

# Georgia, the 'Man in the Leopard's Skin': The Past, Present and Future of Georgia's Middle Eastern Communities

*In May 2008, Professor Harry Norris visited Georgia to study the current situation of non-European communities in the country. Here he provides some historical and cultural background to this politically and ethnically complex part of the world.*

And down in Tiflis, in the glowing lowlands, beyond the shadows of the mountain's and the battle's periphery, there was an atmosphere of seduction, voluptuous adventures and political intrigue. Vineyards and orange groves, bazaars piled with silks and spices, Persian jewellers weighing turquoises by the pound, and Caucasian armourers working on the beautiful damascened blades for which they were celebrated throughout the world. From the Tatar mosques, the chants of the Faithful rose at evening to mingle with the singing of bearded monks in the Armenian churches. Ramshackle, fretted balconies overhung the river Koura, where, in the twilight, the sound of t̄ar and zurna accompanied the plaintive songs of Georgia. Yet this southern softness was never that 'dew-dropping south of love-whispering woods and lût resounding waves'. The land, like the people, retained a savagery behind the beauty.

Lesley Branch, *The Sabres of Paradise*

In recent times, Georgia has been viewed potentially as an outpost of the European Union and of NATO. This view is essentially political. It fails to reflect a major part of its rich and remarkably diverse Christian and non-Christian cultural and religious heritage. This Trans-Caucasian country has known centuries of conquest and occupation by Arabs, by Persians and by Turks (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Strong cultural links with the properties of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the Holy Land, and in particular with the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, have assured it a

continuous and close relationship with its southerly and predominantly Muslim neighbours. Saint Abo of Tbilisi, the 'Arab Perfumer of Baghdad', who was martyred by the Arab Governor of Georgia, in 786 wrote,<sup>2</sup> 'Georgia is called Mother of the Saints; some of these have been inhabitants of this land, while others came among us from time to time from foreign parts to testify to the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Jacques de Vitry, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem in 1180, wrote, 'There is also in the East, another Christian people ... They are much dreaded by the Saracens and have often by their invasions done great damage to the Persians, Medes and Assyrians on whose borders they dwell, being entirely surrounded by infidel nations.' Yet Georgia has been a safe haven for oppressed Middle Eastern minorities as well as serving as a bulwark of Christendom. One of its greatest rulers, King David IV the 'Builder' (1089–1125), was known to have conversed on religious matters with his Muslim subjects. Through his royal office they merited his personal protection. He knew the content of the

*Qur'ān*, and he enquired from Muslim theologians the precise meaning of the Logos (*al-Kalīma*) in their holy book which they regarded as God's final revelation.

The influences from Persian and, later, Ottoman Art were a prominent feature in the medieval illuminated manuscripts of Georgia. These influences are also at the very heart of the contents of two major Georgian romances. In the literary masterpiece, *The Knight in the Panther's (Leopard's) Skin*, "Vepkhis Tqaosanis" (1189–1207), by Shot'ha Rust'haveli, Arabic and Iranian names are to be found, as well as references to the *Qur'ān* and to Mecca. *Amiran-Darejaniani*, ascribed to Mose Khoneli (circa 1196), an even richer work in its Oriental colour, also reveals a direct influence from masterpieces of Iranian and Arabic classical and popular literature. The adventures described therein are geographically framed within India, in the Yemen, in Balkh and in Baghdad, and the personalities who are in the key stories are sometimes patterned upon literary models from the *Siyar* of the world of Islam, the *Sīrat Hamza* in particular.

Figure 1: Tbilisi Citadel (known as the Narikla Citadel or Shuris-tsihke) was originally built by the Persians in AD 360. It was restored by the Ottomans in the second half of the 16th century. It was severely damaged in an earthquake in the 19th century. The church towers offer stylistic evidence that the region was 'a meeting-place of Byzantine and Persian culture'. Photo: Harry Norris.



Between 10 and 24 May 2008, I undertook a research visit to Georgia. Partly this was to examine documents on the history of the Caucasus, in the library of the Georgian Academy of Sciences in Tbilisi and in other libraries. But I also wanted to study the cultural and religious traditions of several Middle Eastern communities in the country – Muslim, Assyrian and Yezidi – and to collect information on their current state by interviewing representatives. I wish to express my gratitude to the British Academy and to the Georgian Academy of Sciences for their invaluable assistance in making this research possible, despite the problems that Georgia was facing at that time.

### Islam in Georgia

The Arabs conquered Georgia in the 8th century. For four hundred years Tbilisi was the capital of an Islamic Emirate.<sup>3</sup> Even after the establishment of Georgia as a Christian kingdom that was to attain its peak in the 12th and 13th centuries through King David the Builder and Queen Tamar, the Muslim community remained significant and thrived. In 1701 there were 3,000 Muslims in Tbilisi within a population of 20,000 (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> The capital has been the central heart of the community, though Muslim tribes and emigrants later settled in certain other districts.

Once known as 'Tatars',<sup>5</sup> today the predominant Muslim community is that of the Azeris (the Azerbaijanis), who are Shī'ite Muslims. Yet they are by no means the only non-Georgian Muslim community. In 1989 it was estimated that there were 303–308,000 Azeris, 96,000 Abkhaz (some of whom are Muslims), 12,000 Kists, 4,200 Avars, 4,100 Russian Tatars, around 4,100 Kazakhs, 1,300 Uzbeks and 1,200 Tajiks. There are also the Georgian-speaking Ajarians, who are now under an increasing pressure to forsake their Islamic faith and customs.<sup>6</sup>

Common to these minority Muslim communities is a current ignorance of Arabic, and a lack of *madrasas* where Arabic and the *Qur'ān* are taught. Mosques of importance do exist, and at a popular level there is an observance of Ramadan and the celebrations of major Muslim feasts. Some other feasts are associated with local saints and with popular and eclectic and heterodox Islamic practices.



Figure 2: The Middle Eastern-looking building in the scene was in origin a 'bath-house' (*hammām*): it is the late 17th-century Orbeliani (or Chreli) baths. It has a facade of bright-blue tiles and two short 'minarets' in the style of a Persian mosque. Tbilisi's sole major mosque is situated behind this building further up the hill. (In the foreground is the author.) Photo: Giorgi Narimanvilis from the Georgian Academy of Sciences.

In some districts, such as Pankisi, the observances of Islam display a close kinship to those observed in Chechnya, Ingushetia and in Daghestan across the border. And as in those countries, Sufi brotherhoods, though past their prime, still survive in Georgia, especially the Naqshabandiyya and the Qādiriyya brotherhoods.

Georgian Muslims, like their neighbours, are not unaffected by the so-called 'Salafi' or 'Wahhābi' influences that mark the forces of change in every corner of the Muslim World today.<sup>7</sup>

Generally, Azeri Islam in Georgia is most closely linked to its Caucasus neighbour

Azerbaijan, and to Iran (though in Tbilisi its one mosque is shared for prayers with other Georgian Muslims most of whom are Sunnī). Ajaria and the Ajarians cannot be severed from their principally Ottoman and Turkish roots and past; and this is also true of the exiled Meskhetian Muslims from South-West Georgia. In their faith and culture, the Kists are intimately associated with the Islamic customs and the waves of reform and resistance that over centuries have been active within the Northern Caucasus Muslim communities beyond Georgia's mountainous borders. One might also recall that the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battūta, while at Qīram (Staryj Krym, the Crimean capital in



the 14th century), wrote that he enjoyed a meeting with the jurist (*faqīh*) and teacher, 'Alā'l-Dīn al-Āssī, who was a North, or a South Ossetian in his ethnic origins.

George Sanikidze and Edward W. Walker conclude their study of *Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia* by predicting that:

There is a tradition of religious tolerance and eclecticism in Georgia that is the result of the country's particular history and experiences. Government officials in Georgia nevertheless worry that outside influences, particularly Islamist ideology and the ongoing conflict in Chechnya, will lead to the politicisation of Islam in the country, which could in turn further destabilize Georgia politically and even precipitate new rounds of internal violence. Fortunately, the government appears to be aware that a heavy-handed approach towards Georgia's Muslim minority would be entirely counter-productive. It is accordingly trying to preserve inter-confessional amity in the country.

### Georgia's Assyrian Community

The Assyrians (*Suryānī* in Arabic and Persian, *Āthōrāyā* in Syriac) are a Christian minority community, and are the descendants of the Aramaic speakers of Asia Minor who adopted Christianity during the 1st century AD. They are a part of the Nestorian or Eastern Syrian Church, and worldwide they are estimated to number 350,000. At a synod held in AD 484, this 'Assyrian (or Chaldean) Church of the East' rejected the decrees that had been approved in Ephesus in 431, and its members officially declared themselves to be Nestorians. Some Assyrians are now Uniates who are within the Catholic Church. But most of the Assyrians who found themselves within the former Soviet Union, including those in Georgia, are today to be included within Orthodoxy.

A meeting with Mr David Adamov, the President of the Assyrian International Congress of Georgia, was part of my programme during my stay in Tbilisi.<sup>8</sup> He told me that Georgia's Assyrians number approximately 5,000, and they are concentrated within the Kartli region, and especially in Tbilisi. They have close contact with the Assyrians in Armenia and also with

those in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Anatolia (Turkey). They rely heavily on financial help from Germany and from other countries in the EU. They have their own newspaper, though this is currently not being printed because of financial problems.

Unlike in Armenia, the Assyrians in Georgia are regarded and are treated as an integral part of the Georgian population. This gives them advantages, though it also brings them disadvantages. One of these is their lack of representation in Georgia's Parliament by an Assyrian representative. Mr Adamov, however, pointed out that he was able to meet President Sakashvili at any mutually convenient time. Nevertheless, this was a personal relationship, and, in his opinion, it did not allow an adequate venue for hearing the views of the Georgian Assyrian Christian Community as a whole. Another obstacle to be faced is that now up to 80% of the Assyrians are members of the Georgian Orthodox Church, hence the views of the remaining 20% who are still loyal to the 'Assyrian Church of the East' are inadequately heard.

Other problems that face the Assyrians relate to criminality, particularly drug abuse, and there are also many marital problems within their community. On the credit side is the enthusiasm of all for football amongst the Assyrians. Their teams have excelled in games played against teams in Iran and in other neighbouring countries, though their sporting efforts do not attain the success of the teams of Armenia and Azerbaijan. But, to Mr Adamov, fortunately the Assyrians do not face a choice of having to choose either nationality, or faith, as is the case between being Kurdish, or being Yezidi, within Armenia. There, a choice between ethnicity and faith is divisive to the Kurdish community as a whole.

As in Armenia, there is total freedom of worship and the celebration of feasts. The two most important of these are held on the first Wednesday in January (*Nōrūz*) and the second on 14 June. The feast and liturgy held in honour of the holy, Mar Zay'ayah (Mari, a foremost Nestorian saint?), is of a special importance. Many burials take place outside Georgia, particularly in Armenia, where Georgian Assyrian family interments occur



Figure 3: Georgians tend the graves of their deceased loved ones in the cemetery of the Cathedral of Sveti Tskhoveli in Mtskheta, which is the very heart of Georgia's spiritual identity. Mtskheta has been inhabited for 3000 years, and was once the centre of the pagan cult of Armazi (this Georgian deity being associated with the Zoroastrian Supreme Deity of Ahura Mazdāh the 'Wise Lord', the One True God). Photo: Harry Norris.

beside those of their Armenian relatives. Family reunions and joint celebrations are also frequently held within the Hakkâri district of extreme South-Eastern Turkey situated to the north of the towns of Zākhū and Dahūk in Iraqi Kurdistan.

### Georgia's Kurds and Yezidis

These twins are separated in a religious and ethnic divide in Armenia. But this is not the case in Georgia, where Kurds and Yezidis are comparable in status to the Assyrians. During my visit, I interviewed Mr Alik Mirzoev, representative of the Yezidi National Congress, and a representative of the Kurdish community in general. He said that a fair estimate of their combined number is upwards of 8,000 – though there is one estimate of over 12,000. A large number of Kurds are nominally Muslims – especially a small floating Kurdish population from Northern Iraq, some of whom have latterly returned to their home country.

The Kurds in Georgia are exceedingly proud of their language and culture, and this was a special cause for a celebration, in Tbilisi, on 16 May 2008. A reception, attended by the new Iraqi ambassador (himself a Kurd), was held in the Caucasus Centre to launch officially the very first translation into Kurdish of Rust'haveli's, *Knight in the Panther's (Leopard's) Skin*, with its title of 'Şot'a R'ûst'avêlî, Wergirê P'ostê Piling', "Mala Qavqasiyê, T'îbilîsî, 2007". Its translator was the late Jardoe Assad, a Kurdish poet.<sup>9</sup> It was a moving and colourful national occasion, in which the Kurdish community in the capital took a very active part, and they were united in displaying their loyalty to their host country.

Mr Mirzoev is of the firm belief that a majority of Kurds in Georgia are of the Yezidi faith, itself a heterogeneous belief system. Members of the Yezidi faith number 150,000 in Iraq, and over 40,000 in the former Soviet Republics, especially in Georgia and in Armenia. The most holy place for all Yezidis is Lâlîsh, in Iraqi Kurdistan, a place of pilgrimage that the Georgian Yezidis regard as the Mecca of their faith. In the opinion of Professor Philip Kreyenbroek, the core of Yezidi beliefs is a legacy that is directly descended from the Indo-Iranian religion, the beliefs of which date back to 2000 BC; it was influenced by the Zoroastrianism that supplanted it, and at a later date by Islamic Sufism associated with the medieval Sufi, Shaykh 'Adî b. Musâfir, who allegedly died in 1162.<sup>10</sup> Professor Garnik Asatryan has argued that they are today a highly secretive, though basically monotheistic sect and community, if not a 'true religion'. To the world of Islam they are deemed to be 'Devil Worshipers', or extreme radicals (*ghulât*). Amongst Oriental Christians in Syria, if one believes William Dalrymple, they are treated with some respect by the Nestorians.

My Georgian Academy colleague, Giorgi Narimanvilis, and I put these questions to Mr Mirzoev at our meeting with him. He firmly acknowledged that, like Christians and Muslims, the Georgian Yezidis had a profound belief and conviction of the reality of human choice between Good and Evil. These two opposites determine the structure of the decisive moral choices for mankind. However, the Yezidi 'divinity', 'Malak Tawus',

was the Highest Angel amongst the Heavenly Host. He was a colourful and a heroic being, remote from the notion of 'The Prince of Darkness', as he is pictured in the West. Indeed, the Divinity himself had, in His very Essence, the nature of 'Malak Tawus', the 'Peacock Angel'. This seemed to be an almost 'Miltonian touch'; and though Milton would not concede that the villain of *Paradise Lost* was none other than God (Yazdan), at least Satan was surely 'a rebel's rebel'. In all probability, Milton would have sympathy with a Yezidi's concept of the Divine character that might be close to the statement, 'Hell within Him for within Him Hell'.

The Georgians, throughout their history, have absorbed many ideas of duality and of conflict, of joy and sorrow, from the Middle East. An example is the 'Woe-Stricken Knight in the Panther's (Leopard's) skin' when he tearfully uttered his lament in Rust'haveli's masterpiece:

God is weary of the happiness I have had hitherto, therefore he turns my pleasure into the gall of bitterness; He has wounded me unto death, none can cure me. Such by His grace, is His will and desire.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

The history and geography of Georgia dictate that it has to face in two directions. Its ethnic, historical and cultural ties with the Middle East are crucial to the whole Georgian way of thinking. Georgians regard themselves as 'Europeans', and many of their famous musicians excel as soloists in orchestras in Europe and the United States. However, if you wish to understand Georgia's place in the world, you must understand this duality.

### Notes

1 Many Georgians were taken as captives to the Middle East in the Middle Ages. According to David Japaridze, 16th-century European sources mentioned Georgian Mamluks amongst the Egyptians. The 17th-century records of European historians stated that the approximate number of prisoners annually kidnapped from Georgia ranged from three to five thousand. This meant that if credit is given to the first and smaller number, Georgia lost three thousand sons and daughters every year. Between the 16th and 18th centuries and up to the first half of the 19th century, Georgia must have lost at least one million youths, aged 13-14, including Georgians either exiled to Iran or forcibly enlisted into the Persian army.

2 See David Marshall Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints* (London: Ethical and Religious Classics of East and West, 1956).

3 Arabic epigraphical material has been recorded in several locations in Georgia, including the Cathedral of Sveti Tskhoveli in Mtskheta: see Tsisia Kakhiani, 'A Bilingual Epitaph of Svetitskhoveli', *Estratto (Venice)*, 36:3 (1997), 169-177.

4 Garnik Asatryan and Hayrapet Margarian, 'The Muslim Community in Tiflis (8th to 19th century)', in *Iran and the Caucasus*, Vol. 8.1 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 29-52.

5 Ivar Lassey, *The Muharram Mysteries among the Azerbaijani Turks of Caucasia* (Helsingfors, 1926).

6 See *ISIM Newsletter*, 12 (June 2003: PO Box, 11089, 2301, EB Leiden, the Netherlands), 46-7; and George Sanikidze and Edward W. Walker, *Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia* (University of California, Berkeley: Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, Year 2004), paper 2004\_04'sani.

7 Islamic radicalism is present in the Caucasus as elsewhere and funding is selective and varied.

8 I am most grateful to Mrs Zina Jiorbenadze of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, and to Mr Giorgi Narimanvilis, for arranging this interview and for linguistic assistance during the course of our discussions.

9 Jardoe Assad (Arto Ozmanyany) (1929-1993) lived and carried out his activities in Tbilisi. He was known to Kurdish society as an expert on their native Kurdish language, literature, folklore and national traditions. He was a gifted poet and an outstanding translator of other people's poetry to Kurdish. He was a member of the Union of Writers of Georgia.

10 The tomb of Shaikh 'Adî, b. Musâfir in Lalish is revered by both Yezidis and Muslims.

11 Stanza 99, in 'Shot'ha Rust'haveli, *The Man in the Panther's Skin, a Close Rendering from the Georgian Attempted by Marjory Scott Wardrop*, with a Preface by Sir Oliver Wardrop (Tbilisi: "Nekeri" Publishing House, 2005), p. 31.

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