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On the features of the ethno-religious identity of the Islamic community of Adjara

The Adjara Autonomous Republic is the only region of Georgia where the majority Muslim population is ethnic Georgians, most of whom are Sunni Hanafi Mazhabs. Islam in Adjara differs significantly from the Azerbaijani form not only by Sunni-Shia division. The historical process of Islamization, the religious dichotomy and the Georgian ethno-linguistic identity of the Adjarian people are of paramount importance in the context of the formation and establishment of this community and its participation in regional processes. I will try to briefly present the process and peculiarities of formation and development of identity of Adjarian Islamic community.

The mass conversion of the population in Adjara - Islamization was carried out during the reign of the Ottoman Empire (15th-19th centuries). Comparing the existing studies on the process of Islamization of Adjara, one can see that it certainly took place on both forced and voluntary basis, often with a combination of personal initiation.

Supporters of the thesis on the violent Islamization of Adjara claim that the process of conversion in Adjara has taken place with the destruction and burning of churches and monasteries, villages and cities, torture and oppression of population, executions and bloodshed.

According to the thesis of self-imposed conversion into Islam in Adjara, the first manifestation was observed among the nobility. Significant influence on self-imposed Islamization has given the people of Adjara an opportunity to receive spiritual and

military education in the Empire. Here they got acquainted with the Islamic environment, values and language, received a better education, which gradually affected their identity and consciousness, promoted their integration into the Ottoman socio-political environment, and advanced in the military and spiritual spheres.

With Batumi's transition to Tsarist Russia, Georgian intelligentsia, nationalists, and the Georgian Orthodox Church began to seek ideological grounds for the return of Muslims of Adjara to the Georgian national identity, using common values: language, culture, and customs. Already in the 1940s, historians and ethnographers in Soviet Georgia seriously engaged in the reconstruction of national identity on ethnic, linguistic and cultural basis, excluding Islamic identity, considering it as a consequence of the Ottoman past.

As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the interest in religion in Georgia increased and gradually Orthodoxy became an important component of national identity and ideology. The redefinition of religious identity has also occurred in Adjara, which has led to the conflict of «Islam-Christianity» in the inter-communal public sphere. The Georgian Orthodox Church with high state support has started to «encourage» religious minorities to convert.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey tried to increase its presence in Georgia, which, despite initial enthusiasm, was not understood by either the authorities or the newly formed nationalists.

Turkey's attempts at economic penetration faced serious obstacles in those years, given the infiltration of radical Islam and the threat of a possible return of Turkish invaders.

In 1992, the participation of 50 Adjara Muslims in Mecca for the Hajji marked the beginning of the Islamic revival in Adjara. A

new system of religious governance, the Muftiat, was established. It coordinates the activities of the Muslim community, reconstructs mosques and madrasas, organizes and finances religious education of Adjarian youth, distributes Islamic literature and reassesses identity. Various Islamic movements also became active in Adjara in the 1990s such as Gulenists, Suleimanijil Tarikat, Mustafa Sunguri Tarikat.

The religious influence of Turkey is not limited to private initiatives, it has a well-developed concept of soft power policy, which is implemented by three major structures: the Office of Religious Affairs (Dinayet İşleri Başkanlığı), the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Office (Türkiye İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Idaresi - TİKA), the Yunus Emre Centre for Turkish Culture.

According to various sources, today there are 180 mosques in Adjara (the number of churches does not exceed 40). There are 400 Muslim educational institutions.

As a result of our research, we can underline that the agenda of re-Christianization of Adjara is important for the Georgian government and the Church, because the region is a historic gateway on the border of Christian and Islamic civilizations. This is probably the only way to prevent the Turkish second try to takeover of Adjara, which, according to president Erdoğan, does not seem so unreal.