

Current Conditions of Religious Practice in Post-Socialist Georgia

The Role of Religion in Local Society

Matriculation Year: 2014

Place of Fieldwork: Georgia

Name: Naomi Yamada

Key Words: Post-Socialism, Revival of Religions, Religious Minorities, Ethnicity, and Religion

Research Background

Religious revival, combined with national revival, occurred in many countries of the former Soviet Union before and after independence. The dominant religion in each country was mobilized



in the public sphere to support assertions of ethnic identity and the building of nations and states. What is more important, such movements led to the revival of the other minority religions, and brought about religious diversity in each republic after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that had advocated an “atheistic ideology.” External influences have also had a significant impact on the process of religious revival in these countries. For example, many organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental, have been trying to implement religious human rights, and many missionaries have made efforts to spread their faith “beyond the ex-Iron Curtain.” Thus, the religious situation appears to be becoming more complex and problematic than in the Soviet period.

(←*The townscape of Batumi, the capital of Ajaria Autonomous Republic in the southeastern part of Georgia*)

Research Purpose and Aim

The purpose of this survey is to describe accurately current religious practice in Georgia. As mentioned above, the context for religious issues has changed gradually (and in some cases drastically) after independence in most of the countries of the former Soviet Union. Georgia is one such country. The Georgian government is under pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is struggling to increase its influence in the public, and from external authorities that seek to protect the human rights of religious minorities. In such a situation, how do local people currently lead their religious lives? Are they strongly affected by the motives of other actors, such as the government and social organizations, or do they simply practice religion as a part of their daily lives

irrespective of those motives?

Results and Achievements of Fieldwork

The fieldwork was carried out for about three weeks in March 2015. I visited a mosque in Pankisi Gorge, located in the eastern part of Georgia, and a Georgian Orthodox church in Terjola, in the western part.

The Kists, a sub-ethnic group of the Nakh people, make up a large part of the population in Pankisi Gorge. Most of them are Muslims, but nowadays it has been said that people are split to two groups, one continuing “traditional Islamic” practices, and the other accepting “new Islam.”

On one occasion, I visited (↑ **Meeting after Zikr at “Old Mosque” in Pankisi Gorge**) a mosque in the former group, usually called “Old Mosque” by the local people. When I entered the mosque with my Kist friend, the devotional acts called *Zikr* had already begun. *Zikr* means “remembrance of Allah.” About ten middle-aged women were circling round and round on the wooden floor of the small room, repeatedly reciting short prayers. Their harmony reminded me of the famous Georgian tradition of polyphony. They were very friendly and open with me. Some of them even recommended that I take a video and photographs. At the informal meeting afterwards, the women talked animatedly with each other about ordinary things. Some of them mentioned people who seemed to be belonging to the “new Islam” group, but there was no hostile feeling in their faces and voices. Therefore, these women simply practiced their religion in their own way, and did not seem to be interested in the motives of other actors outside the community. Their religious practice gives local women a good opportunity to meet each other in one place, and even to show their culture to people from other areas. Religious revival does not always bring about a rift between people who have different faiths.



I became acquainted with a Georgian girl living in Terjola, whose father was a priest, and she invited me to their church. At first, there were some arguments in her family and neighbors about whether I could go to church or not. However, perhaps because I was her friend and I told them that I went to church in Japan every Sunday, finally they allowed me to attend the service with them. When we entered the church at ten o'clock on a Sunday, the service had already started. Inside the



church about 40 men and women were standing and praying, some of whom gave me a faintly puzzled look. According to my friend, the service continues for three hours, from nine o'clock to twelve o'clock every Sunday, and during the service, people can enter and leave the church at any time. Georgian Orthodox chants that a choir sang throughout the service appeared to play an important role in distinguishing the sacred time of the service from other times of daily life.

(← **A church in Terjola, which a friend's father reconstructed after the collapse of the Soviet Union**)

After the service, people went home, talking with their family members or friends. They appeared to regard their religious practice as a part of daily life and a good opportunity to meet other families in the community, as the Kist people do. However, there was an atmosphere in which I felt unaccepted, in other words, a closed mood.

(Sapara Monastery in Akhaltsikhe in the southern part of Georgia→)



Implications and Impact for Future Research

As mentioned above, the local people in Pankisi and Terjola appear to lead their religious lives irrespective of the political or social motives of other actors. However, their attitudes towards people from outside their community were different. Research is needed into which people different communities regard as strangers who are not welcome at their religious practice. Further, research focusing on the difference in religious practice before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union is needed, in order to understand what “religious revival” really means. In addition to these two issues, as only two religious institutions were investigated on this occasion, the range of fieldwork needs to be expanded to many more religious practices and a variety of regions.



(←Kvirike Mosque in the Kobleti district of Ajaria)