The Many Languages of Islam in the Caucasus

November 8, 2017 - 1:41pm, by Rebecca Ruth Gould

A mosque in Dusi in Georgia’s Pansiki Gorge. Islam, along with Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism, is inseparable from life in the Caucasus. Many strands of Islam intersect in the region, including multiple branches of Sufism and many schools of Sunni and Shia thought.

While visiting Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge towards the end of the second Chechen War (1999-2009), what struck me most was the large number of Christian graves that resembled Muslim tombstones. I was also struck by the Georgian inscriptions on Muslim tombstones. The images on these tombstones encapsulate the story of Islam in the Caucasus. My recent book on the history of insurgency in the Caucasus, titled Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus [http://yalebooks.co.uk/display.asp?id=9780300206451], is concerned with these paradoxes.

Islam, along with Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism, is inseparable from life in the Caucasus. Many strands of Islam intersect in the region, including multiple branches of Sufism and many schools of Sunni and Shia thought.

Diversity produces tolerance: the Caucasus is one of the few regions of the Islamic world that accommodates multiple legal schools, including the Hanafi and Shafi’i schools of jurisprudence, in proximate and often overlapping territories. Whereas most of the Islamic world can be divided into the dominant school of law – Maliki in the Maghreb, Hanbali in the Hejaz, Hanafi in Central Asia, and so on – multiple schools feature in the Caucasus. This equilibrium has generated unique forms of legal pluralism.

Alongside the different legal schools, Islam in the Caucasus is exceptionally multilingual. The languages of the Islam here include but are not limited to Azeri, Georgian, Russian, Chechen, Avar, Dargin, Qumyq, Lak, and Lezgi. Although the many varieties of Islam in the Caucasus resist straightforward characterization, history and language has played a role. Islamic practices also have varied with the cycles of Russian colonialism, Soviet atheism and post-Soviet ethnic
Here are three things I learned:

First, *Islam in the Caucasus is a religion of peace.* There is a long-standing quietest tradition in the region. Long before the arrival of Russian colonial power, Muslims of the Caucasus turned to Islam to cultivate their inner lives. The first violent movement that adopted the language of Islam arose only toward the end of the 18th century, with the beginnings of the Russian conquest. Militant Islam later flourished under Imam Shamil (1824-1861), but for specific historical reasons: the Muslims of the Caucasus believed that if they did not resist, their way of life would be obliterated.

The devastation that Muslims in the Caucasus feared most became reality during the second half of the 19th century, although indigenous Islamic culture was kept alive, especially in the mountainous regions. The shepherd Kunta Hajj is just one of many Sufi leaders who practiced a rigorously quietest form of Sufism that spread throughout Chechnya. Later practitioners of quietist Islam choose different paths, but many drew inspiration from Kunta Hajji. Now in the post-Soviet period, younger Muslims are drawn to the quietest dimensions of Salafism – an ultra-conservative form of Sunni Islam – just as Muslims of prior generations were drawn to Sufism. For such believers, Salafism offers a religious praxis untainted by Soviet secularism. Its appeal is not unlike that of Kunta Hajji’s Sufism in an earlier age. I witnessed the appeal that Salafism held for many young Muslims while studying Chechen during my visits to Pankisi.

Second: *Islam in the Caucasus diverges from the norm.* Throughout history, Islam in the Caucasus has been transformed by many religious and civilizations. Under autocratic political structures, the tenets of faith in major centers of Islamic empires, like Baghdad and Cairo, were more rigidly interpreted than in peripheral regions like Shirvan, Ganja, and Temir Khan Shura. These seemingly peripheral locations enjoyed a degree of autonomy by virtue of their remoteness. Muslim poets and theologians were able to foster ways of thinking that made sense in local contexts, and which connected to currents within Christian and Zoroastrian thought and culture, without fearing the persecution they would have faced had they developed their ideas in the imperial centers of the Islamic world. With imperial rulers largely unaware of trends in the periphery, Muslim thinkers in the Caucasus enjoyed a greater degree of freedom to pursue heterodox views.

The patchwork of Caucasian cultures and societies exerted considerable influence over Islam. Georgian Islam, Azeri Islam, Chechen Islam, Dargi Islam, and many other local Islams collectively challenge the idea of a monolithic religion. Of course, the same could be said for Islamic culture everywhere – from Saudi Arabia to Morocco to New York. Yet the inflection of Islam caused by local traditions in the Caucasus was carried a step further than in many other place, by virtue of the region’s distance from centres of power. This is also due to the relatively tolerant attitude towards pre-Islamic custom (‘adat) that prevailed throughout the Caucasus prior to the Russian conquest.

Third: *Islam in the Caucasus is changing.* A new generation of scholars is enabling us to see the Caucasus on its own terms, and through the sources and languages that are indigenous to it. As I argue in my book, the Caucasus is much more than a cauldron of ancient ethnic hatreds (a canard of post-Soviet Studies), or a breeding ground for radical Islam (the neo-Conservative cliché). Thanks in part to the influence of Islam, Caucasus has been a wellspring of cosmopolitan civilisation for over two millennia.

The diversity of Islam in the Caucasus is essential to the region’s future. We can support this diversity by recognizing, and supporting the many forms of Islam that have flourished there, far away from centres of power.

Editor’s note: Editor's Note: Rebecca Ruth Gould is the author of Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus. The book won this year’s University of Southern California Book Prize in Literary and Cultural Studies. It also won Best Book by a Woman in Slavic/Eastern European/Eurasian Studies, Association for Women in Slavic Studies. The book also received honorable mentions for the Davis Center Book Prize, awarded by Harvard University’s Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, and for the Joseph Rothschild Prize in Nationalism and Ethnic Studies awarded by the Association for the Study of Nationalities.

Repost: Want to repost this article? Read the rules » (node61787)