in its ideology and feudal in its political and social structure, this state existed in the North-Eastern Caucasus. Shamil created an Imamate in the territory of Chechnya and Daghestan in the 1840s for struggle against Russia. Disintegrated in 1859.

[7] More detailed – in the journal “Vainakh segodnya”, N-2(4) 1997

Under these extreme circumstances, the "Son of Kisha," approaching the age of 30, spoke out against the policies conducted by Shamil, calling on his followers to refrain from getting involved in worldly issues and focus solely on prayer while seeking the mercy of God. He also predicted the fall of the Imamate and the imprisonment of the Imam himself. His statements, backed by the young preacher’s increasing authority, were warmly received by this mountainous nation racked with fatigue and hopelessness.

Imam Shamil, a person of great patience and scrupulous fairness, responded by inviting the ascetic to his capital Vedeno several times, where

he was given the opportunity to dispute his convictions with the Imam's theologians[8]. Legends say the "Son of Kisha" easily baffled his opponents with the depth of his queries. Finally, by early 1859, at Shamil's suggestion, the refractory Chechen departed on his pilgrimage to Mecca (hadji)[9]. On August 26, 1859, surrounded by the Russian army on the Gunib-Dag Mountain, Shamil capitulated and was sent as war prisoner to Russia[10].

One of the fundamental characteristics of the "Hadji" fraternity, which sets it apart from the other Sufi brotherhoods of the Northern Caucasus, is the so-called "quick" or "loud" *zikr*[11] and a peculiar ritualistic dance. This raises the question as to when and where did "Hadji" become acquainted with such details of the Qadirian current of Sufism, namely the "loud" *zikr* (scream of prayer, or typical Islamic call to prayer by a loud crier (muezzin) located atop the minaret - the tower of the Mosque). Was it prior to his pilgrimage to Mecca, or during the travels? Not even the murids can agree on this issue.

One way or the other, during his three-year journey throughout the Ottoman Empire, the "Son of Kisha" had the opportunity to encounter various Sufi currents and interpretations, but it is clear that he had chosen to concentrate of the Qadirian one[12]. It is true that the pre-Revolutionary author G.A. Vertepov believed the father of the Chechen eikhrism was a follower of the Roufai'a movement (named after its founder Sayed Ahmed Roufai'a), which used fire in its worship, inflicting wounds using cold weapons, and so forth. However, the practice of eikhrism in Chechnya does not confirm the presence of such extremes.

The “Son of Kisha” had been in the Ottoman Empire between the years 1859 and 1861, yet his correspondence was arriving in Chechnya even before 1861. In his epistles, he preached prayer "zikr-ullah," love for one’s neighbor, the need for earning one's bread with one's own work, helping the poor and the orphans, the importance of abstaining from alcohol and tobacco, forgiving one’s enemies, including those who had committed mortal offenses, and so forth.

Upon his return from Mecca in 1861, his rating and popularity rose considerably among the Chechen people. He was now a "Hadji", a preacher, a prophet, whose prophecies concerning the fate of the Imamate and Shamil had fully come true. At that time, numerous adepts soon surrounded him, forming a religious community with a rather strong internal organization. Soon thereafter, the "Son of Kisha" became a "Sheik", which in Chechen terms implies holiness. He was recognized as a man, to whom the future and the mysteries of the Universe had been revealed, and as a symbol of that, he observed the "khalvat"—a voluntary time of fasting and prayer which could last for many days—which he spent in a deep underground cave (still

[8] Shamil didn’t support Kunta-Khadji because he wanted to preserve muridism; he disliked the popularity of Kunta’s followers and their calls for asceticism and equality.

[9] This opinion is not supported by documents.

[10] More detailed in the journal "Vainakh segodnya," no. 2(4), 1997

[11] This custom was prohibited in imamate.

[12] Abd al-Qadir al-Gilani (1077-1166), who lived in Iraq, is the founder of this school of thought. In the middle of the 12th century he was well known in Baghdad and the Islamic world.

preserved by his worshipers in the village of Eliskhan-Yurt).

The brotherhood was headed by the "holy teacher" himself, who was also known as "the leading Imam". Two most trustworthy disciples, Salman and Machik, were given the right to conduct religious services, the so-called preaching of the Qadiri tarikat; they were also named as Sheiks. For the ongoing administration of the fraternal Order, nahibs, vekhils, turkhs, and tamads (supervisors) were named from among the most prominent disciples.

The "Son of Kisha" and his representatives were demanding that ordinary murids follow the holy rituals of the *zikr*, strictly abide by the Shari'a (Islamic Law), dedicate themselves to serving God alone, and not participate in worldly affairs. The movement quickly spread throughout the entire Chechen territory and even into neighboring Ingushetia, the sound of *zikr* was heard in every corner of the country. At the same time, along with the rise in religious conscience based on the Order of "Hadji," a strong anti-governmental conspiracy against Imperial Russia emerged in Chechnya.

In order to gain a deep understanding of the causes that fueled this conspiracy, we need quickly to characterize the situation created after Russia defeated the Imamate in Chechnya.

The country had been completely ravaged by the long-lasting war; the population in Chechnya at the beginning of this historical period was close to 200,000 inhabitants, and after only 25 years, in the 1860's, it numbered about 130,000. Losses from direct military actions, famine, and epidemics amounted to at least 150-200 thousand victims. The massive and complicated irrigation system of the Chechen plateau had been destroyed. The strong opponent had captured all forests and half of the arable land.

The unbearable economic, physical and moral climate of constant pressure experienced by the Chechen nation demanded resolution. The military catastrophe and fall of the Imamate represented only a short pause in the ongoing saga of the warrior nation. Already, by May 1860, in Eastern Chechnya (Ikcheria) and in the heights of Argun, a new armed peasant revolt had burst out under the leadership of former nahibs, supporters of Shamil. By late January 1860, Czarist generals destroyed 15 auls (villages) in Ikcheria to suppress the rebellion in Eastern Chechnya[13]. Nahib Bysangur Benoyevski had been captured, and hanged upon conviction by a military-field trial.

During the summer of 1861, the entire Argun okrug (region) had been captured by the rebels under the leadership of Ouma Douev and Ata'i Ataev. By the fall of 1861, 15 infantry battalions, 700 Cossacks, 1,900 units of cavalry, 3 artillery divisions had conducted a revenge mission in the mountains of Chechnya. In December 1861, the Argun insurrection had

[13] General Ermolov, supreme commander in the Caucasus region in 1817-1827, developed a plan for the conquest of Caucasus, which was to be implemented first in Chechnya; it included the construction of fortresses, destruction of rebel villages and elimination of their inhabitants. After Ermolov was recalled in 1827, the policy of “elimination” continued. More detailed – in the journal “Vainakh segodnya”, N1-3(7-9), 1998: Avtorkhanov A. “Caucasus, the War of Caucasus, and Shamil.”

been crushed, and the leaders captured and exiled to Russia.

Having been defeated in open insurrections, the patriotic forces of Chechnya decided to take advantage of the growing religious movement of the Son of Kisha, and carry out an nationalist uprising with the aim of overthrowing the foreign, authoritarian regime of the conquering power, imperial Russia.

It is important to mention that we are operating here with the notion of the "Kunta-Hadji movement" with a certain degree of understanding. The Sheik personally denied being a titular "spiritual leader" or Imam and, moreover, had ceased his personal activity as a preacher, communicating with his people through mediators. He used to characterize himself as "the Messiah sent unto the world by the Imam (Makhdi)" to prepare the believers for his return. In the meantime, the movement had been gradually acquiring a more political focus and had attracted numerous supporters from among veterans of the late Imam Shamil,, in essence all who were unhappy about the current polity. By 1863 an especially secret leadership had developed to challenge the czarist administration. There were lesser leaders, nahibs, higher murids, essentially an entire hierarchy of power had been established.

Imperial forces, which by that time had already acquired significant experience fighting the liberation movements of Caucasian nations, were able to introduce their agents and informants within the zikrist movement. Having known of the upcoming conspiracy, the Czarist ranks were opposing the more orthodox mullahs and Chechen clergy, giving bribes to influential persons in Chechen villages, and there was even a split among the masses based on theological divergences.

On the other hand, the Czarist authorities stationed their troops in the key locations of the Chechen plain and mountains, and strengthened their garrisons. Without warning, on January 3, 1864, in the Shalin portion of the Argun region, the Russians captured the "Son of Kisha" and his brother Movsar. In no time, a special convoy transported the captives across the mountain first to Vladikavkaz, and then to the city of Novocherkassk. Suspecting that their "spiritual leader" was under arrest in the fortress of Shali, several thousands of fanatically oriented murids gathered there. They were led by Salam and Machik, the closest supporters of the Saint from Eliskhan-Yurt. Holding a black flag, the famous Chechen cavalier Vara was also in attendance.

By the second half of the month of January, the murids gathered there had already sent three delegations to the prince Tumanov, commander of the Czarist regiment in the Shalin fortress, demanding the release of the "Son of Kisha," and were thrice denied. Then a frantic ZIKR started; believing in Allah's intervention and the divine powers of their missing

spiritual leader, the immense crowd of about 3,000, including women, dropped their guns and pistols, approaching the soldiers with revenge and determination. The Russians responded with fire, and murids were forced to pick up their daggers and swords, and engage in a furious attack against the Czarist soldiers.

Under heavy artillery fire, the murids could not resist, and were crushed quickly, over 200 were killed, and several times more were wounded. This battle of January 18, 1864 remained in the memory of the Chechen people as "Sha'altan T'om" - "the dagger fight of Shali"[14].

[14] More detailed – in the journal "Vainakh segodnya", no. 1-3(7-9), 1998: Said-Akhmed Isaev "Massacre in Shali."

After this bloody battle, 18 of the key leaders of the murids were captured as prisoners, and sent to hard labor camps with sentences from 5 to 8 years. Tens of active murids were exiled. Zikr and other ritual customs were outlawed under the penalty of exile, in the mosques in all villages anti-zikrist preaching was read.

However, the person mostly responsible for these events, who became a victim of the nationwide anti-governmental conspiracy, the person who has always preached abstinence from worldly affairs and who opposed violence as means to fight evil, preacher and ascetic, was exiled for life in the city of Ustyuzhko in the Novgorod gubernia (province). He passed away there on May 19, 1867, and there is evidence indicating the Sheik died of complete exhaustion caused by famine.

In fact, zikrist believers consider that the Sheik never died, but only passed to a "hidden", invisible state or "condition". This clearly explains the Messianic mood, which still persists among the zikrist community.

The Imperial authorities in the Caucasus were hoping that the massive defeat and execution of murids in the battle of Shali would end this new religious-political movement. But this turned out to be a self-delusion, the movement went underground, and the masses continued to revolt from time to time. Thus in May of 1865, a villager from Kharacha, Taza Ekmirzaev, proclaimed himself as the spiritual follower of the imprisoned saint, and two more villages joined him in rebellion. Gathering 200-300 supporters and holding a green flag, Taza Ekmirzaev advanced at the head of his group to the mountain of Khetash-Kort (where traditionally reunions and national meetings were held) and proclaimed himself Imam. In turn, the Czarist commandant immediately deployed troops for the occupation of the strategic points in Northern Chechnya. Before their approach to the Taza camp, the local village elite, who probably regained their sense of political self-survival, crushed the movement.

Taza was captured, and sentenced to execution, but later the sentence was replaced by 12 years of hard labor, and subsequent life exile in Siberia. The Kharacha village was fined, and villagers from Elistandji were

even forced to relocate due to their disobedience.

For several years following the above events, a powerful and energetic warrior Vira operated in Chechnya. He started as a local warlord, but soon after the battle of Shali was named Nahib of the Order of "the Son of Kisha". He attempted to revive the community, and his efforts and military feats during the partisan war that followed earned him the image of a national hero. A set of popular songs and ballads about him circulate throughout Chechnya. However, the death of Vara in a battle against a Czarist detachment ended all hopes of re-establishing the political importance of the Order.

Convinced that "the Chechen tribe" among all nationalities in the Terskaya oblast' (region) "maintained the potential spirit of a mass resistance," the Imperial authorities adopted a systematic, planned exile of the Chechen mountaineers towards the frontier of the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, the mountaineers themselves began to emigrate as a sign of protest against the oppressive regime that deprived them of their freedom. During the summer of 1865, 5 thousand families, about 23 thousand people, left Chechnya. This was a unique massive exodus from Russia by the most energetic, freedom-loving segment of the Chechen population. This was clearly an ethnic catastrophe for the Chechens, depriving the future nation of its best sons. (A similar catastrophe, of even more horrible proportions, took place in 1944, when the Stalinist regime exiled the entire Chechen nation to Siberia, condemning it to extinction. An identical catastrophe is taking place in Chechnya today, in the eyes of the whole world.)

Only due to their unbelievable sense of hard work and unique ability to survive under the harshest condition has the Chechen nation managed to escape disintegration and annihilation. Moreover, the traditional economy and customs of the Chechen people soon were restored, villages sprang back to life from ruins, houses, mosques, schools, a new irrigation system arose. Chechnya soon regained its fame as "the granary" of the Northern Caucasus.

In the 9th decade of the 19th century, zikrism started to spread again in Chechnya and among Ingushets as well, but this time only as a religious teaching. Certain rationalistic ideas started to develop, and the system of organization of religious brotherhoods in the villages improved.

However, the single gravitational center in the person of the living sage had already disappeared. At the same time, especially during this period, new Sheiks belonging to the Qadirist movement sprang up. Many called themselves “receivers” of the Sheik from Eliskhan-Yurta. However, they were applying changes in the rituals, which distinguished them from the classical Kunta-Hadjist movement. Overall, such Sheiks as Bamat-Girey, Chin-Mirza, and Batal-Hadji exercised and continue to exercise a

regional and village-type presence, while the muridic brotherhood of the "Son of Kisha" embraces the entire country. Later, already in the 1950's, under the Soviet regime, a new Order developed of the so-called Vis-Hadji - "the white hats." Those consider themselves followers of Kunta-Hadji, but are denied categorically by his true followers.

It is worth mentioning that by the early 20th century Daghestani printing houses had published volumes of the aphorisms of the late Chechen saint, collected by his followers.

For someone to be a follower of the "Son of Kisha" means at this stage to essentially accept him as "a spiritual father" (teacher)—one's representative before God. This acceptance implies to carry out a certain number of additional prayers or formulas, such as the interpreting of the "zikr" in the form of a loud cry with a shrill voice (with a rhythmical repetition of the fundamental Islamic prayer "la-ilaha-il-Allah" while in an ecstatic state running around in a circle performing a peculiar "dance"). At the same time, the murid agrees to embrace a set of rigid moral and ethical rules. The Order worships as holy places the tomb of his mother Khedi in the village Hadji-aul in the Veden region of Chechnya, as well as the remains of Sheik's courtyard in the village of Eliskhan-Yurt. We have to mention that the Order has no unified center, each village brotherhood is led by an elected Turkh (leader).

Zikrism was first popular among the poorest layers of Chechen society. This is why zikrists tended to support the Bolshevik banners during the 1918-20 civil war in Russia, often fighting against the armies of General Denikin. The Soviet power initially flirted with the Chechen Muslims to gain support, but soon placed believers under repression. Arrests of zikrist became commonplace, however, as sources point out, the zikr never ceased, not even in prisons or exile.

After the mass deportation of 1944, the Kunta-Hadji brotherhood gained even more strength. Its growing popularity could be explained by the great misfortune of the Chechen people: people often found hope and peace in their systematic prayers to God and the invocation of their spiritual father, the "Son of Kisha."

Upon the restoration of the Chechen-Ingushet Republic in 1957 and until the beginning of Perestroika in 1985, the relations between authorities and Kunta-Hadjists have been largely antagonistic, sometimes shifting to alert-neutrality. The process of revival of Islamic values has led to the intensification of Kunta-Hadjist communities, the establishment of a religious hierarchy and growth of the number of those studying Islamic theology.

In the fall of 1991, a group led by General J. Dudaev acceded to

power in Chechnya. It is said to have represented the radical extreme of the nationalist circles[15]. Declaring himself as a murid of Kunta-Hadji, Dudaev ensured his new regime a certain level of political support from the more backward and darker side of this movement. The symbols of the "new revolution" were zikrist mass prayers on the central streets and squares of Grozny. However, praying on the dirty city asphalt for true murids was a disgrace, and so it is clear that these popular "dances" were engineered by a hired "ensemble" of individuals with no dignity and respect for the true traditions. The Kunta-Hadjist communities soon overcame the euphoria of "victory", and their attitude towards Dudaev and the like became more careful. In the years of the first Chechen war (1994-96), young murids actively protested against the violence of the federal Russian troops, and displayed fanatical resistance.

[15] There are different opinions among the Chechens about the role of Dudaev in the events of 1991-1995. Some still consider him a national hero.

In the aftermath of the war, the entire Chechen society was struck by a new danger—Vakhabism. On the edge of this new fight were particularly the Kunta-Hadjists, whose values were declared heretical by the Vakhabits in the first place. In a series of bloody clashes occurred in villages between young murids and Vakhabits. The zikrists declared that the Vakhabits should be kicked out of Chechnya, and were strongly supported by all other Sufi orders in Chechnya. This line was persistently carried out by the Mufti (leading cleric) of Chechnya, Ahmed-Hadji Kadyrov, belonging to the Order of the "Son of Kisha."

In July 1998 in the city of Gudermes massive fights arose between the Vakhabits and their opponents, which led to the killing of over 100 Vakhabits. Having lost this major battle, the Vakhabits concentrated their forces in the town of Urus-Martan, transforming it into their fortress.

The Kunta-Hadjists, on the other hand, openly supporting the restoration of the Shari'a Islamic laws, have severely criticized president A.Maskhadov for his ambiguous stand towards the issue of Vakhabism. For that matter, in the current war many ordinary Kunta-Hadjists have adopted a neutral position, or even a clear anti-Maskhadov stance, such as A.H. Khadyrov. Their hope is that the Russians will one day leave, but the Vakhabits want to strengthen their positions in Chechnya forever.

The Kunta-Hadjist Order in Chechnya to this day has no united leadership, since there are no direct descendants of the Sheik. It is only known that in Turkey resides a descendant of the Sheik's daughter, General D.Gyunesh, former head of the joint-staff of the Turkish armies, and in Russia dwells a descendant of the Sheik's sister—General-major I. Suleymenov. There are rumors that descendants of Sheik's brother, Movsar, live in Iraq. The emergence of a unifying leader could make the Order the strongest ruling power in Chechnya. The emergence of a strong leading

personality in the Order could potentially lift that individual to one of the most significant levels of power in the country.

Paradoxically, to become leader of the Kunta-Hadjist Order in Chechnya, and subsequently in a position to seize political power there, would be possible only for someone like General D. Gyupesh, because he is the only direct descendant of the Kunta-Hadji[16].

[16] None of the descendants of Kunta-Hadji can become the leader of the movement since none of them has maintained a religious life and their style of living is far from the principles advocated by Kunta.

Avduev's Critique of Akhmadov's Paper

One objective of our study of religious brotherhoods in Chechnya is to promote the type of public discussions that will promote a greater understanding of the diversity of thought in this area. A first step in this effort was a response to Professor Akhmadov's paper by an exiled Chechen intellectual, Albert Avduev, who is familiar with the Vakhab movement.

The critique of the Akhmadov paper rests on several key points. A contradiction of the historical record presented by Akhmadov is Avduev's first point. Kunta Hadji, Avduev argues, was not an ethnic Chechen. His paternal ancestors came from one of the Turkish tribes in Daghestan and his sole Chechen link was through his mother. Avduev maintains that Akhmadov has presented a false historical record by relying upon documents that had been falsified by the Russians and further distorted by the ideological climate of the 19th century.

Furthermore, placing the Kunta Hadji order within the context of Russian and, later, Soviet policy toward Islam, Avduev insists that, following the 1864 arrest of Kunta, Russia worked to undermine traditional Islamic beliefs and institutions in the Caucasus. The Russian objective was to create an "official" Islam that would be sympathetic to Russian administration of the region. By using falsified religious texts and recruiting locals to work with Russian administrators as exponents of the new, "official" Islam, Russian authorities believed they could effectively disarm Islam as a weapon of resistance to their control.

Avduev maintains that, in contemporary Chechnya, the teachings of many religious activists are completely distorted and, as a result, numerous sects encourage animism, fanaticism, and other distortions of "true Islam". Such groups, he argues, are not real orders because they lack structure and statutory organizations and they are too small (usually no more than 2000 members) to have any real impact on current developments. Moreover, such groups have distorted religious rituals and have transformed the *zikr* into an inappropriate display of screaming and dancing. The Chechen national liberation movement does not rely upon these groups because they are seen as having suspect connections with Russian police agencies.

Avduev explains that President Maskhadov, by contrast, has embraced groups and individuals with connections to the Russian security services. Referring to the Kadyrov case of 1997, Avduev argues that President Maskhadov issued a pardon and appointed Kadyrov as mufti of Chechnya. The evidence in the case was subsequently destroyed. An additional indication of what Avduev sees as the suspect character of the

Former Chechen President Jhokhar Dudaev performing a religious ritual

General Shamil Basaev

President Aslan Maskhadov

Kunta Hadji order is Akhmadov's contention that former colonel of the Soviet Army Suleimenov, who was appointed general by Dudaev, was a descendent of Kunta. Such an individual, with his conviction on charges of corruption and theft prior to escaping to Moscow, could hardly claim kinship with Kunta.

Relevance of Religious Brotherhoods to Current Conflict

Chechen soldiers in prayer

Photo courtesy of the Chechen Republic Site, www.amina.com

In order to appreciate the relevance of the Kunta Hadji movement, it is necessary to place this brotherhood within the context of other such associations in Chechnya. As noted above, the Kunta Hadji is only one of an estimated twenty-seven Chechen brotherhoods but, with the Vakhab movement (also known as the Djamaat movement), it is one of the two largest. A result of this multiplicity of religious groupings is that each has developed an exclusive sense of community or clannishness that encourages members to promote only their immediate "brothers". Non-members are regarded as being beyond the moral code that applies only within each particular community. Consequently, corruption is not only rampant but is also justified on the basis of religious affiliation and dogma.

One important consequence of this corruption has been an exacerbation of tensions leading to violent clashes involving groups identified with religious brotherhoods. An example of one such clash occurred in 1998 in Gudermes, an industrial center which had fallen under the control of organized crime after the first Chechen war. In this case an armed Vahkab group known as Shariat's Guard waged a battle against a criminal gang that was attempting to assert control over local industrial enterprises. The criminal gang was under the leadership of Sulim Yamadaev, one of Chechnya's most prominent underworld figures, and enjoyed the patronage of Ahmed Kadirov, an important local politician. An estimated twenty-eight people were killed during the battle and an additional dozen died in subsequent skirmishes.

Thus, both corruption and violence have become the hallmark of contemporary Chechen life. The deterioration of national life is reflected in changes in the patterns of societal violence since the immediate post-Soviet period. During the first Chechen war, there was a degree of national unity that was reflected in the fact that almost all factions joined in fighting against the Russians. For them, the fighting was seen as a war of national liberation. The more recent post-Soviet years have been characterized by the vendettas undertaken by individuals whose families were killed in early clashes that now appear to have been futile efforts to assert national identity.

In this environment, it is not surprising that almost all sects have armed formations, generally described as militias, which work to advance the often-divergent interests of their particular brotherhoods. A very

practical explanation for the appearance of such formations is that the North Caucasus region is populated by numerous veterans who served not only in the Soviet Army but fought in the conflicts in Abkhazia and Afghanistan. These people have limited training beyond their military education and have almost no civilian career options in the region's terrible economic environment. Shamil Basaev, for example, participated in the fighting in Abkhazia and Maskhadov served with Soviet troops that suppressed demonstrations in the Baltic states. For such people, armed conflict provides a natural opportunity for one of the services they can best provide.

The basis for most active of the armed groups in Chechnya is the former members of the Shariat's Guards, the Shariat's "Courts", and former members of various organs of state security. The Shariat's Guards and the Shariat's Courts were organized by Chechnya's Vakhab movement and were composed of young men who saw themselves as being at the forefront of the fight against criminality and corruption. The stated goal of the Shariat's Guard was to implement decisions made by the Shariat's "Courts." Those quasi-judicial decisions were intended to serve as expressions of the Sharia, which is a specific interpretation of the Koran. The Sharia, therefore, should be viewed as law based on the Koran. Each sect, of course, has its own interpretation of the Koran in order to advance that sect's specific agenda. The overall goal of the Shariat's Guard was to reinstate the "true law", which for the Vakhab movement means full equality for all men before God and the law. In short, this was intended to be a practical code of behavior for all followers of Islam.

Since 1997, most of the militias' military efforts have been directed against other sects rather than against state agencies. This situation is, in large part, a result of the Shariat's Guard view of itself as the true expression of legitimate state power and the resultant necessity to direct their efforts against other sects that challenged their legitimacy. In this, they present themselves as being involved in the struggle against corruption and criminality rather than as agents of religious extremism.

The religious brotherhoods have emerged as major political actors in Chechnya and they played an important role in facilitating the demise of the Dudaev regime. While Dudaev utilized religious appeals in advancing his political agenda, it became obvious to serious Muslims that Dudaev's commitment to the Kunta Hadji movement was, at best, superficial and, more likely, insincere. This apparent hypocrisy, coupled with complaints over his increasingly dictatorial operational style and suspicions that he was a "Russian agent," contributed to his political decline.

Contrast between Kunta Hadji and Vakhab Movements

While the clashes between the various armed formations might be dismissed as the expressions of narrow self-interest, it is essential to note that there are important differences between the Kunta Hadji and Vakhab movements as well as other sects operating in Chechnya.

Much of the contrast between the two main groups is based on theology and philosophy. There are several important religious differences that set the Kunta Hadji movement apart from the Vakhab movement. The latter believes in general equality before the law and argues that all men should be treated equally regardless of nationality, wealth or language. Like most Muslims, this egalitarianism does not extend to gender issues. Women have a subordinate place in Chechen society, whether they live in the Vakhab or the Kunta Hadji communities. The Vakhab brotherhood is far less clannish than the Kunta Hadji and, for that matter, other sects. The Kunta Hadji, of course, unlike the egalitarian Vakhab, claim numerous saints.

Again consistent with Vakhab egalitarianism, leadership positions or functions are not inherited. They are, by contrast with the Kunta Hadji, based on personal merit. This is closer to traditional Chechen mentality. Their struggle against corruption is justified on the basis of their view that there should be no favoritism or special arrangements for anyone. In the Kunta Hadji community, leadership is inherited and closely parallels their belief in sainthood.

In addition to these religious disputes, there are important distinctions in terms of their respective views of Russians. The position of the Kunta Hadji, while not identical to that of the "official" Islamic institutions of the Soviet era, is much more supportive of Russia. Its essentially pacifist posture creates an environment in which it is possible to advocate a continued place for Chechnya within the Russian Federation. By contrast, the Vakhab movement advocates the restoration of "true Islam" and supports a struggle against domination by the Russians. They are also openly hostile to the region's traditional Sufi Islam because of its moderation and its incorporation of pre-Muslim traditions. For the many Russians as well as Sufi Muslims who feel threatened by this tendency, Vakhab is simply another word for "extremist." The Kunta Hadji followers joined the Russians in denouncing the Vakhab movement as a great threat to Chechnya. Interestingly, while there is considerable focus on the anti-

Russian orientation of the Vakhab, it is important to remember that the brotherhood maintains an equally critical view of Western society.

It is also essential to note that there is a fundamental trend that works against stability in the North Caucasus region. It is something that can be seen not only in Chechnya but also in Dagestan and central Asia. The main features of this trend are: (1) a collapse of state authority, (2) a lack of faith in state officials, (3) economic adversity, and (4) persistent intervention by Islamic groups from abroad. The violence that came in 1999 to Dagestan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikstan was driven by these factors and the Chechen situation is subject to the same factors.

Connections with Taliban and Other Outside Groups

Recognition of the fact that such an important and dynamic brotherhood can, like other Islamic movements for national liberation, pose a challenge to Western society prompts legitimate questions about their relationship with Islamic organizations outside the region. While Islam did much to provide spiritual comfort to Chechen soldiers during the 1994-96 war, it has undergone dramatic changes during the decade since the collapse of the USSR. Most important, open borders have made it possible for Arab missionaries espousing a more radical form of Islam to find converts in the Caucasus region as well as what was Soviet central Asia. The newly converted Muslims have been increasingly hostile to Chechnya's traditional Sufi orders and have opened the door to outside groups with more violent tendencies.

One such organization that has attracted attention because of these developments is the Taliban movement. While there are important philosophical differences between Chechen religious brotherhoods and the Taliban there are also some similarities. The essential fact, however, is that within Chechnya there is little interest in the Taliban or, for that matter, other such groups located abroad. The primary reason for this disinterest is the fundamental provincialism of most Chechen movements. They see events and actors within Chechnya and the Chechen community as of primary importance and all others of limited relevance to their struggles.

Apparently, the Russians take the Taliban much more seriously. Reportedly, Russian President Vladimir Putin feels Osama bin Laden and the Taliban have supported Chechen efforts to gain their independence from the Russian Republic and has even threatened to bomb Afghanistan if necessary.

Reprise

Chechen soldiers resting after combat

Photo courtesy of the Chechen Republic Site, www.amina.com

For over six millennia the Chechens have defended their way of life in their Northern Caucasus homeland. As the chart of Russian-Chechen relations above illustrates, the history of these two valiant peoples can be characterized as a never-ending cycle of warfare, conquest followed by an independence movement, conquest, independence movements, and internal dissent. Every generation of young Chechen manhood has had the opportunity for martyrdom to the national cause. Following each suppression of Chechen separatism, revenge accompanied by suppression and wholesale slaughter has threatened to obliterate the Chechen culture and way of life. All parties in this ongoing conflict have given the others ample cause for hatred and vengeance. The tragedy of Chechnya is that this cycle of violence seems destined to continue. Its continuation is made likely if not probable by a variety of factors. The fact that it suffers from a weak state structure under the control of a leadership lacking either legitimacy or the ability to forge a consensus is one of those factors. The absence of a popular consensus about the identity of the Chechen nation is highlighted by the fact that while many Chechens are willing to die for freedom from Russia, others seem perfectly content to live in Russian communities and under Russian control elsewhere in the former USSR. Equally significant is a regional economic collapse that has denied people an economic avenue for advancement outside the criminal underworld. Coupled with the infusion of a more militant form of Islam from neighboring states, these factors guarantee that, for Chechnya, crisis is a way of life.

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