

PROPER 'TRADITIONAL' VERSUS DANGEROUS 'NEW'

RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY AND IDIOSYNCRATIC ISLAMIC PRACTICES
IN POST-SOVIET CHECHNYA¹

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On 8 May 2008, employees of the Chechen Ministry of Foreign Relations, National Policy, and Press and Information performed a rite of sacrifice commemorating Akhmat-Khadzhi Kadyrov, the pro-Russian president of the Chechen Republic who had been assassinated four years previously, on 9 May 2004, during a ceremony devoted to the victory of the allied forces in WWII. Bulls were slaughtered and meat was given to an orphanage in Grozny. Before reading out the *mawlid* (in Chechnya, a collective prayer) to pay respects to the assassinated president, the vice-*mufti*² of Chechnya, Magomed Khatanaev, remarked:

If anyone were to have told us some twenty to thirty years ago that one day it would be possible to offer praise to the Prophet Muhammad and carry out a rite of sacrifice in the government offices, he would have been considered insane. Praise be to God that today we can openly utter the name of the Almighty and our Prophet, perform *namaz*,³ and observe the rules of the Holy Quran. Minister [of External Relations, National Policy, Press and Information] Shamsail Saraliev's proposal that such a rite should be performed here [at the Ministry] proves that he and his subordinates are pious and generous people honouring the memory of the noble sons of Chechnya, such as Akhmat-Khadzhi Kadyrov. (*Grozny Inform*, 8 May 2008)

This news report from the main state-controlled news agency in Chechnya, *Grozny Inform* – which reported on a similar ceremony at the Chechen Ministry of Finance the next day – makes no pretence of separating religion and the state in the Chechen Republic of the formally secular

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² In Chechnya, as elsewhere in the Russian Federation, the *mufti* is a religious official in charge of the *muftiyat*, the official Spiritual Board of Muslims of the relevant territory. During the past couple of years, the Spiritual Board of Muslims has swung its full support behind the Chechen government led by President Kadyrov Jr.

³ Term for Muslim prayer in Chechnya.

Russian Federation, and indeed points to the use of Islam as a prominent ideological tool in local government politics.⁴ In a territory until recently defined by federal law as a zone of counter-terrorist operations within Russia, where both violent state practices vis-à-vis its citizens (including abduction, torture and killing) and resistance to state power structures are still frequent, such religious ideology is used by the ruling regime, not only to gain the support of the population and thus strengthen its position, but also to classify certain citizens as ‘dangerous’, that is, as enemies of the state who should either be forced to change their position or be eliminated.⁵ Government ideology, coupled with violent practices, enhances an atmosphere of fear, or at least suspicious cautiousness, and precludes dissenters from openly discussing or practising their faith. Moreover, such ideological discourses often go unquestioned by many outside observers, who end up ignoring and thus distorting the religious diversity of the ‘obedient’ part of the population.

Nonetheless, however pervasive and aggressive this religious ideology might seem and indeed often is, it neither predetermines and guides all social practice, nor can it be regarded as the constant cause or explanation of (state) violence. In this article, I aim to trace the production and workings of this ideology as one of the discourses that interact with (overlapping, diverting from, building on) other discursive strands – academic, political, public – and to demonstrate, with the help of ethnographic material, how informal religious ideas and practices in Chechnya contradict and deviate from the official Islam of the government and academic-cum-journalistic accounts. I also wish to emphasise the inadequacy of the dichotomous Sufism vs. Wahhabism paradigm which has prevailed thus far in the analysis of religious life in the North Caucasus region of Russia, and especially to voice my objections to the common treatment of Chechnya as still a traditional Sufi territory, with Sufism as the ‘absolute’, dominant mode of religiosity.

⁴ Not that this goes against the general trend of employing religion, namely Orthodox Christianity, through its official body, the Russian Orthodox Church, to provide ideological support for the policies of the Russian government, as has been fully demonstrated by the ongoing cooperation between former President Putin and current President Medvedev on the one hand and the late Patriarch Aleksy and his successor Kirill on the other.

⁵ Similar attempts to crash the ‘extremist enemies’ can be observed elsewhere in the Russian North Caucasus and also in the post-Soviet states of Central Asia.

I

As indicated in the title of this paper, the religious ideology being promoted by the Chechen government rests on a clear-cut divide between the ‘right’ or ‘proper’ and the ‘wrong’ or ‘evil’ forms of Islam, the former being ‘traditional’ Sufism, the latter so-called Wahhabism. The origin and application of this dichotomy will be dealt with shortly. For now it suffices to say that this ideological formula does not reflect life lived on the ground, where the boundaries between what is believed and practised, what is masked and what is revealed, and how and why, as well as what is considered ‘safe’ or ‘dangerous’ by the authorities, are much more blurred and in no way restricted to black-and-white ‘Sufi’ versus ‘Wahhabi’ affiliations. A further dissection of this rigid set of oppositions is needed.

Let us start with a discussion of *beards*, currently the most prominent symbol and epithet used to mark off the resistance fighters (in Chechnya, they are often referred to as the ‘bearded’, Russian *borodatye*) and the practices and discourses that surround them. In the second half of the 1990s, a longish beard with no moustache together with trousers of above-ankle length became the main visual markers of religious difference in the Northeast Caucasus, especially the Republics of Dagestan and Chechnya, where men generally shave their beards, wear moustaches with pride and consider short trousers indecent. Such innovations were introduced by ‘Wahhabis’ (whom I prefer to call reformist-minded believers or ‘reformists’), people with a different, ‘purist’ vision of Islam, who disapprove of how local *adat*-based⁶ social norms have blended into Islamic rules and reject certain local practices, for example, pilgrimages to the mausoleums of sheikhs and their relatives, or the ritual of *dhikr*. Crucially, the beard still remains a signifier of diverging, that is, of reformist religious beliefs that often merge with protest against the ruling regime; or rather, the latter is voiced through the signs of the former. It is worn by the holders of such views, despite the ongoing crack-down on ‘Wahhabi terrorists’ and therefore the potential trouble that might be triggered by such appearance. Due to the current equation of ‘Wahhabi’ with ‘terrorist’ or resistance fighter (Russian *boevik*), the beard carries an immediate implication of the beard-wearer’s supposedly dangerous associations and possible involvement in crimes of terrorism; as such it rarely fails to attract the attention of violent state agents.

⁶ As I explain later in the paper, instead of defining *adat* narrowly as ‘custom’ or ‘customary law’, I prefer to see it as a wider range of socio-cultural ideas and practices.

Nonetheless, at least at first glance, there seems to be an impregnable ambiguity about the meanings of beards: one can never be sure exactly what motives are behind someone else's bearded appearance and how it might turn out for the wearer, since different contexts have different implications and effects. Last winter my friend witnessed a young man being detained in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, precisely because he had a beard, although not at all a pronounced one. It had been a horrendous night in one part of a sprawling, usually lively suburb of the city where some thirty to forty newly renovated five-storey buildings have been re-inhabited, and where markets and shops stay open far into the night. A 'terrorist cell' of two men and a woman had been discovered in one of the flats in the house next to my friend's lodgings. The flat had been stormed in the usual manner by an array of law-enforcement agents and members of special units who had arrived in the evening, surrounded the building, and continued shelling their target with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and machine guns till early morning. Those being besieged fired back. Once the operation was over, people from the adjacent flats whose evacuation had – typically – not been thought necessary and the inhabitants of the neighbouring houses, my friend among them, little by little appeared in the street to find out what had happened. It turned out that 'terrorists' had been killed; special units were still present taking stock of the battle. A gaping hole was evident where the flat used to be on one the side of the house. Bed linen and a night gown were hanging on the balcony, which had bullet holes in it, one floor above the spooky hole that signalled both the previous 'normality' of human life and the present fear to approach it.

A threatening group of heavily armed Special Tasks Police and Federal Security Bureau agents dressed in khaki camouflage uniforms were lingering around. One of the men, with a high-calibre Kalashnikov machine gun in his hand, moved towards my friend and his host, passed them and stopped by a young bearded neighbour standing nearby. '*Nokhchi vui?* (Are you a Chechen?)', he asked him. After he had nodded positively, the member of special unit asked the youth to come with him. After a brief conversation, the youth was surrounded by the other armed men, pushed into a silver car of local Russian make and taken away. 'They are detaining Khamid!' some neighbours were shouting helplessly in their wake; others were silent. In the usual scenario of such extra-judicial detentions, the 'suspect' is taken to the police or some other quarters and tortured to extract a 'confession' of belonging to an illegal armed formation led by

Wahhabi ideologues and participating in terrorist crimes. After the victim has confessed under torture, charges might be brought against him, and he might consequently be convicted of crimes of terrorism and sentenced. The law enforcement agents in their turn tick off another case of success in the fight against the rebels. As the story goes, this time the young man was lucky to return after a couple of days. The beard had cost him dear, but not as dear as for many other such men before him.

What this episode indicates is the absence of any concern with the actual religious beliefs and political sentiments of the captured individual: they remain hidden from us and are not at stake here. What matters is the symbolic connection of a beard (perceived as the main visible property of a 'Wahhabi', that is, a 'terrorist') with a potential threat to the state.

Yet, in a revealing twist, the same beard can lose its obvious harm and acquire neutrality when worn by a member of some influential law enforcement unit. It is not unusual to see heavily armed men in black uniforms (the colour of clothes adopted by President Kadyrov's security forces and some other special units) sprouting neatly groomed beards in the towns and villages of Chechnya.⁷ The paradox is that they might even harbour the reformist sentiments they are supposed to be fighting fiercely against. 'We can grow beards, you can't!' was the remark made by one member of special police unit to our young Chechen acquaintance Ruslan, who had been summoned for an inquiry about his alleged participation in a rebel group (which he indeed has links with). Unsurprisingly, the young man faced questions about wearing a beard and also the ring on his ring finger, a sign which, together with the absence of underwear (also often checked by law enforcement agents), has recently become yet another indication of 'Wahhabi' affiliation in Chechnya.

In short, what we have encountered in these cases is not religion per se, not contested Islamic meanings and arguments over the substance of Islam in contemporary Chechnya, but rather the ideological use of religious symbols in the violent struggle for and the assertion of political power. The production of religious ideology – in other words, how Islam is appropriated for ideological purposes by the ruling circles in both Moscow and Grozny – deserve greater consideration here.

⁷ Even more striking are men wearing camouflage with very long unkempt beards and Che Guevara hairstyles who can sometimes be spotted in central Grozny. 'Wahhabi fighters' by appearance (?), they are said to be agents provocateurs.

II

This ideology should not be seen as a monolithic body of knowledge but, more accurately, as an assemblage of different discursive layers and types of power that constantly affect and shape each other. Thus, the ideological postulates advanced in Moscow, especially during Putin's presidency (2000–2008), cannot be examined without due consideration of the main arguments advanced in academic and journalistic works; likewise, the religious programme imposed on the Chechen population by President Kadyrov cannot be analysed without keeping in mind the discourses sustained by the federal government and academia. It might well be that academic debate carries much of the responsibility for providing government circles and policy-makers in Moscow with a convenient tool in the politics of confrontation whereby 'Wahhabism' (alternatively termed 'religious radicalism' or 'extremism') has been made the central cause and target of the official 'fight against terrorism'. And vice versa, in endless cycles of discourses, researchers, analysts and journalists are confirming and perpetuating the rigid yet insubstantial categories once discovered in the ideological talk of the government.

The dichotomy between 'traditional' Islam and Wahabism has been consistently upheld, in a stronger or milder form, by Russian, including North Caucasian, as well as Western scholars engaged in the analysis of Muslim movements in the territories of the former Soviet Union, especially Central Asia and North Caucasus.⁸ One must agree with the conclusions reached by the Russian scholar Igor Alekseev (Alekseev 2004) that this distinction is a result of the search by post-Soviet scholars – following in the footsteps of their Western colleagues, who first equated terrorism with *Islamic* terrorism and then searched for an Islam compatible with democracy – for an Islam that is 'loyal' to the state and compatible with the Russian federal state system. Consequently, what has been revealed as 'good', 'moderate' and 'peaceful' is the 'local' or 'traditional' Islam,⁹ which has been confronted with the 'bad', 'politicised' and 'militant'

⁸ For a good overview of the relevant literature, see Knysk. Some of the more recent articles include Yemelianova 2007, Yarlykapov 2007, Gammer n.d. and Akaev 2008.

⁹ As Alekseev rightly points out, the focus on 'our' Islam reflects the academic preoccupation during the Soviet period with the local practices of Islam and particularly the pre-Islamic influences on them. Moreover, he notes that the main specifics of Russian Islam is not its special 'locality' but rather its absence in terms of the low religiosity of post-Soviet (i.e. post-atheist) Muslims and their very restricted knowledge of Islam (Alekseev 2004: 410-411). One might add, though, that this knowledge has increased considerably in recent years, due to unrestricted global exchange of information, study visits of younger generation Islamic scholars from Russia to the Middle East and a rising interest in Islamic ideas and practices exhibited by the younger generation Muslims of Russia in their quest for identity.

Islam of ‘foreign or ‘Arab’ origin. In the same vein, the ‘peaceful’, ‘traditional’ Islam of Chechnya and the two other republics of Russia’s Northeast Caucasus, Ingushetia and Dagestan, has been personified by Sufism, even though this too has been perceived in the past as distancing itself from or opposing the state and its ideology and providing a vehicle for resistance. The challenger to Sufism in the last couple of decades has been the newly arrived, radical trend of Wahhabism or Salafism.¹⁰

Against the backdrop of scholarly debate, the ideology of government emerges as seemingly more concrete and targeted. The two interconnected, sometimes merging discursive strands evolving in the federal centre (Moscow) and the peripheral territory (Chechnya) have the presence of ‘Wahhabi terrorist’ as a threat to the state as their common theme. Yet, the tone and phrasing of the problem present some marked differences. Having placed the war conflict in Chechnya firmly within the framework of the international fight against terrorism ever since the 9/11 attacks in the United States, Moscow prefers a more abstract language which easily resounds with the wider rhetoric of the ‘war on terror’. For example, when the new Russian President Dmitry Medvedev appointed a new head of the Federal Security Bureau in May 2008, he stated that high-level counter-terrorism work and the fight against extremism would remain among the priorities of the FSB. The ‘terrorist’ of the federal centre remains as vague as the ‘enemy of the nation’ (Russian *vrag naroda*) used to be during the Stalinist era, although the latter was the ‘enemy within’, while the former is the enemy from without, the ‘Other’. The mystery of what counts as a ‘real terrorist’ is only enhanced by the active implementation of the law ‘On Counterterrorism’ by federal proxies in the North Caucasus, who keep launching new offensives, introducing new ‘zones of counterterrorist operation’¹¹ and spinning theories of Al-Qaeda links and the foreign sponsorship of terrorist groups in Chechnya and other republics of the North Caucasus.

¹⁰ In Russian official, public and scholarly debates these terms have acquired meanings that differ considerably from those in Middle Eastern studies. Moreover, the two terms have been used interchangeably although they denote different movements and schools of thought in the studies of Middle East (see e.g. Cook 1992, Ahmad 1966, Abun Nasr 1963, Abdallah 1983 and Commins 1990).

¹¹ The ten-year-old status of the whole territory of Chechnya as a zone of counter-terrorist operations was revoked in April 2009 by the Russian anti-terrorism committee, causing much speculation about the reasons for such a decision and the future prospects for the region. However, the law enforcement structures retain a right to declare parts of Chechnya a ‘zone for counter-terrorist operations’ when deemed necessary, as has been done in relation to the neighbouring republics.

By contrast, the policies and praxis of Chechen President Kadyrov are quite straightforward: evil must be eradicated. While at times referring to the ‘terrorists’ and ‘extremists’ constantly being mentioned by Moscow, Kadyrov’s government and authorities are mostly talking about ‘Wahhabis’, *boeviks* (rebels), bandits or Satans.¹² These terms are used interchangeably and are inevitably identified with ‘Wahhabism’ as the main source of terrorism and of malevolence in general. Consider Kadyrov’s announcement during one of his recent meetings with Chechen journalists in Grozny, when he accused the ‘Wahhabi followers’ of separatist propaganda and the deliberate spreading of ‘wrong interpretations of Islam’. ‘Wahhabism is the biggest evil, and we should not be afraid to talk about it openly. These fake prophets should be countered with the same weapon – the word. One of the mightiest means of such counteractions are the mass media’, said Kadyrov (*Interfax News Agency*, 1 August 2008). On another occasion, meeting with the Minister of Education of Chechnya, Kadyrov was stricter: ‘If Wahhabism cannot be cured, it has to be eradicated. Remember all the predecessors of Umarov [Dokka Umarov, the current self-proclaimed leader of Wahhabi resistance and head of the so-called North Caucasus Emirate] – Basaev, Khattab, Abu Valid [rebel leaders killed by local and federal forces in the course of the last decade]? Where have they gone? We will send Umarov there too!’ (*Interfax News Agency*, 31 July 2008).

These quotations reveal the two main pillars of the current struggle with Wahhabism in Chechnya: a wide-ranging ideological campaign and a physical crackdown on all individuals perceived as ‘Wahhabis’.

On the ideological front, Kadyrov’s team makes use of several influential devices. First of all, the President enjoys the submissiveness of the official Muslim clerics belonging to the Chechen *muftiyat*. *Imams*, *mullas* and *quadis* are expected to go on television preaching the ‘right version of Islam’ (in January 2008, Kadyrov threatened to close down the local TV channels – there are currently two main channels, both controlled by President, and some music TV – that would not broadcast shows about Islam), while teaching activities in *madrassas* (Muslim schools) and sermons in the mosques are controlled by the apparatus of the main *mufti* of Chechnya, Sultan Mirzaev (ironically a *sharia* official during the interwar period, 1996-1999,

¹² Ironically, Kadyrov himself has been called a Satan by one his main opponents, Sulim Yamadaev, former commander of the ‘Vostok’ (East) battalion subject to the federal Ministry of Defence, assassinated in Dubai in March 2009. As Yamadaev claimed in one of his recent statements, now circulated as a video clip on mobile phones: ‘Seventy percent of his [Kadyrov’s] forces are amnestied Satans.’ I will return to the issue of amnesty and mobile communication later in the paper.

of the independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria). Activities around mosques are of great interest not only to the official religious leadership, but also to a number of law enforcement structures and the security and intelligence services. It is at the mosques that constant surveillance takes place, screening individuals that might present a potential ‘Wahhabi’ threat, infiltrating groups of believers and perhaps detaining the ‘suspects’ later. This summer a mosque-goer was taken away from his home at night after an explosion¹³ in a Grozny suburb where my Chechen friends live and brought to the local Department of the Interior, where he discovered that one of his torturers jumping on his body was a fellow believer whom he had previously seen at the mosque. In today’s Chechnya, any man who attends the mosque regularly (there are no women’s sections in the mosques, although recently the first women’s mosque was built in Grozny) and who exhibits signs of strong piety is in danger of being persecuted as a ‘Wahhabi’ radical unless he belongs to one of the miscellaneous and at times competing power structures (Russian *sylovye struktury*) currently operating in Chechnya.

However, piety itself remains vague and elusive: when is it a virtue to be a pious Muslim, and when does it become an inappropriate and potentially harmful weapon? In the absence of any meaningful public debate on religion, those who are in doubt are left with only one choice if they are to avoid trouble (although even the ‘obedient’ Muslims cannot always hope to escape the harassment of violent state agents): conspicuously subscribe to the ‘right version of Islam’ advanced by the ruling regime. Although this is presented as ‘traditional Sufism’, it would be more appropriate to regard it as a cluster of arbitrarily chosen religious symbols and practices used for political purposes. These practices – above all *dhikr* (ritual of the remembrance of God), *mawlid* and pilgrimage to *ziyarat*s (mausoleums of sheikhs and their relatives) – are borrowed from the largest *wird* (in Chechnya, section or subgroup) of the Sufi Qadiriyya *tariqa* or brotherhood. This group carries the name of Kunta-Khadzhi Kishiev, who founded a Qadiriyya branch in Chechnya in the middle of the nineteenth century. The choice of Kunta-Khadzhi *wird* as a platform for the regime’s religious ideology is explained by the fact that President Kadyrov’s kin have long been adherents of this branch, with one line in the family traditionally seen as belonging to the religious authorities. The assassinated Akhmat Kadyrov was one of

¹³ Such explosions, as well as attacks on law enforcement agents, are carried out by resistance fighters or, as argued by fellow researchers working in Chechnya, by the FSB. Explosions are especially frequent in summer.

them and served as *mufti* of Chechnya before being appointed the Head of Government of the Republic in 2000, right after the active fighting of the second Chechen War was over.

The differences between the Kunta-Khadzhi *wird* and other groups of Qadiriyya *tariqa*, as well as between the Qadiriyya *wirds* and groups of the other major Sufi *tariqa* in Chechnya, the Naqshbandiyya, relate not so much to doctrine but rather to ritual practice. Thus, while Kunta Khadzhi *murids* (members of *wird*) practise loud *dhikr* by moving around in a circle, others might perform loud *dhikr* by standing and nodding heads (*Auda wird* of the Qadiri *tariqa*) or do so to the accompaniment of drums and local stringed instrument (*Vis Khadzhi wird*), or, alternatively, perform silent *dhikr* in a sitting position (*wirds* of Naqshbandi *tariqa*).

While the practices of other Qadiri and Naqshbandi groups are currently not completely rejected as diverting from ‘the right version’ of Islam, it is the rituals of Kunta Khadzhi *wird* as performed by government members, official religious leaders and their supporters that have acquired massive public visibility in Chechnya. When President Kadyrov travels to the countryside, large groups of villagers are usually gathered together by local religious officials, who, together with government members and their huge entourage, heartily perform public *mawlid* and *dhikr*, which are always recorded on cameras and repeatedly shown on the local TV news and other shows. Often these rites are performed to commemorate one of the Kadyrov family members (as mentioned above) or to restore the health or other problems of the President’s relatives or sometimes, though much more rarely, for the relatives of other government members. Thus, several *mawlids* and *dhikrs* were performed to pray for the good health of President Kadyrov’s 10-year old nephew, who had been presented with a car by Kadyrov and had ended up unconscious in a serious accident.

President Kadyrov also makes trips to *ziyarats*, many of which have been reconstructed and built anew using government funds. Again, these are mostly *ziyarats* of Kunta-Khadzhi *wird*. In addition, the government has made efforts to build and renovate as many mosques as possible throughout Chechnya. This has been carried out with the help of a reconstruction fund named after Akhmat-Khadzhi Kadyrov and often replenished with ‘donations’ deducted from the modest salaries of public-sector employees. In the city of Grozny, a new central mosque, also bearing the name of Akhmat-Khadzhi and said to be the biggest in Europe, opened its doors in October 2008. The new mosque complex is likely to serve as a venue for international events aimed at proving the ‘peacefulness’ of Chechen Islam, like the forum entitled ‘Islam – the

Religion of Peace and Creation' held in Kadyrov's residential town of Gudermes in 2007¹⁴ and the international conference 'The role of Sufism in the development of Muslim society' that took place in the same town in July 2008, with the officially announced goal of establishing 'Sufi propaganda as the primary ideational basis in the building of the nation state'.

Sufism is presented, with no hesitation or embarrassment, as a proper and potentially most efficient ideology of the state; as such it re-appears as just one side of the coin, the other being its old-time antagonist Wahhabism. Just as 'Wahhabism' – or more precisely, certain symbols, slogans and rites pertinent to so-called radical or fundamental Islam – was appropriated by a faction of the Chechen resistance movement from the mid-1990s onwards, so has 'traditional Sufism' been developed by the ideologues of the pro-Russian government and the current regime in Chechnya as a framework for (often violent) action.

Yet Sufism as the path of a believer seems to have been lost somewhere amid the struggles for power. One might even argue that – having been impoverished during the seventy years of atheist Soviet rule – Sufism in Chechnya has been depleted even further in the two decades since the start of *perestroika* and the break-up of the Soviet Union, despite the 'revival of religion' that was unleashed in conjunction with these processes. In neighbouring Dagestan, where Sufism has a longer history and stronger intellectual roots than in Chechnya, several *tariqas* are nowadays actively competing with each other, with living sheikhs involved in the education of *murids* and thus securing continuity of their teachings (Shiksaliev 2004). In Chechnya, by contrast, there does not seem to be much of an intellectual debate, except some contestation over ritual differences (which have been pointed out to me in private conversations) between Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya groups, who mostly venerate deceased sheikhs.

As mentioned earlier, there has been a strong tendency in both western and Russian academia to regard Chechnya (and North-East Caucasus in general) as a stronghold of Sufism and to put forward various claims about Sufi dominance and influence, from emphasising the Sufi role in anti-Soviet resistance during the Soviet period (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985) to insisting on constant Sufi involvement in politics ever since the Caucasus War and noting struggles between different Sufi groups for political influence (Akaev 1998, 1999, 2001; Malashenko 2001; Yemelianova 2001; Zalimkhanov and Khanbabaev 2000). Also, claims have

¹⁴ Kadyrov's initiatives are paralleled by analogous events on federal level. One of the recent examples is the international conference titled 'Islam will Conquer Terrorism' that took place on the Russian government's initiative in July 2008 in Moscow.

been made about large numbers of Sufi *wirds* and a considerable number of *wird* members, reaching up to 200,000 people (currently around one fifth of the population).¹⁵ Yet the credibility of such statistics is questionable for several reasons. First, it might be difficult to study Sufi groups, let alone count their members, as they are not officially registered and their practices are informal and usually not public. Secondly, due to the prolonged armed conflict, no on-the-ground research into Sufism in Chechnya has been carried out in the past two decades. Thirdly, a distinction should be made between an actively practising Sufi *murid* and a formal ‘member’ of a Sufi *wird*, as the latter can be anyone (a man, a woman, a child) who has inherited formal Sufi *wird* membership through the family, but may not be religious at all and may not even know which of the *wirds* he/she belongs to and who is its leading deceased sheikh.

Based on my own observations in the field, I contend that both the scope and political influence of Sufi groups in Chechnya has been highly exaggerated (although I cannot claim statistic accuracy, I would put the number of active Sufi *murids* at twenty times less than the mentioned 200,000). Moreover, I argue that while Sufism remains an important religious, cultural and historical reference point and for some the main channel or vehicle for Islamic faith, it cannot be considered an all-encompassing and overwhelming framework of religious ideas and practices or a major discursive tradition, to borrow Asad’s (1986) term, in contemporary Chechen society. Rather, ‘Sufism’ has so far been used uncritically as a label for a wide range of Islamic practices which cannot be directly classified as ‘Wahhabism’ and therefore are automatically deemed ‘traditional’, that is, as more appropriate in the given ideological environment. But such a classification ignores the vibrant, diverse and constantly changing religious life and the believers who engage in it, in other words the *lived* Islam in Chechnya, to which I turn now.

¹⁵ This estimate was provided to me by active *murids* of Kunta Khadzhi *wird* currently residing in Moscow. According to Akaev (2001), there are 32 *wirds* in Chechnya; according to Garsaev (1998), 65% of the Chechen population belong to Kunta Khadzhi *wird*. Also, referring to unnamed experts, Akaev says in his recent article (Akaev 2008) that 80% of people in Chechnya are believers who belong to one of the *wirds* (60% to Qadiriyya *wird* and 20% to Naqshbandiyya *wird*), 15% are believers with no ties to *wirds*, while 5% are not religious. This brings the total share of believers in Chechnya to 95% of the current population of about 1 million.

III

We all are believers!

‘Well, we all are believers!’ Zaynab remarked with some surprise when I noted that people in Chechnya seem to be much more religious than in the west. I had in mind the steady piety I had encountered during my visits to the families of friends and acquaintances and observed in public: for example, at the time of prayer when some men would pray on the streets – though it is a relatively new and not so ubiquitous practice in Chechnya, and a potentially ‘dangerous’ one, given the anti-Wahhabi sentiments, or during Friday sermons, when one can see people standing outside an overcrowded mosque in the centre of Grozny. Zaynab did not make such distinctions; for her, all her fellow Chechens were undoubtedly Muslims. Indeed, faith is present in Chechen lives, whether by frequent references to God Almighty and affirmations that ‘It’s all in God’s hands’ – fate, suffering, survival, hope for justice, success – or daily *adhans* resounding from the nearby mosques, or *dhikrs* performed at the funerals of loved ones.

Yet believers believe in different ways: some do so strongly, others waver; some unquestioningly engage in everyday practices, others search for new meanings; some prefer an individual path, others join groups. As elsewhere, Islam in Chechnya comprises varied and at times competing ideas, norms, interpretations and practices. Still, there are some underlying themes which cannot be ignored in the account of religious life. One of these is the notion of the synthesis of constantly transforming traditional (pre-Islamic) rules and practices and Islamic discourses.

‘Our laws’ and Islam: an easy merger?

Chechens often refer to ‘our laws’/‘Chechen laws’, ‘traditions’ or *adats* when discussing important life events and decisions such as birth, death, blood revenge, marriage, family affairs etc. As mentioned earlier, rather than categorising Chechen *adats* (which are not found in a strict written form but are instead circulated as loose references to what ‘ought’ be done in different social situations) as ‘customs’ or ‘customary law’, I would support Geertz’s claim (Geertz 2000 (1983)) that such categorisation does not do justice to the wider set of sentiments, in fact, to the world view encompassed by *adat*. Thus, I am inclined to see ‘Chechen laws’ or *adats* as a set of

socio-cultural rules and related practices that emphasise patriarchal authority, kin ties and the responsibilities attached to them and are linked to the multifaceted ideals of dignity and justice.

Often ‘Chechen laws’ of pre-Islamic origin are seen as having smoothly merged with Islam, which gained ground in the current territory of Chechnya in the form of Sufi brotherhoods in the nineteenth century with the rise of anti-colonial resistance. Not once have I been told that the newly arrived Islam was found to coincide or go ‘hand in hand’ with ‘traditions’ or *adats* and was therefore accepted by Chechen population. There is no space here for a discussion of how the rules and practices of Islamic law or *sharia* and *adat* affected and shaped each other and where and how the teachings of Sufi sheikhs, particularly Kunta-Khadzhi in Chechnya, built on or diverged from local socio-cultural norms.¹⁶ What is more important is the competition between ‘Islam’ and ‘tradition’, exhibited by those members of society who view either one or the other as more influential and instrumental in the architecture of the Chechen world view. For example, Seda, one of my female friends in Grozny, a well-educated woman in her forties, expressed a very firm belief in the strength of *adats*: ‘We never even had such concepts as “philosophy”, “religion”, even “ethics”. All of these ideas had materialised in our own *g’illakh* and *oi’zdangalla* (Chechen terms for behavioural etiquette and nobility or noble moral stance). And *adat* has always been stronger than *sharia*.’ Seda mentioned the practice of blood revenge as one of the most telling examples: while *sharia* would prescribe a material compensation for the life taken, the local Chechen preference would be for either a rite of reconciliation or a prolonged blood feud. She presented me with several moving stories about reconciliation (one of them was about a man who had forgiven, in a dramatic act of reconciliation, the unintentional killing of his wife and children in a car accident, and thus stopped a blood feud from starting. Had he not forgiven the offender, Seda noted, the blood feud would have erupted immediately.) Yet she admitted that Chechens have also been opting for monetary and material compensations in such cases. Most probably, there is no predominant view and practice; and the diversity indeed testifies to the dynamic fusion of the Islamic and local socio-cultural discourses.

¹⁶ Among works that provide further analysis are Zelkina 2000, Bobrovnikov 2002, and Khizrieva 2004.

The Sufi case

This fusion can easily be traced in current Sufi practices in Chechnya; it also explains why the quality of being ‘traditional’ has been perceived as integral to Sufism. The most vivid example here is the widespread performance of *dhikr* at funerals, mentioned above. No funeral in Chechnya is considered proper without *dkhir* and *mawlid*. Even if the deceased person and his/her family are not particularly pious or not pious at all, their funeral ceremony at their house will in most cases involve the two rites carried out by Sufi *murids* from their village or some neighbouring area. Accordingly, it is not without reason that the reformist-minded Muslim youths in the North Caucasus have disdainfully characterised Sufism as ‘funeral Islam’ (see Akaev 2008, referring to Yarlykapov’s findings).

Interestingly, the performance is not restricted to *murids* of the *wird* the dead person formally belongs to: thus, members of the Qadiriyya *wird* can participate in the funeral *dhikr* carried out for someone formally belonging to the Naqshbandiyya *wird* and vice versa. It is the obligation of *murids* to attend funerals in their community and sometimes in the neighbouring ones; often the members of a particular group meet right at the place of the funeral and stay there for a large part of the day and for the next few days of the mourning period (the number varies for the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya *tariqas*), praying and carrying out the rituals and enjoying the meals provided by the hosts in between, or going home for lunch and in the evenings. Even if *murids* have particular professions and jobs and various daily duties in their ‘other’ life, as a group they are set apart from other community members since they are performers of certain religious services expected from them and for which they in turn expect a certain type of treatment. (*Murids* differ in their demeanour and appearance too: Chechen Sufis wear special attire for *dhikr*, consisting of grey or dark-greenish loose trousers, loose long-sleeve shirts reaching below the hips and special round caps that vary from *wird* to *wird*. As the local joke goes, *murids* are great eaters who want good meat served to them, implying some self-interest on the part of *dhikr* performers. Not that the duty is easy. Khussein, an active *murid* of Auda (sheikh Bamatgirii) *wird* of Qadiriyya *tariqa* in his mid-fifties, told me that sometimes he has to attend twenty funerals and *mawlids* per month. That day he was tired and confessed to me that he would rather engage in some manual labour. And added immediately: ‘But no one forced me to become a *murid*.’

Now, *dhikr* as a Sufi ritual, in fact the ‘trademark’ of Sufism, has not usually been linked to funerals in Sufi brotherhoods around the world, while *mawlid*, which is generally taken to mean the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad or of a saint but has been expanded to denote a collective prayer that might be held for different purposes in Chechnya, has not always been regarded as a Sufi-only ritual.¹⁷ Thus, these rituals have become the properties of both Sufis and the wider Muslim community in Chechnya: *dhikr* through its appropriation by the majority as a general ‘traditional’ practice, and *mawlid* through its incorporation into Sufi practices.

Together with *dhikr* and *mawlid*, *ziyarat* (a sheikh’s or saint’s tomb or mausoleum or a trip to one) is another major practice of Sufis. Khussein took me with him on one such trip together with some of his fellow *murids* and villagers. Early one April morning, I washed my hair and performed ablutions as taught by Khussein and instructed by his wife and repeated a formula, whose full meaning I was to understand only after some asking and searching: ‘Ostagfirullah’ or ‘Let Allah forgive me’ (in Khussein’s interpretation: ‘I give up any inappropriate thoughts and deeds and try to live decently’). Dressed in a longish skirt (Khussein’s wife and daughters told me that a skirt just below knee-length would not be appropriate, although I later saw such at the pilgrimage site), my head covered with a headscarf, I walked with Khussein and his son to the van that would take us, about ten villagers, to three different *ziyارات*. It was the month of Rabi’ al-awwal, when the Prophet Muhammad (Arabic *al-nabi*) was born. It is obligatory for every Muslim to make a trip to the *ziyarat* in this month, Khussein said. As our van was creeping along the muddy, winding roads towards the mountain village where Kunta-Kadzhi mother’s mausoleum is located, I kept seeing people walking in pairs and small groups, some leaning on tall sticks. These were pilgrims covering the distance to the *ziyarat* on foot; some had been walking for more than a day. As we approached the village where a new mosque had been built recently with President Kadyrov’s support, an open space emerged in front of us, filled with private cars, old Soviet buses, minivans and people everywhere. Yet the atmosphere was one of peace and a certain unhurried deliberateness. We joined the stream of visitors moving steadily towards the Khedi (Kunta-Khadzhi’s mother’s) mausoleum, passing a Russian army camp with

¹⁷ There are two different approaches in dealing with Sufism and cult of saints: one ties both sets of practices together, while the other tends to see them as separate. Probably the most appropriate way would be to regard these two phenomena as different, but nevertheless affecting and borrowing from each other (e.g. Gilsenan 1973). As regards Chechnya, *mawlid* as a prayer cannot be considered an exclusively Sufi practice.

an armoured personnel carrier and some army trucks. In this region, clashes between rebel forces and army and police units are still frequent; yet, the stream of pilgrims has recommenced with double force. Moreover, it is being ‘encouraged from above’, as President Kadyrov has taken care of both the renovation of the mausoleum and the construction of new buildings and is a frequent visitor himself.

We had to stand in line to enter Khedi’s mausoleum and leave our shoes at the door; once inside, we made three circles around Khedi’s grave and moved on to the prayer room, from which I luckily escaped with the help of Khussein’s son. We moved on to a newly built octagonal shed where men were performing the *dhikr* of the Kunta-Khadzhi *wird*. Khussein and his fellows joined in for a while (as he explained later, there are no great contradictions between the *dhikr* of his group and the Kunta-Khadzhi men). As we went on to another shed, I noticed hundreds of colourful strips tied to the fence poles, bushes and trees. I was told that these had been left by people praying for something, most often a solution to some health problem. We made another three circles under the shed and proceeded towards our van. The first visit was over. We descended to two other villages in the foothills: one was a *ziyarat* of Umal-Cekkh, guardian of health, where hundreds of colourful bands had replaced leaves on the trees, and the other a neatly-renovated mausoleum of Sheikh Auda, founder of Khussein’s *wird*. As we circled around the mausoleum the usual three times and walked out backwards, I found myself praying for the good of myself, my family and my hosts. Later Khussein told me I had ‘partly become a Muslim’.

The reformist case

Khamad and Maryam, a young married couple I had befriended in Grozny, would never even think of going to *ziyarats*. For them, it is one of the unnecessary innovations (Arabic *bid’a*) incorporated into Islam. Both strong believers, Khamad and Maryam possess some knowledge of Arabic – Khamad studied with a mullah in a madrassa in the early 1990s and continued learning on his own afterwards, while Maryam was taught Arabic by her well-educated brother – and are deeply interested in the history and developments of Islam. They often pray together, read about Islam and study the hadiths (narrative records and explanations of the sayings and customs of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, which are available in different Russian and also Arabic versions in Grozny). Islam permeates all aspects of their daily lives, from teaching their

toddler how to pray, to using Islamic homeopathic healing methods, to Maryam's dress (she prefers a Chechen-style headscarf to the more Middle-Eastern *hijab*, which is rare in Chechnya, but unlike many Chechen women of her age who prefer a skirt below the knee and tops that cover only the shoulders in summer, she wears long-sleeve blouses and a long skirt to cover her arms and legs), to listening to Islamic songs (*nasheeds*), to frequent quotations from the Quran and hadiths. Indeed, their faith is one of the main reference points in their attempts to make sense of and live the difficult life in Chechnya, a life of unpredictability and danger, and of permanent heaviness, as they sometimes admit.

Nevertheless, the language of Islam, although constantly present, is not the main or only vehicle through which Khamad and Maryam express their opposition to the subverted morals of present-day Chechnya, to the current regime and the corruption and violence it promotes. Having gone through abduction and torture some years ago (the unfortunate fate of many young men during the last decade in Chechnya), Khamad is now seeking justice through secular courts in Chechnya and Europe. Yes, he sympathises with the resistance movement, nurtures the idea of Chechen independence and rejects Kadyrov's rule. However, he does so not on the basis of 'hatred against infidels' and the aspiration to build a pan-Caucasian Islamic state, as has so often been claimed in different analyses of resistance movements in Chechnya and the North Caucasus region in general. Differences among the republics notwithstanding, what these studies have failed to see is that resistance phrased in Islamic terms might not necessarily be Islamic (in the sense of being driven, first and foremost by Islamic ideas). The reasons why teenagers and youths – many of whom remain immune to the religious ideology imposed by Kadyrov's team and instead consume and exchange countless mobile phone videos showing attacks on Chechen law enforcement units inevitably accompanied by exclamations 'Allahu akbar!' (Arabic 'God is great!') – keep joining the rebel units in the forests might be far from 'radical Islamism'. They might rather be rooted in the prolonged experience of deprivation and injustice; however, this theme deserves a separate study.

Returning to Khamad and Maryam, their 'reformism' is a thoughtful stance which does not exclude the unavoidable compromises necessitated by the competing interpretations of Islam and, even more importantly, the need to avoid potentially grave consequences for deviating from the officially accepted version of religion. For example, even if they believe that certain Sufi ideas and practices – veneration of sheikhs as saints, trips to *ziyarats* and *dhikrs* – lead to an

unjustifiable likening of man with God and therefore should be rejected as distortions of Islam, they nevertheless accept that such rituals are performed in their extended families. Once I happened to be in the village where Maryam's parents were living at the time she was visiting them (in Chechnya, a husband usually takes his wife and children to her parents, where they stay for some days, while he himself returns home, as it is considered inappropriate for the husband to stay overnight at the place of his parents-in-law). I made use of this coincidence and went to see Maryam at her parents' place. Upon my arrival, I noticed a lot of people, mostly men, coming and going. 'What's the matter?' I asked Maryam. 'We have just had *dhikr* and *mawlid* as a part of mourning ceremony for my deceased uncle,' she replied, adding that she had been busy preparing food and serving guests. Maryam had told me before that her father, a successful construction engineer both in Soviet times and nowadays, had turned to Islam relatively recently (but thoroughly) and had embraced the majority approach, which included the widespread practices of *dhikr* and *mawlid*. Even though Maryam disapproved of them, she would never make any remarks or criticise her father in my presence, let alone in public. In a complex system of competing authoritative discourses from which distinct visions of religion emerge, an individual is never absolutely free fully to exercise his or her choice; rather he or she is involved in an unending process of negotiation, which includes firm insistence on one's own diverging beliefs, as well as concessions to the ideas of the majority.

One of Khamad's assertions was that it was, in large part, the fault of special services (KGB, now FSB) working hand in hand with the local power elites (Soviet bureaucrats, then Kadyrov Senior and now Kadyrov Junior) that Sufi Islam had become so deformed in Chechnya. Sufi Islam, Khamad claimed, nowadays differs very much from its original version as upheld by Kunta-Khadzhi and other sheikhs of his time. However, it was not only the secret services and power structures that were to blame, but also the followers and promoters of 'Wirdic' Islam. As asserted by Khamad, *murids* of Sufi *wirds* do not want to pursue knowledge and engage in self-education; they are satisfied with just learning the rituals and prayers. 'Their credo is: *this world is not for us*; they only look forward to that next world,' Khamad said in one of our evening discussions.

Although ideas of otherworldliness are present in Sufi thought in Chechnya just as elsewhere, I believe that many active Sufi *murids* would strongly disagree with Khamad. In an environment of constant religious contestation against the backdrop of a religious ideology being

forcefully implemented by the government, it is very hard to stay politically neutral, if not in one's deeds, then definitely on the level of ideas. Consider Sufi *murid* Khussein's opinion about 'Wahhabis':¹⁸ 'I would rather die than let any Wahhabi enter my house. I simply don't accept this [Wahhabism]. Wahhabis are not acceptable in our republic; they just violate all the norms and practices of our people. If they are acceptable in the east, let them practice there. [...] Currently 70 percent of those in power are 'Wahhabis'. Kadyrov has made them lawful.' Once again, one is struck by a realisation that these disputes are not so much about the substance of religion as about the power to determine what that substance should be – a power struggle fought in clashing discourses.

Formal Muslims

Another sentiment found in Chechen society, though not particularly advertised, is lukewarm or formal religiosity, or indeed the absence of piety. The Soviet term 'atheist Muslim' is relevant to the issue here. As mentioned earlier, the long period of Soviet rule with its atheist policies and praxis deprived Islam of its intellectual core. Faced with restrictions on movement and the exchange of knowledge, Soviet Muslims were confined to the informational vacuum of the narrow local milieu, where the continuity of Islamic tradition had to be maintained in the face of the oppressive measures of 'atheisation'. There was a need to find an alternative to the proper practices that had become impossible; one telling example in Chechnya is the suggestion that people carry out seven pilgrimages to the *ziyarat* of Kunta Khadzi's mother instead of going on the *hajj* to Mecca (Vachagaev 2008).

During the Soviet period, at least two generations of people were born and grew up without being inculcated into Islamic ideas and practices. This is not to say that religion was totally absent; some have rightly noted (and my fieldwork has confirmed these claims to a degree) that part of the Muslim population did retain at least some of the practices. Yet, as a result of Soviet

¹⁸ What is meant by 'Wahhabis' here are supporters of rebel field commanders like the late Shamil Basaev, who were competing for power with the late Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov in the interwar period, 1996-1999. They made use of radical Islam as an ideology, introduced *sharia* law, then fought against the Russian federal army in the second Chechen war and later continued their activities as part of resistance movement. A large number of such former 'Wahhabis' have 'descended the mountains' or 'left the woods', as the popular saying goes, and joined the current law enforcement structures and other power units under Kadyrov's wing. Switching sides and joining the camp of one's former enemy was the only way for these fighters to get amnestied. Those who did not want to accept such a scenario were either killed or escaped to the west, or are still 'in the woods'.

nationalities politics, being a Muslim and participating in religious rites became either part of a national and cultural identity (Shahrani 2005; Pelkmans 2007) or a means of socialisation (Bobrovnikov 2005). The overarching conceptual framework, however, was that of *homo sovieticus*, the Soviet citizen of the vast Soviet industrial and industrialising state.

In today's Chechnya, there are still people who can be considered 'Soviet products' in that they have never known Islam and have not discovered it anew since the fall of the Soviet Union either. One example is Daud, a pensioner-taxi driver, whose services I used frequently while in Chechnya. A mild man in his sixties, Daud had chauffeured Communist Party secretaries and directors of collective farms around in the late Soviet period and enjoyed some of the perks associated with the upper-level of the Soviet *nomenklatura*. Daud speaks with some longing for those days when factories and collective farms were working and there was some order, and he vehemently deplores the current corruption, overall injustice and unpredictability. Yet I have not heard any references to God in his speech or any attempts to explain the hardship and suffering encountered during the war and its aftermath by attributing it all to God's will. Nor have I noticed any signs of piety in his behaviour during our daily comings and goings. Daud did not fast during the month of Ramadan, which I discovered with surprise by routinely offering him tea and snacks before our afternoon ride.

Zara did not fast either. A divorced woman in her early forties, Zara says she was never taught how to pray in her childhood and teenage years. Now she finds it too hard to master. When her sons were attending the local madrassa and praying at home, she tried to learn from them. However, she soon forgot what she had learned and stopped practising again. 'Do you believe in God?' I ask her. 'Of course I do,' is the answer.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate how the diverse forms of lived Islam in Chechnya contradict the ideological discourses supported by the Russian government, journalists, analysts and academicians, as well as the current Chechen regime, who have, each to different extents, seen or tried to shape Islamic practices in the region in accordance with the Wahhabism vs. Sufism paradigm. The contention here is that the lived Islamic tradition cannot be forced into this double-breasted straitjacket, neither by armchair analysts far away from Chechnya, nor by

the ruling regime, whose massive yet shallow religious ideology cannot hem in the dissenting multiplicity of the local *umma*.

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