

## **The Role of Replacing Ethno-Cultural Identity with Religious Identity in the Process of Formation and Development of the North Caucasus Imamate**

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## **Ролята на подмяната на етно-културната идентичност с религиозна в процеса на образуване и развитие на Севернокавказкия имамат**

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***Abstract:** Within the confines of the present paper, the authors consider the problem of replacing ethno-cultural identity with religious identity in the process of formation and development of the North Caucasus Imamate. The authors of the article analyse the question of the mechanisms of changing mass consciousness using elements of supranational religious beliefs, individual dogmas of world religion. The authors of the article pay special attention to the mechanism of changing the national and cultural identity of a person. They also explore the issue of replacing national and cultural identity with religious fanaticism. In most cases, religious fanaticism is based on the denial of historical legal, ethical and aesthetic traditions. At the end of the article, the authors come to the conclusion that the study of the history of formation, formation, development and disintegration remains relevant and allows us to predict, model and level the processes of reconstruction of similar political and theocratic formations in the modern world.*

***Keywords:** history, political history, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, North Caucasus imamate, Islam, Sufism, Imam Shamil, Gamzat-bey, Gazi-Mohammed*

The formation of the North Caucasian Imamate on the territory of the North Caucasus was a consequence of the religious conflict that arose among the North Caucasian Muslim community in the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. “Muridism” was formed not as a form of spreading Islam among the non-Muslim population, but on the basis of the historically established Muslim community.

According to contemporaries' records (**Dubrovin 1871**, 70; **Tahir 1990**, 4; **Fadeev 1860**, 10–11) by the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Islam had already the status of one of the traditional forms of religion in the territory of the future imamate. There had been certain forms of Muslim self-government (similar to the “mahalla” of Central Asia), and Muslim communities had been formed and successfully developed, which had become an integral part of the cultural environment of the North Caucasus.

The active use of ‘āda law or “law by custom” (legislative and moral and ethical norms based on the historically established customs of the peoples of the North Caucasus) (**Tahir 1990**, 4), as well as the preservation in Muslim communities of folk dances, games, songs, legends, costumes and historical memory (**Karch-Karchevskiy 1875**, 125–126) including those formed in the pre-Islamic period of the history of the people had been distinctive feature of Islam in the North Caucasus.

This situation changed in the early 80s of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the doctrine of the specific North Caucasian Sufism (Muridism) spread in the territory of the North Caucasus. According to a number of researchers (for example: M. Ya. Korolykov (**Korolykov 1914**, 411–412), S. K. Bushuev (**Bushuev 1939**, 73) A. M. Pickman (**Pikman 1956**, 75), the creator of Muridism is Sheikha Mansura (1760–1794)<sup>1</sup>. The dogmatic system of the Sufi tariqa (brotherhood) Naqshbandi was at the core of the concept of “Muridism” created by Sheikh Mansur. This tariqa early enough began professing a creed that allowed its brothers not to abandon active social interaction: a person was not required to give up the worldly life, involvement in public service and holding of public offices were not blamed (**Petrushevskiy 1966**, 347–348) but even encouraged, being considered as an opportunity to benefit the tariqa. Proceeding from this, the Naqshbandi brothers enjoyed the right to own property in a fairly large scale (**Ivanov 1954**, 10). These features of the tariqa were used by Sheikh Mansur when creating religious and political concepts.

Sheikh Mansour quickly gained spiritual authority and became one of the first leaders in the history of the North Caucasus having a special status that combined the elements of spiritual and secular leadership. The further development of the ideology of the new tariqa by the successors of Sheikh Mansur Ghazi-Muhammad (1795–1832), Jamaludin al-Ghazigumuki (1788/1792–1866) and Mahomet Yaragsky (1771–1838) at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century completed the formation of dogmatics. This allowed the charismatic leader to actually dictate to his community not only the norms of everyday life and law, but also the principles of geopolitics, motivating his decisions with a “divine order” (**Dadaev 2009**). Previously, most decisions were made in the communities of the North Caucasus collectively, and the answers to religious questions came from the text of the Koran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (570(?)–632). According to the ideology created by Jamaludin al-

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<sup>1</sup> All dates are according to the Christian calendar.

Gazigumuki and Magomed Yaragsky, the principle of proclaiming the infallibility of the spiritual leader-imam actually created a system of mediation of the head of the community between ordinary believers and Allah, habitual to traditional Islam. This actually made the ideology of the future North Caucasus Imamate directly dependent on the personal religious and political views of a limited number of people, playing the role of spiritual leaders.

Analyzing the goals declared by Sheikh Mansur, his successors – Jamaludin al-Ghazigumuki and Magomed Yaragsky, and their followers – Ghazi-Muhammad, Gamzat-bek and Imam Shamil (1797–1871), we came to the following conclusion. The leadership of the new tariqa claimed to create a new state on the territory of the North Caucasus, based on the teachings of the Sufi tariqa. Muslim states formed within a separate confessional group have already existed in history. For example, the Nizari Ismaili state with its capital in Alamut was in the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries (**Shahrastani 1984**, 161–170).

There were several directions of development in the history of the formation of the North Caucasus Imamate as a state. First, there was the “religious” direction. This was the formation of a community that has become isolated in the conditions of the Muslim Ummah of the North Caucasus. Secondly, there was the “ideological” direction. This was the replacement of the ethno-cultural identity of the inhabitants of the North Caucasus Imamate with the specific religious and ideological identity of their state. Third, there was the “technical” direction. This was the creation of the state apparatus, infrastructure and cultural component that ensures their functioning. All this was aimed at creating a theocratic state of the “murids”.

The community adopted the traditional religion of Islam as a basis for local residents and formed elements that strictly differentiated the members of the community “murids” from the Muslims who did not accept the elements of the religious doctrine of the new community. The division was based on the principle of “friend-foe”.

Formally, “Muridism” does not differ from any Sufi brotherhood. The Murids take a vow of obedience to the murshid. The Murshid directs the spiritual development and training of the murid disciple. The head of the community is the sheikh or Imam. A distinctive feature of the North Caucasian “muridism” was the initial creation of a full-fledged theocratic state. Before that, it was rare, for example, the state-community of Hasan al-Sabbah (c. 1055–1123) in the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

“Muridism” began to spread in the North Caucasus at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup>–in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to most researchers, the faith and structure of the Naqshbandi Sufi tariqa began to spread in the North Caucasus thanks to the activities of sheikhs Mansur, Muhammad al-Yaraga and Jamaludin al-Ghazigumuka. The legacy of Sheikhs Muhammad and Jamaludin formed the basis of the ideology of the imamate, not only as a community under the leadership of a charismatic spiritual leader, but also as a full-fledged state.

Formally, the theme of the jihad of the sword (armed struggle against non-Muslims) is not touched upon in the works of both sheikhs. But their sermons completed the formation of an ideology that allowed a charismatic leader to dictate to his community not only the norms of everyday life and law, but also the principles of geopolitics. Unfortunately, most of the information describing this process is based on eyewitness accounts of the sermons, the content of which is mentioned in the sources only in fragments.

For example, a researcher from Dagestan, Magomed Dadaev, describes the legend of the “divine order” to the imam of Dagestan and Chechnya, Gazi-Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Ismail al-Gimravi al-Daghistani. The order was to launch a *ghazawāt* against the Russian Empire (**Dadaev 2009**). However, Magomed Dadaev does not cite historical sources that confirm this legend or indicate the source of its origin. The influence of the religious component on the geopolitics of the North Caucasus Imamate is described in more detail in the monograph “Imam Shamil” (**Kaziev 2001**, 47). It has been written by the researcher Shali Kaziyev. In the monograph, the decision to start ghazavat on the part of Imam Ghazi-Muhammad and Imam Shamil is based on the thanatological idea of the path to personal achievement of paradise bliss in one’s posthumous destiny.

The testimony of a contemporary of the era of the formation and development of the North Caucasus Imamate and the personal secretary of Imam Shamil Muhammad-Tahir al-Karahi (1809–1880) can be called more objective. In the work “Three Imams” (**Tahir 1990**, 5, 15, 16, 21, 22), he describes the features of the “Murids” religion and some mechanisms for replacing the ethno-cultural identity of the population of the North Caucasus with a religious identity. Speaking about the specifics of the “religious” development of the North Caucasian Imamate, it is necessary to note those features of the creed that served as the basis for the separation of the new community from the general Caucasian Ummah.

First, Ghazi Muhammad and his successors claimed spiritual leadership in their community, without appealing to the community and the authority of the Naqshbandi tariqa (**Tahir 1990**, 4–5).

Secondly, the categorical denial of *‘āda* law (the law according to custom) and its replacement with Sharia law, without appealing to such a source of law as “urf” (a custom that has developed historically). “Urf” is a source of law characteristic of the Hanafi madhhab. Hanafi madhhab is a Muslim legal school, most common in Central Asia and the North Caucasus in the period from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Thirdly, they withdrew from the *‘aql* (reason, logic) as an instrument of Islamic law (fiqh). Although fiqh is widely used among the Sufis of the Naqshbandi tariqa, for example, in Central Asia. The *aql* is not used as a source of law, as it is characteristic of the Shiite Jafarite mazhab. Imam Ghazi-Mohammed carried out this process by violent methods. He excluded from the

life of the Muslims of the North Caucasus their historically established customs, historically established trade relations (for example, with the Russian Empire) (**Tahir 1990, 5**). Later this activity was continued by Imam Shamil. He went beyond religion and jurisprudence.

Fourth, Imam Ghazi-Mohammed was very strict about isolating the “murids” from Muslims who adhere to historical traditions. This we learn from the memoirs of Muhammad-Tahir al-Karahi and Imam Shamil (**Chichagova 1889**). Imam Ghazi-Mohammed implemented a policy of isolation by violent methods. He excluded from the life of the Muslims of the North Caucasus their historically established customs and trade relations (for example, with the Russian Empire (**Tahir 1990, 5**). Muhammad-Tahir al-Karahi admits that Muslims who did not want to accept the power of Ghazi-Muhammad fled to the territories controlled by the troops of the Russian Empire. Later this activity was continued by Imam Shamil. Based on the work of Mariya Chichagova, who met Imam Shamil during his exile in Kaluga, it can be assumed that Imam Shamil, after coming to power, not wanting to lose his subjects, reduced the repression against dissidents (**Chichagova 1889**).

These features became the basis of the second, “ideological” direction of development. The aim of this direction was to create a theocratic state of “murids” by the imams of the North Caucasus Imamate. During this period, the historical ethno-cultural identity was replaced by a specific religious and political one. Imam Shamil went further than his predecessor, Imam Ghazi-Mohammed, in implementing this policy. Shamil used violent methods to pursue a policy of abandoning the historically established folk culture. He demanded that the peoples of the North Caucasus abandon folk music, songs, working “shameless” clothing (**Tahir 1990, 14**), etc.

In addition to Muhammad-Tahir al-Karahi, modern historians also point to this fact in their works. Semen Bushuev writes that Imam Shamil tried to destroy the traditional way of life of the peoples of Dagestan, Chechnya, and Crimea by any means. He replaced the traditional way of life with a Turkish-style Islam that was alien to them (**Bushuev 1956, 73–74**). Yusup Dadaev and Nurislam Dzhidalaev suggest that Imam Shamil pursued a policy of introducing not Turkic, but Arabic culture (**Dadaev 2008**). Researcher Nurislam Dzhidalaev clarifies that not only the spiritual sphere and office work were subjected to Arabization, but also the entire life of the peoples of the North Caucasus who fell under the rule of the North Caucasian Imamate (**Dzhidalaev 1994, 270–271**).

This policy led to the deepening of the split of the North Caucasian Muslim community both on the basis of the confession of a certain direction of the Islamic faith, and the self-identification of a person by belonging to a national (ethno-cultural) or supranational (religious) community. Belonging to an alien culture became an indispensable part of it. At the same time, the leadership of the North Caucasus Imamate was trying to sacralise an alien culture (Turkish or Arabic) in the system of perception of the World among the “murids”. As a result,

an artificial identity of the “murids” of the North Caucasus Imamate was formed. This identity came into conflict with the real ethno-cultural identity of the Caucasian peoples. The leaders of the North Caucasus Imamate used the technology of “memory stripping”<sup>2</sup>. With the help of this technology, the population of the North Caucasus was provoked by the need to redefine their own identity. This need was artificially created by the imams of the North Caucasus Imamate and used to form a controlled community. This community became the basis for the creation of a theocratic state focused on geopolitical cooperation (up to vassalage) with the Ottoman Empire under the rule of Sultan Mahmud II (1785–1839) (later Sultan Abdul – Majid I (1823–1861)) and the Egyptian Khedive Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769–1849), who captured Arabia in 1811.

On the ideological direction of the development of the imamate, a number of concept characteristics of the North Caucasus and Muslim society were clarified. So, for example, to refer to the war with the Russian Empire and Muslims of other directions of Islam, the supporters of Ghazi-Muhammad, and later his successor Imam Gamzat-bek, choosed the term “*ghazawāt*” rather than “jihad”. The goal of this “linguistic revolution” was to create a kind of ideology of controlled fanaticism. The term “jihad” in this context begins to be used under Imam Shamil. The term “*ghazawāt*” in the Cambridge History of Islam is interpreted as a phenomenon known in the pre-Islamic period. Ghazawāt is an armed struggle between the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula for control of water bodies, cattle or pastures, which is a raid on the territory of the opposing tribe. In the early Islamic period of the history of Arab civilization, the term “ghazawāt” referred to wars in which the Prophet Muhammad was directly involved (**IL 1970**, 569). This is also mentioned by researchers Bernard Lewis (**Lewis 1991**, 71–72) and Raven Fireston (**Firestone 1999**, 14–15). The term was not used in the verses of the Qur'an. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “*ghazawāt*”, that is, the war for resources could be declared by the head of the tribe. “Jihad” as a religious war could only be declared by the caliph as the spiritual leader. In the 30–40s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the North Caucasus, the definition of “*ghazawāt*” became identical to the definition of “jihad of the sword”. There is a situation in which any leader of the Muslim community could potentially declare a religious war. Since the days of Ghazi Muhammad, Gamzat Bey, and Imam Shamil, it has been possible to declare “jihad” as a religious war initiated by a secular ruler. Since that time, no one has evaluated the use of the term “*ghazawāt*” as an appeal to the early Islamic (if not pre-Islamic) tradition. After the collapse of the Russian Empire,

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<sup>2</sup> This technology is described in detail by Erik Erikson in his works “Identity: youth and crisis” (**Erikson 1996b**) and “Childhood and society” (**Erikson 1996a**). On the one hand, E. Erikson has an extremely negative attitude towards the ethno-cultural identity as such. On the other hand, he recognizes its “natural” character. He believes that identity is a phenomenon centered on the essence of the individual and the culture to which the individual belongs. E. Erikson clearly states that the need to relate oneself to the culture, history, mythology, and values of a certain people is a primary social need for a person.

this distorted concept went abroad and have influenced the history of the Middle East and Europe to the present time.

After analysing both concepts, it became obvious that it is impossible to consider the war of the North Caucasus Imamate with the Russian Empire as a religious war – “jihad”. The attempt of Ghazi-Muhammad, Gamzat-bey and Imam Shamil to give the Caucasian War of 1817–1864 the character of a religious confrontation is doomed to failure for the following reasons:

- The army of the North Caucasus Imamate and the army of the Russian Empire cannot be called monoconfessional. It is known that Imam Shamil willingly used the services of collaborators. In the army of Shamil served Polish deserters from the army of the Russian Empire. Most of them professed the Christianity of the Roman Catholic Church.

- A significant number of Muslims served in the army of the Russian Empire. Part of the Russian army in the North Caucasus was made up of Muslims-representatives of the peoples of this region. Many of them believed that by opposing the “murids”, they were liberating their country from the invaders. For their heroism, Muslim soldiers in the Russian army received Russian military awards for Muslims by Decree № 18188 of Nicholas I from August 29, 1844. The modification of the Order of St. George the Victorious contained a special image of the Imperial Russian Eagle. It did not offend the religious feelings of Muslims (**PSZRI 1845**, 535).

Imam Shamil’s reforms made it possible to translate ideological and spiritual changes into a real vector of political development for the long term. The reforms contributed to Imam Shamil’s construction of the political and ideological system of the North Caucasus Imamate. Forming a new ethnic group, Imam Shamil took a set of measures to create a new culture. As the official language of communication of the “new aristocracy” and office work, he chose Arabic. This is justified by the dogmas of Islam. And to create a new household culture, he borrowed the cultural heritage of the Naqshbandi tariqa. Sometimes the introduction of elements of the “new culture” was carried out through the personal example of the leaders of the North Caucasus Imamate. For example, in the 20–30s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Imam Shamil himself and his inner circle practiced special types of dances. These dances were part of Sufi rituals. Such ritual dances had no cultural and historical connection with the traditions of the peoples of the North Caucasus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were not connected with their history.

It is necessary to note the following fact. By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an Arabic-language literary tradition had already developed on the territory of modern Dagestan. Within the framework of this tradition, mainly historical chronicles were created (**Shamaev 2019**, 44–45): “Derbend-name”, “Tārīkh Dagestan”, “Tārīkh Abī Muslim”, “Akhty-name”. These works were not persecuted. But they were not widely distributed as census copies of works of Arabic-language literature imported from abroad. Popular among them were *Kitāb al-Gharībayn fī al-Qur’ān wa-l-ḥadīth* by Abū ‘Ubayd Aḥmad ibn

Muḥammad al-Harawī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm ad-dīn* by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī”, *al-Ṣiḥāḥ* of Abū Naṣr Ismā'īl ibn Ḥammād al-Jawharī (Shihsaidov 2001, 34). Thus, in the course of the struggle against the national culture, the “cultural field” did not remain completely empty, leaving on it the introduced Arabic-speaking and Turkish cultural components. Given that Arabia was under the rule of the Turkish vassal Khedive of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, these cultural components did not contradict each other, but formed a single whole.

The third, “technical” direction of the imamate’s development is also connected to Shamil’s reforms. Imam Shamil succeeded in creating the infrastructural and clerical component of the North Caucasus Imamate. He separated the “Murids” from the rest of the Muslim population of the North Caucasus, and from the Muslims of the Russian Empire (as well as the Ottoman Empire and Persia).

First of all, it is necessary to note the imam’s contribution to the formation of a standardized system of Sharia law. This system was quite amorphous. Imam Shamil codified the laws of Sharia in 1839–1841 in a single document – the code of laws “Nizam” (from Arabic “order”, “system”). He adapted them to the conditions of the North Caucasus.

In general, the administrative system of the North Caucasus Imamate was largely copied from the administrative system of the Ottoman Empire. The power of Imam Shamil in the territory under his control was absolute. Military duty applied to all men without exception. The highest administrative institution in the North Caucasus Imamate was the “Divan”<sup>3</sup>. The “Divan” was organized in the image and likeness of the Turkish one. There was no question of representation in the “Divan” on the basis of territorial or ancestral grounds. The main criteria were considered “piety” and “respect” among the “murids” (Chichagova 1889). Consequently, the restoration of the institution of the “shura”<sup>4</sup>, characteristic of the theocratic Muslim state as in the era of the Righteous Caliphate<sup>5</sup>, is out of the question.

Thus, by the beginning of the 50s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Imam Shamil managed to form a unique state for his time. Most of the population professed a form of Islam that was historically alien to their peoples and their ancestors. The main part of the population of the North Caucasus Imamate by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had already identified themselves rather poorly on an ethno-cultural basis. Gazi-Muhammad, Gamzat-bey and Imam Shamil managed to separate a significant part of the population of the North Caucasus in an orderly manner. They formed a local political system that meets the needs of a separate group of the population. This gave stability the community.

At the same time, Imam Shamil and his associates failed to create a self-

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<sup>3</sup> Divan is a Council, a higher administrative institution.

<sup>4</sup> The Shura is a general council of men of the Muslim community.

<sup>5</sup> Here we are referring to the time of the first four caliphs after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, which became the standard for the Muslim state.

sufficient and viable economic system. Therefore, when the Russian navy cut off the supply routes of the North Caucasus Imamate from the Ottoman Empire, the state of Shamil very quickly became unviable.

It is possible to distinguish the main results of the reforms of the North Caucasian imams from the 80s of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

First, a significant part of the population of the North Caucasus adopted the “Murids” creed. They have stopped identifying themselves based on ethnic and cultural characteristics and are taking priority over religious identity.

Second, the imams have created a fairly stable religious and political community with a rigid hierarchy, a system of office work and a system of internal rules.

The main reasons for the non-viability of the imamate as a solid state were economic problems, the dependence of the state of “murids” on foreign supplies. In the future, this predetermined his political independence. The leadership of the North Caucasus Imamate failed to completely overcome the population’s need for the cultural traditions of their ancestors. The imams failed (although they declared in their official ideology) to create a system of social elevators that would allow them to overcome the remnants of the class division of society. All this has led to a deepening of the religious and cultural division of the population of the North Caucasus and a reduction in the social base of the “murids”. This led to the disappointment of a significant part of the “murids”, who hoped to improve their social status within the new state.

The Ottoman Empire used the theoretical, social and ideological potential of the North Caucasus Imamate in its foreign policy. In the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the leadership of the “Murid” community, at the request of the Ottoman diplomacy, provoked military actions against the Russian Empire. Russia was not interested in an armed confrontation during this period. On July 6, 1854, a personal decree of Nicholas I was issued on the allocation of arable land for the Caucasian peoples (this territory now makes up most of the territory of the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation), provided that they renounce robbery and violence. And after the squadron of Admiral Mikhail Lazarev blocked the sea supply routes of the North Caucasus Imamate with the fleet of the Ottoman Empire, there was an alternative: either war or peace. A significant part of the population of the imamate chose a peaceful path. This led to the collapse of the imamate and the defeat of its troops.

Summing up, it should be noted that the leaders of the state of “murids” have created a precedent. This precedent proved the possibility of creating a theocratic state by forcibly and ideologically isolating a part of the population in a territory inhabited by peoples professing Islam. Throughout the history of Modern times, attempts have repeatedly been made to recreate a theocratic state in the image and likeness of the North Caucasus Imamate on the basis of various regions. In particular, in 2006, a group of extremists in Syria tried to implement this precedent by the same methods and with almost the same result.

Thus, the study of the history of formation, development and disintegration remains relevant and allows us to predict, model and level the processes of reconstruction of similar political and theocratic formations in the modern World.

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