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“Praying Muslim Youth” as a Subculture of Kabardino-Balkar Society

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This article examines a social group within Kabardino-Balkar society — the so-called “praying youth” that emerged during the post-Soviet religious revival. The article presents some distinctive features of this group — its members’ social base, their world outlook, and their behavioral patterns and markers. Special attention is paid to analysis of the reasons for the emergence of the religious conflict that divided society into those professing a “popular” form of Islam and those “praying,” with their fundamentalist agenda. Field materials illustrate how “folk” and/or “traditional” culture vanishes within the subculture of the “praying youth.”

Keywords: Islamic revival, Islamic praying youth, traditional Islam, fundamentalism, extremism, Kabardino-Balkaria, ritual, conflict.

A STRIKING phenomenon in the social life of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic (KBR) in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a religious resurgence that emerged especially prominently with respect to Islam. This phenomenon, which has currently become an accepted academic designation, signifies the process of the mass construction of mosques, the registration of religious communities, the organization of a system of religious education and enlightenment, and, broadly speaking, a sharp increase in societal interest in religion.

By the end of the Soviet era in Kabardino-Balkaria, as in other regions of the country, religion had largely been pushed to the margins

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of social life. Religious indifferentism was typical of the overwhelming majority of the republic's population. In the realm of ritual practice a unique "folk" form of Islam had become established, one characterized by the presence of a large number of elements of non-Islamic origin. The religiosity of the Kabardino-Balkar population centered mainly around the performance of a series of funeral and memorial rituals that were especially rich in these elements. The customs most clearly contradicting Islamic prescriptions were the following: the provision of food to those who come to offer their condolences during the first three days of mourning at the home of the deceased; the compilation of a list of those visitors and the sums of money they brought to the family of the deceased; the subsequent distribution of commemorative packages (*sedek'e*) to those on these lists on the fifty-second day and the one-year anniversary of the death; the giving of lavish memorial feasts on the seventh, fortieth, and fifty-second days, as well as a half-year and a year from the day of death; the purchase of new items and their distribution to the relatives and neighbors of the deceased as *deura* (atonement for the sins of the departed); the setting up of expensive memorials, often with photographs of the deceased; and the like. Moreover, in the republic a sort of competitiveness existed in performing these rituals — over the luxuriousness of the memorial meal, the value of the commemorative packets, the size and cost of memorials and so on, thereby driving families of modest means into debt that often took years to pay off. Indeed, among the people a nickname took hold for local mullahs who supported the ruinous practices described above — *khèdefyshch*, or "one who fleeces a corpse" (Mukozhev 2008, 213).

In 1986, on the threshold of the religious revival, one of the leaders of the Muslim clergy in the North Caucasus, Mahmud Gekkiev, gave a very succinct portrait of the characteristics of the religious practice that had been established in the republic by that time, noting in particular that "the funeral rituals performed by the Kabardians and Balkars are nothing but the inventions of the local effendi and mullahs" (UTsDNI, f. 1, op. 28, d. 77, l. 15). This came as no surprise, since by the end of the Soviet period there was scarcely a single cleric in the republic who possessed specialized religious education. As scholar Arsen Mukozhev rightly observed:

By this time, very few knew how to read and write in Arabic and, especially, how to interpret the Qur'an, while mullahs who prepared privately received minimal information about performing burials and memorial feasts, solemnizing marriages, and saying *namaz* [Islamic

prayers]. What is more, they memorized the suras [chapters in the Qur'an] necessary for performing acts of worship and frequently interpreted these texts as they wished. Often clerics used prayer texts written in Russian script (Mukozhev 2007, 174).

As a result, all the necessary conditions had arisen in which each cleric, to the extent of his creativity, incorporated his own ideas into religious practice. For this reason, the forms for conducting religious rituals in Kabardino-Balkaria were not standardized and at times differed markedly in various districts (*raiony*) of the republic and even in neighboring villages.

An important aspect of the religious resurgence of the late 1980s and early 1990s was the appearance of a new social group — believing youth who sharply distinguished themselves from society at large — characterized by the contextuality of its religiosity, that is, piety that appeared only in specific instances, such as funerals, weddings, and a number of major holidays. Given that the members of the new group possessed an array of highly visible external and behavioral markers, including strict observance of the prescribed practice of praying five times each day, others frequently began to call them “the praying ones.”

Young people's particular receptivity to the religious revival stemmed largely from the concurrence of their socialization with the crisis and subsequent collapse of the Soviet ideological system. Undoubtedly, the natural psychological proclivity of youth for all things new also played its own role. In this case, youth in the early 1990s perceived the Islamic religion, including its external manifestations (silver ornamentation, prayer beads, books in Arabic, light stubble beards, and so on), as a new, “fashionable” trend with elements of “Eastern exoticism.” The knowledge of Arabic and of the finer points of Islamic worship practices, the observance of *sawm* (fasting), strict adherence to dietary prohibitions, and so forth became signs of “good form” and even something of a trend.

The social base of the “praying ones” consisted predominantly of university students and upperclassmen in urban high schools, especially in the city of Nalchik. Numerous religious institutions, opened amid a wave of religious enthusiasm, carried out their work especially among the urban population in the 1990s and early 2000s. For example, representatives of the charitable organization “Salvation” (Saudi Arabia), the international organization “al-Igasa” (Saudi Arabia), the World Assembly of Islamic Youth “an-Nadva,” the Islamic charitable organization “Islamic Relief,” a branch of the International Islamic Organization “Dagvat” (Saudi Arabia), an educational-computer-

language center “Minaret,” and others were all active in Nalchik. The initiative to open these establishments belonged mainly to Arabs and Adyga [Circassian] returnees. For example, in 1992, at the initiative of Adyga returnees and with the financial support of the organization “Salvation,” the Sharia Institute opened in Nalchik; it was the first Islamic higher educational institution in the KBR, renamed the Arabic Language Institute in 1994 (Babich and Iarlykapov 2003, 197). The founders of the institute were also its first teachers: Muhammad Kheir Khuazh (who, along with Zaur Naloev — one of the leaders of the Kabardian national movement — and another returnee, Fuad Duguzh, translated the Qur’an into the Kabardian language), Shauki Balag, Abdul Vakhkhab Kankosh, and others (Babich 2008, 164). In 1996, the institute was closed. In 1997, the Islamic Institute began its work in the republic under the authority of the Muslim Spiritual Board (DUM); it was reorganized in 2007 as the Imam Abu Hanifa North Caucasus Islamic University.

In rural localities the activity of these institutions was significantly more constrained. Research indicates that over the course of the 1990s, fifty-four sites offering elementary religious instruction functioned at various times and in one form or another (Mukozhev 2008, 210); they were basically a sort of Sunday school for studying Arabic and the principles of the Qur’an, located within secular educational establishments. They did not function for long, however, and by the end of the 1990s they were already inactive. Only in the town of Baksan (the second most populous locality in the KBR) did a madrassa named after Adam Dymov function quite successfully from 1991 to 2002. The limited activity of Islamic educational organizations in rural areas was linked first and foremost to village residents’ loyalty to ideas of traditionalism and to a certain deference toward the older generation, the bearers of “folk” Islam. Nevertheless, since a significant number of rural young people had continuous close ties to the cities (they studied in the universities and schools, had relatives there, on so on), the institutional influence discussed above was scarcely weaker on them than on urban youth.

Among religious training-educational institutions, the Islamic Center, which commenced operations in 1993 and was registered by the KBR’s Ministry of Justice on July 7, 1995 (Gluboglo and Sokhroкова 2001, 238), enjoyed the greatest authority and popularity. This establishment presented itself as a cultural-educational religious organization founded to promote the revival of Islam in the KBR. A council of *jama’ats* (assemblies) and a *shura*¹ functioned under

1. A gathering for the purpose of consultation on issues affecting the group.

the auspices of the Islamic Center. Foreign charitable foundations with branches in Nalchik and Moscow financed the center (Babich and Iarlykapov 2003, 196). Of particular note among these funding organizations was the “SAR Foundation” (Berezhnoi 2006, 173).

Since 2004, the KBR’s Ministry of Education and Science has prohibited the granting of premises in educational buildings to members of a confession for conducting work with the population. Consequently, the majority of elementary religious education sites in the republic were closed. The closure of establishments for religious education was not a spontaneous event but was connected to the undertaking of an extensive campaign in the first half of the 2000s directed toward preventing the spread of Islamic radicalism. In addition to the liquidation of religious education sites, the campaign carried out a whole range of measures, including the mass closure of mosques that were not under the control of the DUM (upon the pretext that the rental term had expired for the premises they were using), the compilation of the infamous lists of “Wahhabists” (lists of individuals who were allegedly part of the radical extremist underground), and the like. The closure of religious educational programs furthered the virtually complete liquidation of official channels for introducing young people to the Islamic religion, so these channels assumed a more latent character. Only toward the end of that decade did the network of religious educational institutions gradually begin to revive. As of today in Kabardino-Balkaria, a single madrassa named “Nur” (active from 2009, licensed from 2011) is operational. In addition, twenty-five Sunday schools are functioning at village mosques in the republic, in which attendees (typically, elderly individuals) learn to read the Qur’an and, more rarely, to write in Arabic. Students there also study at least the essential rules for rituals. The Sunday schools do not provide a systematic Islamic education, but they contribute to the elevation of the congregants’ level of religious knowledge (Akkieva and Sampiev 2015). The sole Islamic higher educational institution in the KBR is the Imam Abu Hanifa North Caucasus Islamic University.

Inasmuch as the Islamic revival in the republic, as already noted above, revealed the virtually complete absence of personnel who were sufficiently competent to satisfy the growing spiritual needs of the society, the leadership of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kabardino-Balkaria (DUM KBR), founded in 1991, set out to solve this problem by sending promising young people for training at foreign religious educational institutions. As Roman Silant’ev candidly commented:

The chief criteria in selecting the educational institutions were the defrayal of travel expenses by the accepting institution, free tuition, room and board, and, preferably, the provision of a stipend. Of course, the training centers that offered such favorable conditions were not as well known as Cairo's Al-Azhar University, but they seemed suitable for furthering religious literacy and Arabic language instruction (Silant'ev 2007, 144–45).

According to data from Nadezhda Emel'ianova (2002), “in 1994–95, about one hundred students from Kabardino-Balkaria underwent training in Saudi Arabia (Muhammad ibn Saud University), Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Turkey.” From the second half of the 1990s, the number of students from Kabardino-Balkaria who received foreign religious instruction markedly decreased. On the one hand, this was due to the republic's own institution of higher religious education — the above-mentioned Islamic University — opening in 1997; on the other hand, it was attributable to a sharp decline in the amount of resources allocated by foreign foundations and charitable organizations for Russian citizens to acquire a religious education. By the early 2000s, therefore, the republic's practice of obtaining religious instruction abroad had been reduced to nil.

Yet the knowledge obtained by young people abroad often contravened the above-mentioned religious ideas then prevalent in the republic. And, in an additional, subtle aspect underlying this situation, a significant portion of the educated youth self-identified as being called to fulfill a kind of missionary purpose. Concerned about the erosion of religion in society, its marginalization, and the loss of religion's position as the regulator of social and family life, these educated youth energetically took on the reform of the existing state of things. They therefore actively set out to spread throughout the republic an interpretation of Islam more consonant with its classical, fundamental tenets but differing considerably from its “folk” form, which was professed by a large portion of the population. This became the basis for the rise of religious conflict in the republic.

The active work carried out in the 1990s by the DUM KBR with the purpose of creating a professional, experienced base of clerics did not ultimately achieve the expected results. Since the majority of the educated youth turned out to be purveyors of religious ideas that were non-traditional in the sub-region and that were essentially fundamentalist, a campaign got underway at the end of the 1990s to “squeeze them out” from the positions they had held as imams in

community mosques in the second half of that decade. This process culminated in 2004 at the Fourth Congress of Muslims of the KBR with the adoption of a resolution stipulating that the chief imams and imams of localities would begin to be appointed by decision of the DUM, in agreement with the leaders of local administrations (since the early 1990s, the community of believers in a specific locality had chosen their imams). Since the matter of staffing mosques thus shifted entirely to the jurisdiction of the DUM leadership, the opportunity for active work by purveyors of religious ideas considered to be non-traditional within the republic was out of the question. Subsequently, the following process occurred: instead of young, educated imams, members of the older generation, who did not possess specialized religious education, once again came into the leadership of local religious communities. As a result, according to data from the DUM itself, in 2003, only 10 percent of 138 officially registered Muslim clerics in the KBR had specialized training (*Kabardino-Balkarskaia pravda* 2003).

Notably, the leadership of the DUM generally recognized the validity of the “praying youth’s” criticism of the state of the republic’s religious ritual system. In the early 2000s, the leadership led an extensive effort to align the rites of the funeral and burial services with canonical religious prescriptions. In 2004, during the lead-up to the Fourth Congress of Muslims in the KBR, the DUM adopted a resolution “On the Regularization of Muslims’ Funeral Rites.” This resolution was later published as a separate booklet (*Postanovlenie* 2011, 20). In particular, most of the issues that had been the subject of debates between the “praying ones” and traditionalists in the early to mid-1990s were reflected in the publication’s contents. Many of the extravagant rites and rituals that had become part of tradition were subjected to severe criticism within the resolution. For example, the compilation of lists of those who came to pay their respects (for the purpose of distributing commemorative packets) was banned (clause 1.16), as were the feeding of visitors throughout the three days of mourning by the relatives of the deceased (clause 1.17); the holding of memorial events commemorating the third, seventh, fortieth, and fifty-second days, the half-year, and the year from the day of death (clause 1.18); the purchase of new clothing items and their subsequent distribution as if it were the clothing of the deceased (clause 1.21); and many others (*Postanovlenie* 2011, 10–14). It is conceivable that had this resolution appeared several years earlier, religious conflict in the KBR might have subsided. But in 2004, at the height of the

campaign to close mosques and religious educational institutions and to replace young imams with members of the older generation, the adoption of this resolution did not advance the reconciliation of the contending parties. Furthermore, strict implementation of the resolution in the localities did not accompany its publication. The traditions of “everyday” Islam, which had been accumulating for decades, proved quite persistent; and the opportunism of a significant number of clerics also played a role. In the end, burial rituals in the republic remained varied after the resolution’s adoption.

The emergence of the social group of “the praying ones” in Kabardino-Balkar society, as well as the group’s attainment of quite distinct group boundaries, assumed a more or less organized form as a result of the selection of a leadership core from the community of educated youth. Musa Mukozhev and Anzor Astemirov, the directors of the above-mentioned Islamic Center of the KBR, became the main leaders of the “praying ones.” In the words of scholar Ruslan Kurbanov:

Both [Musa Mukozhev and Anzor Astemirov] had training in Saudi Arabia’s Islamic higher education institutions behind them. Both possessed a broad vision of the prospects for the development of Islam’s appeal in the republic, applied the most effective means to spread that message and to exhort recruits, actively engaged in translating texts from Arabic, and sponsored an online digital presence of adequate quality: www.islaminkbr.ru (Kurbanov 2006, 75).

In the 1990s and 2000s, other synonymous terms for “the praying ones” also gained a foothold in the republic — “neo-Muslims,” “young Muslims,” “new Muslims,” “practicing Muslims” — and in academic circles, “Salafis.” Meanwhile in the late 1990s, largely due to the efforts of mass media, “Wahhabists” became something of a cliché. As Leonid Siukiainen has rightly remarked, the term “Wahhabi” in the Russian public sphere has become practically synonymous with the concept “Islamic extremism” (Siukiainen 2001). Members of this social group referred to themselves simply as Muslims. Yet, in order to demonstrate their distinction from the adherents of the “folk” form of Islam, they often added the designations “praying Muslims,” “new Muslims,” “young Muslims,” or “practicing Muslims.” They did not use the term “Salafi” to refer to themselves.

Common to individuals considered part of this group was their possession of emphatically expressed fundamentalist narratives, that is, of an exaggerated striving toward a purity of religious practice,

against a backdrop of unqualified reductionism that manifested itself primarily in rather critical attitudes toward the religious history and tradition of their own peoples. This reductionism contributed to the role played by tensions between the “praying” youth and the bearers of “folk” Islam in causing deep divisions among the Muslim clergy, as well as society as a whole. In addition, both contending parties publicly called for the consolidation of Muslims, while simultaneously excluding their opponents from this process and accusing them of apostasy (Malashenko 2001, 105). Due to a whole complex of reasons the discord between the “praying ones” and the adherents of “folk” Islam turned into a confrontation that was initially confined to theological debates and matters of ritual practice but subsequently escalated into a dispute over the fundamental question of religious leadership in the republic.

The issue of the assignment of places for prayer within the mosque serves as an example illustrating a typical manifestation of the conflicts between traditionalists and “the praying ones.” A tradition existed in the republic, according to which the places of honor in a mosque were occupied exclusively by members of the older generation. Moreover, if an older person entered a mosque and the places in question were already filled, then the youngest congregant was obliged to yield his place to the new arrival. Consequently, friction, gossip, and the chaotic movement of people constantly occurred in the republic’s mosques, which effectively distracted people from prayer. The “praying ones” sharply criticized this tradition. In particular, as the scholar Irina L. Babich (2008, 158) has noted, “young Muslims disapproved of the institution of respecting one’s elders”; they thought that those “who arrived in the mosque earlier” should occupy the best places. An actual incident that occurred in 2002, in one of the mosques of Baksansky district (*raion*) of the KBR, evoked a strong reaction. Young believers there categorically refused to allow a group of elderly worshippers, who had arrived after the young people, to occupy the places of honor in the mosque. A heated dispute broke out, the substance of which consisted of public rebukes of the older attendees for their ignorance in religious matters. The mosque’s imam got involved in the argument and supported the older congregants. The conflict ended with the expulsion of the young believers from the mosque, a decision made by the imam with the support of members of the older generation (Field material 2012, Baksan).

A complete breach between “the praying ones” and the DUM became a crucial turning point in the religious conflict in the KBR.

In the early 2000s, “the praying ones” formed the KBR Jama’at as an alternative administrative network structure. For a long time, Musa Mukozhev, the undisputed leader of the praying youth, headed this organization. A significant difference between the KBR Jama’at and similar structures that have emerged in other sub-regions of the North Caucasus where religious conflicts have also occurred was its relative unity and rather clear organizational structure. As Akhmet Iarlykapov has correctly observed, “a unified *jama’at* was not established in any other constituent member of the North Caucasus [Federal District]” (Iarlykapov 2006, 41).

By the mid-2000s, the more or less ideologically monolithic KBR Jama’at began to break apart under the influence of a series of factors, to be discussed below. Trends toward the radicalization of a significant portion of its membership became clearly apparent. An extremist wing, including the Yarmuk Jama’at as well as others, materialized as a result of this process.

For understandable reasons, scholars have studied the extremist wing of “the praying ones” quite thoroughly. With respect to this category, one can point to certain specific quantitative indicators. For example, as early as 1996, there were about six hundred Muslims in the republic with extremist tendencies “capable of creating definite problems” (*Severnji Kavkaz* 2001). This data came from Shafiq Pshikhachev, then the mufti of the KBR, who was in turn citing a statement by Amir Kazdokhov, the self-proclaimed emir of Kabardino-Balkaria and one of the “praying ones” from the Baksansky district [*raion*], who for the record did not enjoy great authority in Pshikhachev’s circles. In the early 2000s representatives of the security agencies indicated that “more than 300 active adherents of Islam” were at work in the republic (*Severnji Kavkaz* 2001). Sources from the prosecutor’s office in the republic, for their part, noted in 2001 that “382 adherents of the ‘new’ Islam are on file with law enforcement agencies” (*Kabardino-Balkarskaia pravda* 2001). In view of the lack of public access to lists with surnames, one can only assume that a good many of those who perished as militants during the raid in Nalchik in October 2005 were in the agencies’ files four years earlier. Individuals considered part of the radical wing were entered into these registers, many of whom were already thought to be operating illegally at the moment of the lists’ compilation. They comprised only a small portion of the general number of “praying ones,” most of whose representatives still remained within legal bounds.

The evolution of the religious conflict in the KBR, which by the mid-2000s had on the whole moved far beyond purely religious

bounds, led to the events of October 13–14, 2005, in the town of Nalchik — an attack by the extremist wing of the “praying ones” on the security agencies of the republic’s capital. It now seems possible to identify the following main causes for the bloody outcome of the republic’s religious conflict:

1. The development of the potential for conflict proceeded in the republic in the absence of any real power able to resolve or at least to mitigate the conflict.

2. Scholar Aslan Borov aptly remarked:

As a fundamental factor [in the Nalchik Raid of 2005], one must here acknowledge the loss of spiritual-ideological and moral direction by a significant portion of society. This was coupled with profound economic decay, social polarization, and glaring forms of social injustice. As a result, in social consciousness a dangerous decline in the authority and level of legitimacy of the powers of the state took place, as well as mass alienation from the state and the erosion of a legal consciousness among the country’s citizens (Borov 2006, 13).

3. The security agencies’ meddling in the religious conflict fueled its intensification. Security officials’ actions, unprecedented in their brutality, had a huge effect. Among believing youth who did not have connections with extremists, these actions fostered the formation of a sense of permanent danger of persecution by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Indeed, the authorities replaced legal measures for the suppression of the activity of real extremists with illegal actions against a wide circle of the “praying ones” (*Pravozashchitnyi tsentr “Memorial”* 2008), which in the final analysis paved the way for preachers of “armed jihad” and contributed to the radicalization of a significant number of young believers. The overreach that took place, the lack of a differentiated approach when engaged in operational procedures, and strong-arm pressure tactics led to the security agencies’ loss of legitimacy in the eyes of society. Ultimately, the number of those sympathizing with radically inclined young people who acted on religious motives increased in the republic (Apazheva and Takova 2014, 243).

4. The academic community did not possess the necessary personnel with the expertise to work on such a delicate problem. Therefore, the republic’s religious conflict proved to be one of the most discussed but simultaneously most under-studied issues in post-Soviet Kabardino-Balkaria. An exception, perhaps, was an ethnographic expedition

organized by the KBR Institute of Humanities Research, together with the Russian Academy of Science's Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, in the course of which researchers exposed "a dangerous tendency related to the discrimination against young believers on the pretext of the struggle against 'Wahhabism'" (Berezhnoi 2006, 176). A summary of the expedition was presented in the press in 2003, when an accurate predictive assessment was made of the nature of the religious conflict's expansion in the republic. The director of the expedition, Valery Kazharov, noted:

There is no doubt that the continuation of the policy of discrimination with respect to young religious adherents, having dramatically lowered the level of religious tolerance in society, may become one of the factors capable of drastically destabilizing the ethno-political situation in the North Caucasus (Kazharov 2003).

5. The complex socioeconomic situation in the republic, mass unemployment, the polarization of society, clannishness and corruption, and the lack of any definite life prospects for the majority of the residents led to the formation in Kabardino-Balkaria of a broad social base of disaffected people who, in certain situations, were adept at violating the law. The socialization of young people amid conditions such as these laid the groundwork for "the marginalization of a significant portion of the youth and for deviations in their behavior, including religious and political extremism" (Tetuev 2010, 438).

6. The formation of a radical, extremist wing from among the "praying ones," as well as the shift to a position of radicalism by Musa Mukozhev and Anzor Astemirov, the leaders of the "praying ones," resulted from the causes enumerated above. To be sure, for a long time Musa Mukozhev's position was not clear, since in all his public statements preceding October 2005, he spoke exclusively of the Jama'at's peaceful character. Some were of the opinion that he did not participate in the October attack. Only in September 2006, on the website *Kavkaz-Tsentr* (Caucasus center), did he post a message entitled, "By resorting to jihad, we obtained true freedom," in which he justified the armed action of October 13, 2005, noting that it was provoked by security officials' actions against members of the Muslim community; he also called upon his followers to continue "the tactics of October 13." He took personal responsibility and credited the entire Jama'at's leadership for the armed attack of October 13 and expressed

the view that this attack was part of an “armed jihad” against Russian rule in the North Caucasus (*Pravozashchitnyi tsentr “Memorial”* 2008).

The fighting of October 13–14, 2005, was one of the most tragic events in the republic’s recent history. During the clashes, thirty-five security agency officers, twelve innocent civilians, and ninety-five attackers perished. In the bloody battle, quite a few people with close ties to one another — relatives and neighbors, classmates and fellow university students — fought on opposite sides, which made the situation particularly tragic. Based upon the surnames on a list of those killed that was distributed by the press, the attackers of October 13–14 were generally multiethnic. Of the ninety who were identified, eighty-nine were residents of the republic. Of those eighty-nine attackers, seventy-eight were Kabardians, six were Balkars, two were Russians, and three were Ossetians. The presence of individuals not related to so-called ethnic Muslims (Russians and Ossetians) among the attackers points to a further feature of the “praying ones,” the presence among them of a special contingent — converts, whom Dmitry Prasolov (2008) has studied in considerable detail.

After October 2005, several questions repeatedly arose: “How could such a thing happen?” “Who is to blame for what happened?” And, “What should be done to prevent possible recurrences?” Conferences and roundtables took place in the republic. A succession of major religious figures and eminent scholars specializing in the topic of Islam visited Kabardino-Balkaria. Government agencies developed specialized, targeted programs aimed at the prevention of religious extremism. Common to these programs were, on the one hand, reference to the need to “divert” young people from extremist ideas, and, on the other hand, suggestions of the enormous stabilizing potential residing deep within traditional culture.

In the context of this post-2005 process in Kabardino-Balkaria, focused work began at the state level for the “diversion” of youth from fundamentalist ideas by way of cultivating their interest in their ethnic past. The effort proceeded actively with massive, staged ethno-cultural events. These included the New Year according to the Adyga [Circassian] calendar (*G”ere shchhyre shchzykhekh*), festivals in the “World of the Adyga” series (which featured the ritual branding of horses [*damyg”etedze*]), and the like.

Dances, trick riding, the consumption of *makh”syme* (the national low-alcohol drink), traditional divination with mutton shoulders,

and so forth, accompanied these entertainments. These events also directed attention to the ancient pagan system and the rites and rituals associated with it, as well as to the replication of the worship of pagan deities. Along those same lines, enterprising young people organized a series of ethnographic evenings with the purpose of introducing young men and women to the culture and etiquette of traditional dance — the so-called *Dzhegu* (young people’s festive gathering). Beginning in 2006, the *Dzhegu* was held regularly in Nalchik, on Abkhazia Square, the city’s central square, which leads one to conclude that the authorities were obviously interested in the popularization of this kind of event. The *Dzhegu* took place once a week and lasted from three to four hours, attended by approximately two hundred to three hundred people (Kesheva 2008, 364).

That is not to say that these events were blatantly anti-Islamic. The majority of the republic’s inhabitants, who had been living under the conditions of an acute shortage of leisure activities, likely did not perceive them as such. But religiously inclined people saw in them a dangerous tendency to impose on the residents of Kabardino-Balkaria archaic pagan notions that went against the norms of the Islamic religion.

The prominent scholar and folklorist, Aslan A. Tsipinov, a member of the Kabardino-Balkar Institute of Humanities Research, served as the organizer of the ethnographic productions. Tsipinov’s position, shared by part of the republic’s academic intelligentsia, stood out in its perception of the Islamic religion as a distinctive superstratum that had been added onto the integral system of the *adyge khabze* (a collection of norms of common law and moral-ethical precepts for the Adyga), and had adapted to it without having changed the system’s basic principles. In academic publications and newspaper articles, and in presentations at conferences, Tsipinov repeatedly articulated this position. A series of his statements have resonated widely: “Religion comes and goes, the nation remains”; “We are Adyga first and Muslims second”; “Yes, the Adyga were Muslims, but they never said *namaz*, because they would never have bent the knee to anyone”; and others (Bakova 2014).

The public and specialists alike interpreted these ethnographic productions and the *Dzhegu* variously, including both delighted and sharply denunciatory reviews. Emblematic was an article by one Zoia Dyshekova, dated October 25, 2007, which offered a bitingly negative assessment of the ethnographic events. With indignation, the author wrote:

When the whole civilized world is striving toward progress, why do these people persistently call the Kabardians to regression? Every people, having once lived in paganism, seeks to conceal this period of ignorance, . . . yet our compatriots do not hide or shy away from this period of idol-worship, but they even try to make it a matter of pride (Dyshekova 2007).

A. A. Tspinov regularly received threats. The scholar was murdered in December 2010 by members of the extremist underground, acting from religious motives.

The events of October 2005 became a distinctive watershed for many of the republic's inhabitants in their attitude toward the social group of the "praying ones." Babich (2008, 168) rightly pointed out:

Among the majority of the population, the view arose that all young, bearded Muslims were radicals, Wahhabists, who were dangerous to society and who wanted to overthrow the existing authorities. They thought that most of them were linked to the criminal world of the North Caucasus; that the mosques young Muslims visited were extremely dangerous places for children, teenagers, and young people; and that the KBR population did not need the various forms of Islamic education organized by the young Muslims, because the Islam that they preached was incorrect.

In the period following October 2005, most of the republic's residents generally came to regard young people's interest in Islam negatively, which testifies to a radical shift in public attitudes, since that same type of interest evoked approval in the early 1990s. Scholar Arsen Mukozhev (2009, 318) remarked on this topic: "Now in everyday conversations on the street one can hear, 'Would you believe it?! Their son says *namaz*!' And in reply, one hears, 'What a shame!'" Consequently, believing young people have found themselves in an extremely difficult position and have gradually formed a rather closed subculture.

The validity of applying the term "subculture" to the "praying ones" lies in the social group's possession of all the classic indicators that would, from a sociological perspective, allow scholars to classify them as a subculture, specifically: (1) the presence of clearly defined norms and values and, more broadly, of a system of perception of the world; (2) the manner in which adherents lead a specific way of life; (3) the presence of a defined set of distinctive behavioral markers and external attributes; (4) the presence of a more or less visible,

proactive center, in this case, of a leadership core (for a specified period of time).

Accordingly, quite clear-cut group boundaries, evident both to those entering the group's membership and to society at large, set this social group apart. In addition, often the identity of a "praying one" is the result of complete resocialization; of a total change of his or her system of perception of the world, life rules, norms of behavior, and way of life; and of the rejection of a significant number of elements of national culture and secular standards. The problem of fragmented families, in which permanent conflicts take place between "praying" children and "secular" parents, has therefore become urgent for the republic. These conflicts often lead to discrimination against believers on the everyday level, including within the family. The vast majority of "praying ones" in the KBR reside in Nalchik.

The "praying ones," especially the women among them, stand out from the rest of society by way of striking external markers. For women, chief among these is the hijab, a headscarf covering the neck and hair. It must be noted that among Kabardians and Balkars over the entire period of their affiliation with the Islamic religion, women have never worn a headscarf after the fashion of the hijab. Every married Kabardian or Balkar woman has worn a headscarf but has tied it in another way, with the neck and sometimes part of the hair remaining visible. In addition to the hijab, the other clothing worn by women within the social group of the "praying ones" is quite democratic — consisting primarily of long skirts, loose tunics of heavy fabric (often brightly colored), and flat shoes. In their external appearance, these women often seamlessly fuse the hijab with clothing completely consonant with the main secular trends in fashion. The sight of young women in hijabs with a subdued manicure and make-up has become common. In 2010 or 2011, a trend toward a strict dress code began in the republic: exclusively black, baglike clothing, gloves covering women's hands, and even, at times, niqabs — head scarves in which only the eyes remained visible. But this trend did not actually take hold.

The external markers for "praying" men are not as obvious. A beard, which in the eyes of society became the main indicator of its possessor's classification in the category of the "praying ones," does not signify this in reality. At present, a beard serves mostly as a characteristic that completes the image of those individuals inclined to flaunt conventional norms and to engage in various forms of conspicuous behavior. In recent years, a beard has also come to symbolize a state

of mourning, just as a black scarf does among women. This instance represents the revival of an external marker that existed in the prerevolutionary period. To be sure, back then these signs pertained exclusively to people of advanced age. In sum, an obvious external sign symbolizing a male individual's membership in the social group the "praying ones" does not exist today.

With respect to behavior, such traits as emotional reserve, humility, modesty, marked politeness, and responsiveness to others' needs, which are evident even at the stage of superficial acquaintance, are typical of representatives of the "praying ones." But the most important characteristic distinguishing members of this social group from others is the predominance of the religious element over all others (national, state, and other elements) in the system of their self-identification.

The peculiarities of the conduct of weddings among the "praying ones" vividly illustrate this thesis. As is well-known, for Kabardians and Balkars, a wedding (one of the most important events in the life cycle) is a lavish affair overflowing with guests and accompanied by a series of ancient rituals and an abundance of national dances, in which mainly the young people participate. In contrast, when members of the "praying ones" solemnize a marriage, the wedding is subject to substantial transformation. For example, the symbolic abduction of the bride, all the rituals associated with the consumption of alcohol, the mock "beating" of the groom by his unmarried friends, and so forth, are completely unacceptable, and wedding dances are reduced to a minimum. In rare cases, dances do take place among the men after the manner of the circular dances of the East Caucasus. As Babich (2008, 158) notes, young Muslims in the KBR permit only those dances in which men alone take part, with drums and stunts on horseback. "Praying" young women do not take part in dances at all (Field material 2013, Nał'chik).

In general, at weddings among the "praying ones," the national element is vaguely present but is simplified to a minimum. Nevertheless, since the "praying ones" still objectively belong to a specific clan and family and hence by definition have a large number of relatives, families most often arrange something of a compromise version of a wedding, including a separate halal table set for the young people and their believing friends, and, when possible, even separate venues. At the same time, a traditional wedding celebration is organized for the other guests.

The characteristics of wedding rituals are only one of the examples bearing witness to the substantive transformation of the national

elements of spiritual culture among the praying youth. No less telling is their performance of the series of funeral and memorial rituals, secular holidays, and even the naming of children.

An objective analysis of these facts makes it possible to conclude that, in general, the narratives of the “praying” youth differ markedly from the less religious or non-religious part of society, among whom the emphasis lies to a greater degree on national elements. Unlike the circumstances of the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, however, when the “praying ones” undertook active steps to purge the rituals of spiritual culture of elements that were, from their point of view, contradictory to the tenets of Islam and in doing so often provoked open conflicts and exacerbated existing tensions, one observes nothing like this in today’s republic. In contrast to the negative precedents of the past, a practice has taken hold of the segregation of “praying” young people — a voluntary practice from both the religious and non-religious sides. On the one hand, this reduces the possibility of conflicts to a minimum; on the other hand, it preserves the closed nature and insularity of the members of this social group.

In the matter of employment, the “praying ones” often experience certain difficulties. For example, the circle of workplaces potentially feasible for a “praying” young person is considerably constricted. One does not find representatives of this social group working as doctors, teachers, educators, or bank employees, much less as staff members of the administrative-management organs and security agencies, because unwritten hiring rules in these sorts of professions exclude the possibility of employing members of this social group. Quite often, however, one can encounter them among the employees of private-sector establishments. Many work as retail staff and as wait staff in food establishments. A sizeable number of the men are employed in transportation and a good many as employees of taxi firms, as well as IT-technology specialists, field engineers for digital equipment, construction workers, repairmen, and interior finishers. In the republic there is also a specific cluster of small businesses in which the proportion of “praying ones” is quite high. This sector includes markets for auto body parts and equipment for auto maintenance, auto service establishments, car washes, children’s clothing shops, and, of course, the entire existing trade in Muslim clothing, perfume products, and religious objects.

On the whole, members of the “praying ones” live quite comfortably, enjoying a stable income. Many, including women, own their own vehicles, sometimes even upscale brands. The “praying ones” practice

active intra-group mutual aid with respect to employment and starting a business (through interest-free loans, help in formalizing documents, bookkeeping, and so forth). Notably the “praying ones,” with rare exceptions, conduct their businesses openly and conscientiously complete the necessary financial transactions (Field material 2014, Nal’chik). No one among them can possibly be included among the republic’s financial elite, but at the same time one does not find any in need. This does not support the current, persistent view that the unemployed and disadvantaged overwhelmingly fill this social group’s ranks.

The prospects for future employment are determined by university departments and higher education institutions, in which the share of “praying ones” as students is especially high, particularly in the economics and construction and engineering-technical departments, as well as at technical colleges that train specialists in applied fields, including laboring trades. These young people are closely monitored. All school pupils and higher education students affiliated with the “praying” social group are listed in special records. Security officials regularly conduct review measures with respect to these students according to a strictly defined program. First, they check the lists of individuals affiliated with the “praying ones,” often adding new names to the lists. Second, they analyze the students’ academic performance and attendance. Third, they record the names of individuals with whom the “praying ones” are on friendly or simply familiar terms, even if these people are not classified in the category the “praying ones.” Finally, they gather reports from instructors, classroom teachers, and tutors on each of these students, stressing the nature of their behavior, particulars of their interactions with classmates and university-level peers, and considering whether or not the given individual reveals his or her religious views, engages in propaganda, and so forth (Field material 2012, Nal’chik). In sum, all “praying ones” who are studying in schools and universities are, without exception, in the operational records of the security agencies.

The social group “the praying ones,” which emerged in the republic in the early 1990s, already has a more than twenty-year history. And while initially, entrance into the group stemmed from a distinctive kind of resocialization, eventually children were born into this environment. Unlike their parents, these children were already introduced to the worldviews and values of Islam at the stage of primary socialization. This makes it possible to speak of the sustainability of this social group and its potential tendency to expand.

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