

National Liberation Movement of North Caucasus (1820-1860): A Study of Muridist Movement

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Abstract

This article analyses the Muridist Movement in the North Caucasus and its role in National Liberation Movement during the period (1820-1860). Muridism is the direction in Sufism, which is an ordinary Sufi tariqat, that is, a way of communicating with the Allah (God). In Muridism there is such belief that a person can improve and reach some levels of perfection. It combines the religious teachings of Sufism with political action, which took the form of holy-wars or Ghazawats, against the infidels to secure the triumph of Islam. Muridism was led by the Imams Ghazi Muhammad, Hamzat Bek, Shamil and their naibs (vicegerents). It reaches its zenith under Imam Shamil. The ideology of Muridism imported a religious aspect and a certain organized character to the struggle of the divided and linguistically diverse mountaineers of Northern Caucasus particularly Daghestan and Chechnya.

Keywords: North Caucasus, Sufism, tariqa, Muridism, Shamil, Imamate, ideology

Introduction

Russian encroachment in the Caucasus aroused resentment that developed into resistance of a religious character. The first to initiate resistance under the banner of Islam was Sheikh Mansur¹ who used the existing Sufi network for popular mobilization against Russian orthodox invaders. During the resistance Islam, particularly the Sufi Islam of Naqshbandi tariqa, provided the ideological framework for the first political unification of the region². In 1791, Sheikh Mansur was defeated and imprisoned by the Russians in the fortress of Schlisselburg, where he lived three years and died in April 1794.

Mansur's death did not end the struggle against Russia, but he was the first to preach and lead resistance against the Russians in the Caucasus in his endeavour to unite the fierce tribes of mountains and forest. It was he who first taught them that in religious reform lay one of chance of preserving their cherished liberty and independence. The impact of Mansur's ideas and actions continued for many years to come, and were translated into the Muridist Movement in the next century³. The core of this movement was the struggle against 'infidel' Russia, which attempted to conquer the Caucasus. It can be therefore labeled as "the National Liberation Movement of North Caucasus".

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¹ "Sheikh Mansur", a Chechen Naqshbandi (Sufi) Sheikh -- with wavering support from other North Caucasian tribes. Sheikh Mansur was the first to make an attempt (still popular nowadays) to unite peoples of the North Caucasus into a single Islamic state. From 1785 – 1791 Sheikh Mansur united tens of nations of Northern Caucasus under the banner of a holy war to defend their homeland, liberty and religion

² Galina M. Yemelianova (2002), *Russia and Islam: A Historical Survey*, Palgrave, New York p 48

³ Zubeyde Gune-Yadcy (2003), "A Chechen National Hero of the Caucasus in the 18th Century: Sheikh Mansur", *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 22 No1 p 111

Muridism⁴ as a mould for Islamic resistance only hold in the Northern Caucasus under the pressure of Imperial Russia. By the nineteenth century, when Islam had finally cemented itself as the dominant faith in the region, Sheikhs and Imams in mountain people of North Caucasus particularly Dagestan and Chechnya called for Islamic resistance against the Russian occupation, with the faith evidently acted as a unifying force⁵. The muridist movement depended on the traditional organization of mystical Sufi brotherhoods, or tariqats that consisted of murids, or students, around an Islamic teacher, or sheikh. The muridist movement arose in opposition to the external pressures of Russian colonialism; it quickly embarked on an effort to transform the internal structure of Caucasus society. This was because the murids could mount an effective opposition to the Russian empire only by uniting the Muslims of North Caucasus⁶. In 1829, the doctrine spread throughout the entire Caucasus and gained immense popularity among those who also wanted to revive Muslim beliefs. As in any other creeds, there are the basic tenets of Muridism, which must be strictly followed by those who believe. Muridism can even be called an independent religion, since a person should worship followers and mentors, participate in cleansing Islam from ‘infidels’, try to spread the Muslim religion throughout the country and do everything to organize an obedient society. In general, muridists are quite a patriotic people in the sense that they believe in the unity of their faith and the correctness of their methods of natural selection. In Muridism there is such a belief that a person can improve and reach certain levels of perfection. The first of these steps symbolizes the Quran, that is, the full observance of the commandments given by Allah to people⁷.

Unification of North Caucasians in the Muridism:

In North Caucasian’s long history of national-liberation movements and wars, an important role was played by events connected with the name of the Sheik Shamil⁸. His name and the movement linked to it acquired special relevance in the 1990's, when a new attempt to politicize this religious brotherhood took place⁹. The role of Islam in the life of the Daghestani and Chechen peoples increased, which promoted the unification of all Muslim peoples of Caucasus in one coalition against foreign invasion. The first attempt to create such a union was carried out by Sheikh Mansur. He created a foundation for the unification

⁴ Muridism: a term introduced into Russian literature in second half of 19th century to designate the national liberation movement of the Northern Caucasus mountaineers from 1820’s through 1860’s. The characteristic feature of Muridism, an offshoot of Dervish order of Naqshbandiyya, was that it combines religious teaching of sufism with political action, which took the form of holy wars or gazawat against the infidels to secure the triumph of Islam, (see The Great Encyclopedia, 3rd edition, 1979).

⁵ Adam Bartell (2019), Islamism in Historical Context: Islamic Identity and Nationalistic Resistance in the North Caucasus 18th Century- Present, Unpublished research thesis, University of San Diego, California, p 15.

⁶ Enver F. Kisriev and Robert Bruce Ware, (2006), “Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus” Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 42, No. 3, p 493

⁷ www.trendxmexico.com/spritualdevelopment (accessed on 19.03.2021)

⁸ “Imam Shamil”, (1797-1871), was a political and religious leader of the Muslim tribes of the Northern Caucasus. He was a leader of anti-Russian resistance in the Caucasian War of Dagestan and Chechnya (1834-1859).

⁹ Akhmadov, Yavus Z.; Bowers, Stephen R.; Doss, Jr., Marion T.; and Ciobanu, Valeria, (2000), "Religious Brotherhoods in Chechnya" Faculty Publications and Presentations <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu>, (accessed on 17/01/2021), p 113

of the Caucasus peoples on the basis of Islamic law and cultural, spiritual and historical commonalities¹⁰. At the beginning of the second quarter of the 19th century, Russia intensified its military power in the North Caucasus, which was triggered by the growing resistance of the local Muslim fighters who began resistance –gazawat (an Islamic holy war) against Russian orthodox invasion. It is believed that the ideologist of the gazawat was the Daghestani Islamic scholar Imam Muhammad Yaraghi¹¹. The preaching of Muhammad Yaraghi attracted listeners from every corner of the North Caucasus. Rumours started to spread that God had sent an imam to free them from Russian despotism. He advocated the formation of an Islamic State- an Imamate based on the Shariat as a viable political framework for the armed gazawat against Russian infidels. In a short period of time the troops of imamate managed to liberate many territories captured by the Russian occupants. The peoples of North Caucasus particularly Dagestan and Chechnya united in their struggle for independence in a state known by the name “Imamate”¹².

The first Imam or leader of the imamate was Imam Ghazi-Muhammad, a close associate and a follower of Imam Yaraghi. After Imam Gazi Muhammad’s death in 1832, the imamate was headed by Imam Hamzat Bek. From 1834 till 1859 its legendary leader, perhaps the most prominent was Imam Shamil who unified northern Caucasus within a single Islamic state –an imamate¹³. The founders and leaders of imamate were wonderful and educated people who devoted their lives to serve their nation. Their followers were also very generous and noble people. The people who witnessed Shamil’s rule (1834-1859) wrote about it: “After he purified the country from idolatry and dissipation, Shamil established order in the country and acted according to the Sharia law¹⁴. He managed to reinforce the process of unification of the mountaineers, initiated by the previous Imams. He finished the shaping of Muridism as an ideology to provide the means for devotion to a common goal and obedience to a common leader. To achieve the goal, i.e. the elimination of the internal and external enemies, all the obstacles had to be removed. Firstly, the oppression of the aristocracy in the service of the Russians and implementation of the promise for social equality, which had universal support in the society had to be initiated. Secondly, the purification of the moral values, which had been deeply shaken up by the cultural clash with a new civilization and undergone structural changes, was to be achieved. It was only after the obtainment of the first two aims did the population becomes ready to fight with the external enemy, namely the Russian Empire in the name of protecting life, religion, and state. Shamil managed to do this

¹⁰ Akhmadov, Yavus; Bowers, Stephen R.; Doss, Jr., Marion T.; and Kurnosov (2009) "Islam in the North Caucasus: A People Divided" Faculty Publications and Presentations available [http:// digital common. liberty.edu](http://digital.common.liberty.edu) (accessed on 09/02/2021) pp 25-27.

¹¹ Muhammad Yaraghi was a famous alim who lived and taught in the village of Yaraghi. His fame as a scholar brought him numerous students from both Daghestan and neighbouring countries.

¹² Imamate also known as Caucasus Imamate was the state established by the Imams Daghestan and Chechnya during the mid in 19th century, to fight against the Russian Empire during the Caucasus war , where Russia sought to conquer the Caucasus in order to secure communications with its new territories.

¹³ Galina M. Yemelianova (2002), *Russia and Islam: A Historical Survey*, Palgrave , New York p 50

¹⁴ Akhmadov, Yavus; Bowers, Stephen R.; Doss, Jr., Marion T.; and Kurnosov (2009) "Islam in the North Caucasus: A People Divided" Faculty Publications and Presentations available [http:// digital common. liberty.edu](http://digital.common.liberty.edu) (accessed on 07/01/2021), p 27.

by using the mechanisms of the Sufi teaching and Sharia norms, by setting strong examples and being merciless in cases of violations of the religious, political, and social order. As a result of Shamil's Sufi organization and leadership, religion had the strongest claim to define the sense of unity between and within the various tribes probably more than any other aspect of life in the Caucasus." Muridism gave the mountaineers a common goal and directed their efforts towards a common enemy under the indisputable leadership of a respected and trusted leader. Thus, Muridism was an important state-building element. Uniting people in one territory; enabling them to live under same social, governmental, administrative and religious norms; and following a common domestic and foreign policy, the Imamate "generated a concept of citizenship and loyalty far greater and stronger than that of the clan, tribe and commune" as the ground for this was very well prepared by the Muridism¹⁵. Acting in accordance with the Quran, Sunnah and laws of Sharia, he punished those who committed crimes and eradicated crime." Shamil unified Daghestan and Chechnya with a single Islamic state- Muridism or Imamate which for more than a quarter of a century successfully withstood the Russian military advance. In a short period of time the troops of imamate managed to liberate many territories captured by the Russian occupants. Thus, Islam appeared to be the force that united the peoples of North Caucasus particularly Dagestan and Chechnya in their struggle for independence and the future of their descendants¹⁶.

Spiritual Source of Muridist Movement:

Muridism initially emerged within the Naqshbandi Sufi brotherhood. Sufism arrived in Dagestan as early as the eighth century. Its tenets were expounded in a manuscript titled *Raihan al-Hakaik va bustan ad-Dakaik*¹⁷ by an eleventh century thinker from Derbent, known as ad-Darbandy. This work is an encyclopedia of the Sufi code of norms and rules of behaviour (Adab), offering a window into ancient Sufi traditions in Daghestan. Sufi networks continued to exist in Northern Caucasus particularly among Daghestanis who, up to the 18th century, maintained links with Naqshbandi Sufis of Central Asia. The arrival of Naqshbandi was part of a global movement that sought to guide Muslims through a period of socio-economic and political turmoil, which by that time had affected virtually every Muslim society¹⁸. Muridism is a teaching on choosing the right path, which contributes to both spiritual and physical development. After all, everyone goes well in the soul, then there will be no problems in the entire body. Rooted in the traditional organization of mystical Sufi brotherhoods (tariqas) murids (students) were disciples of prominent Islamic teachers

¹⁵ Tsvetkova, Tsvetelina (2017), Muridism As A State forming Element of Imam Shamil's Imamate (1834–1859)], *Journal of Caucasian Studies* Vol. 3, No. 5 pp 104-105

¹⁶ Akhmadov, Yavus; Bowers, Stephen R.; Doss, Jr., Marion T.; and Kurnosov (2009) "Islam in the North Caucasus: A People Divided" Faculty Publications and Presentations available <http://digital.common.liberty.edu> (accessed on 07/01/2021) p 27.

¹⁷ "The Basilica of Truth and the Garden of Refinement", in the Manuscript Archive of the Dagestan Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Science, F3, No.94.

¹⁸ Enver F. Kisriev and Robert Bruce Ware, (2006), "Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus" *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3 pp 493-495

(sheikhs). Initially emerging from a suborder of the Naqshbandi Sufi brotherhood i.e. *Naqshbandiyya Khalidiya*¹⁹, the movement would eventually make its way to the Northern Caucasus as Islam became a dominant force in sociopolitical life²⁰. It is important to note that Naqshbandi teachings underwent major transformations between the advent of Sufi Islam and its arrival in the Northern Caucasus. Naqshbandi teachings sought to restore populations by supplanting local laws with strict adherence to Sharia. They believed that in order to remedy the “political weakness and depravity of the MuslimsMuslims had to return to the strict observance of the Quran and Sunnah, to restore Sharia in order to regain their former strength and international prestige²¹”. Moreover, the population had to follow the leadership of a chosen Sheikh or Imam to lead them in cultivating these virtues. While these organizational criteria clearly influenced the formation of Muridism, it was in fact only under the Northern Imams that Muridism took hold and functioned as a military and political framework against Russia. In Dagestan specifically, the tenets of Muridism helped foster faith-driven resistance and identity while the rapid changes in life under Russian occupation saw an increased attachment to the political and social orders of the Murid movement. Muridism movement “had the goal of spiritual purification of Muslims from the imposition of a foreign religion, the perceived impurities of the new society, and the inequities of the new aristocratic order²².”

A central component of the Murid philosophy was the role of *gazawat* which loosely translates to “war of liberation”. This engrained position, forged in the language of the Quran, fostered resistance to Russian occupation and indicates an increased attachment to the political and sociological concept of liberation under the pressure of a foreign power. Such language is indicative of a change in the Northern Caucasian mentality. The historical pressures felt by communities in the region pushed self-determination to the forefront. With tribes in the Northern Caucasus feeling as though the egalitarian nature of their societies was quashed by the Russian entrance into the region, the Muridist philosophy fundamentally aligned with a historical will for autonomy. And while the movement rested upon the shoulders of the chosen Sheikh or Imam, the resistance cemented a deep devotion to Allah through a unifying call to arms. The Naqshbandi tariqa and other Sufi brotherhoods are concerned with deep and analytical interpretations of the Quran, and as such, there are running conflicts between traditional Muslim adherents and the more spiritually aligned Sufis. The Muridist ideology which burgeoned through the tariqa synthesized the spiritual elements of the Quran and the sociopolitical tenets of the faith. Uniquely, in the Northern

¹⁹ The Naqshbandiyya -Khalidiya appeared in the Caucasus at the beginning of the 19th Century. This Sufi teaching underwent one more transformation by the Ottoman sheikh Diya al-Din Khalid al-Shahrazuri (1779-1827), giving the name of the suborder Naqshbandiyya Mujaddidiyya-Khalidiya or only Naqshbandiyya -Khalidiya

²⁰ www.wikipedia.org (accessed on March 23rd, 2020)

²¹ Tsvetkova, Tsvetelina (2017), Muridism As A State forming Element of Imam Shamil's Imamate (1834–1859)], *Journal of Caucasian Studies* Vol. 3, No. 5 p 93

²² Enver F. Kisriev & Robert Bruce Ware (2006) Russian hegemony and Islamic resistance: Ideology and political organization in Dagestan 1800–1930, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 3 p 494

Caucasus Muridism fostered a distinct system of governance that supplanted local laws and norms or adat. At first divisions resulted from this strict ideology, but upon constant pressure by the Russian military, the diverse tribes in the north would unify through a Muridist framework. It is important to note that while Muridism did not become formally institutionalized until 1828 with the Caucasian Imamate, Sufi traditions became widespread during the late eighteenth century. Taking this to heart, in 1785 a military leader (Sheikh Mansur) raised in the Sufi tradition would lay a foundation for Muridism, unifying tribal clans under the banner of nationalistic resistance to the Russian incursions²³.

Islam through the Ghazawat against the Russians and their local allies was that aspect of the Muridism which gave impulse not only to the movement for liberation but also for the establishment of a militarized administrative state structure and military organization²⁴. Relying on Islamic values as a foundation for resistance, the leader would preach a unifying message to Muslims in the region, asserting that followers of Allah needed to follow the “true virtues of Islam”²⁵. It was during this period (around 1829) that Ghazi Muhammad began to call for gazawat. Initially this motivation was entirely based on spiritual purification - ousting local leaders and establishing Sharia but just as Mansur’s movement transformed politically, so too did the movement under the direction of the Ghazi Muhammad. After Ghazi Muhammad had consolidated a significant amount of power among the Northern Caucasians’, gazawat became the mode of operations from which the Caucasian Imamate would finally commence. With its first Imam finding great success ousting local aristocracies and Russian forces, Ghazi Muhammad would lay a formal socio-political foundation for the Caucasian Imamate, one built on Naqshbandi teachings and institutionalized through Muridism. Ghazi’s two primary goals were to establish a uniform Sharia among the Caucasian populations and the elimination of Russian forces from indigenous lands. Ghazi Muhammad established the infrastructure required to propagate Sharia among the North Caucasus. His coopting of spiritual purification and militaristic intent against Russia transformed the way the people of the Caucasus were governed, and in doing so, catalyzed the role of Muridism in the region.

The primary goal of the Imamate going back to Ghazi Muhammad was bringing the tribes of the north under one Islamic identity through Sharia and the ousting of Russian-allied local governments²⁶. After the death of Ghazi Muhammad, Hamza Bek could continue to establish Sharia in the region. Hamza subsequently continued the goals of Ghazi

²³ Tsvetkova, Tsvetelina (2017), Muridism As A State forming Element of Imam Shamil’s Imamate (1834–1859)], *Journal of Caucasian Studies* Vol. 3, No. 5 p 100

²⁴ Adam Bartell (2019), *Islamism in Historical Context: Islamic Identity and Nationalistic Resistance in the North Caucasus 18th Century- Present*, Unpublished research thesis, University of San Diego, California, pp 16-17

²⁵ Anna Zelkina, (1996), *Islam and Society in Chechnia: From the Late Eighteenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol.7, No. 2 p 247(Accessed May 14, 2020)

²⁶ Adam Bartell (2019), *Islamism in Historical Context: Islamic Identity and Nationalistic Resistance in the North Caucasus 18th Century- Present*, Unpublished research thesis, University of San Diego, California, pp 29-36

Muhammad's movement, and it should be noted that this could not be done without the help and guidance of Shamil. Shamil brought both a keen eye for military tactics and a deep commitment to the spiritual elements of the Naqshbandi legacy and Muridist movement. Thus, when Hamza Bek was assassinated in September of 1834, the rightful and most logical heir to the Imamate was Shamil. During his first few years as Imam, Shamil appointed various naibs (essentially deputies of Shamil) to rule over the many districts in Chechnya and Dagestan. Meanwhile, the Muridist framework that Ghazi Muhammad and Hamza Bek operated through during the first years of the Imamate became fully realized by Shamil. Once the ousting of local aristocracies aligned with Russia and the sacking of Russian strongholds in Chechnya and Dagestan were completed; Shamil continued the goal of establishing Sharia among the people. Shamil's initial diplomatic efforts were viewed by many as a reasonable strategy to establish peace in the region²⁷.

Conclusion:

Muridism in North Caucasus particularly in Daghestan and Chechnya is famous for its long and fierce resistance to the Russian advance in the North Caucasus. Sheikh Mansur was the first to preach and lead resistance against the infidel Russian in the Caucasus and in his endeavour to unite mountain people of North Caucasus, he it was who first taught them that in religious reform lay one of chance of preserving their cherished liberty and independence. The impact of Mansur's ideas and actions continued for many years to come, and were translated into the Muridist Movement in the next century. The core of this movement was the struggle against infidel Russia, which attempted to conquer the Caucasus and therefore labeled it as "the National Liberation Movement of North Caucasus". Muridism was the framework for the unification of the population and its confrontation with the Russians, and was regulated by the real management system. The success of the Muridism was depending on the Shamil's authority, which he built in years as its spiritual, political and military leader, whom the people were ready to follow to defend their interests. Muridism was the element that laid the ideological foundation of the Imamate and gave significance to the fight against Russia, stimulating the formation of a proto-national consciousness and solidarity among the North Caucasian mountaineers.

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²⁷ Tsvetkova, Tsvetelina (2017), Muridism As A State forming Element of Imam Shamil's Imamate (1834–1859)], *Journal of Caucasian Studies* Vol. 3, No. 5 pp 100-105

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