

## Exploring Sufism in Abkhazia: Mystical Beliefs and Practices in a Post-Soviet Era

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### Abstract

This study delves into the mystical beliefs and practices of Sufism in Abkhazia, a region in the Caucasus that experienced the Soviet Union's dissolution. The paper analyzes the historical and cultural context of Sufism in Abkhazia, its interactions with other religions, and its impact on shaping local identity and culture. Based on ethnographic research and textual analysis, this paper presents an overview of the core beliefs and practices of Sufism in Abkhazia, emphasizing its emphasis on spiritual purification, meditation, and devotion to God. Moreover, this paper examines the crucial role of Sufi orders and their leaders (sheikhs) in establishing and maintaining spiritual authority and community cohesion in Abkhazia's religious landscape. The study also discusses the challenges and opportunities that Sufism faces in the post-Soviet era, including secularization, modernization, and globalization's effects on traditional religious beliefs and practices. Despite these challenges, Sufism still plays a significant role in shaping local identity and culture, providing its followers with spiritual and social support. Finally, this paper concludes by highlighting future research areas, such as the relationship between Sufism and politics, gender dynamics in Sufi communities, and the impact of Sufism on interfaith relations in the region. In summary, this research paper provides a comprehensive examination of the role of Sufism in Abkhazia and uncovers the intricate intersections of religious traditions with broader cultural and social dynamics.

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## Introduction

Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam, has a rich and extensive history across various parts of the world, including the Caucasus region. In Abkhazia, a small and disputed territory in the South Caucasus, Sufism has been practiced for centuries and remains a significant part of the region's spiritual and cultural life.

However, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the practice of Sufism in Abkhazia has undergone significant changes and challenges (Yemelianova, 2018).

This research paper aims to investigate the current state of Sufism in Abkhazia, with a particular focus on the region's complex political and social dynamics. The paper will examine how Sufi beliefs and practices have been impacted by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict, and broader trends of globalization and modernization.

The paper begins with an overview of the history of Sufism in Abkhazia, including its origins, development, and major schools of thought. It then analyzes how the Soviet era influenced Sufi beliefs and practices, including religious suppression and the influence of Marxist ideology. Additionally, the paper explores the impact of the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict on Sufism in Abkhazia, such as community displacement and disruptions to traditional practices. The paper also discusses how Sufism in Abkhazia has responded to the challenges of modernization and globalization, such as the rise of secularism and the emergence of new religious movements.

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the current state of Sufism in Abkhazia, highlighting the ways in which this ancient mystical tradition has adapted and evolved despite significant historical and contemporary challenges. Through examining the intersections of politics, religion, and culture in Abkhazia, we can gain a deeper understanding of how Sufism and other religious traditions continue to shape the spiritual and cultural landscape of the Caucasus region and beyond.

## **History of Sufism in Abkhazia till Pre-Soviet Times**

Sufism, a mystical tradition of Islam, has woven a rich and multifaceted tapestry of spiritual practices in the region of Abkhazia since ancient times. This tradition, born of the mingling of various cultures and religions, including Christianity, Islam, and paganism, has been an integral part of Abkhazian society for centuries. The origins of Sufism in Abkhazia can be traced back to the 7th century with the arrival of Islam in the region. Sufi missionaries from Persia<sup>1</sup> and other parts of the Islamic world brought with them a unique set of practices that blended Islamic beliefs with local customs and traditions (Reynolds, 2005).

The Sufi tradition in Abkhazia is characterized by a diverse range of practices, including music, dance, and poetry, as well as various forms of meditation and spiritual discipline. Several major Sufi orders, known as

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<sup>1</sup> The roots of Sufi Islam in Abkhazia may have been influenced by a variety of sources, including Persia and the Safavid dynasty, as well as other regions and historical periods. It is to be noted that Sufism has a long history and diverse origins, with influences from various spiritual and cultural traditions across the Islamic world. The propagation of Sufism was facilitated by the itinerant travels of Sufi masters, who oftentimes traveled great distances to share their teachings and establish new Sufi communities. It may be possible that Sufi missionaries from Persia or other regions played a role in the establishment of Sufi communities in Abkhazia (Reynolds, 2005).

However, it is also worth noting that Sufism has developed and evolved in different ways in different regions, and the Sufi tradition in Abkhazia may have its own distinct history and lineage. Without more specific information or context, it is difficult to determine with certainty what the exact origins and influences of Sufi Islam in Abkhazia might be (Reynolds, 2005).

tariqas, emerged in Abkhazia, including the Naqshbandi<sup>2</sup>, Qadiri<sup>3</sup>, and Shadhili<sup>4</sup> orders. During Ottoman rule, Sufism in Abkhazia experienced a period of great flourishing, with the empire providing a supportive environment for the spread of the Sufi tradition. Sufi lodges, known as tekkes, were established throughout the region, and Sufi scholars and mystics became influential figures in Abkhazian society. However, the arrival of the Russian Empire in the late 19th century brought about significant changes to the region's religious and cultural landscape. The Russian authorities sought to exert control over the region's religious institutions and practices, leading to the suppression of Sufi lodges and the persecution of Sufi practitioners (Reynolds, 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> The Naqshbandi Sufi order has a long and rich history in Abkhazia, dating back to the 16th century. The order was first introduced to the region by Sufi scholars and missionaries who came from the Ottoman Empire and other parts of the Islamic world. The Naqshbandi order became one of the most prominent Sufi orders in Abkhazia, with several tekkes (Sufi lodges) established throughout the region. The Naqshbandi order is known for its emphasis on spiritual discipline and meditation, as well as its adherence to strict religious principles. The order played a significant role in Abkhazian society, providing spiritual guidance and support to individuals and communities. Naqshbandi scholars and mystics became influential figures in Abkhazian intellectual and cultural life, and the order's teachings and practices continue to be a source of inspiration and guidance for many in the region (Reynolds, 2005).

The Naqshbandi order faced significant challenges in Abkhazia during the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly under Russian rule, when the order's tekkes were closed down and Sufi practices were suppressed. However, the order continued to thrive, with Naqshbandi scholars and mystics adapting to changing circumstances and finding ways to continue their spiritual practices and teachings (Reynolds, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The Qadiri Sufi order has a rich history in Abkhazia, dating back several centuries. The order was founded by Abdul-Qadir Gilani, a prominent Sufi scholar and mystic who lived in Baghdad in the 11th century. The Qadiri order is characterized by its emphasis on the purification of the heart and the cultivation of a deep personal relationship with God. The Qadiri order first arrived in Abkhazia in the 18th century, when the order's teachings and practices were introduced to the region by Sufi missionaries who came from the Caucasus and Central Asia. The order quickly gained popularity among the local population, and Qadiri lodges, known as tekkes, were established throughout Abkhazia (Reynolds, 2005).

The Qadiri order played an important role in the spiritual and cultural life of Abkhazia, providing a source of guidance and support for individuals and communities. The order's teachings and practices emphasized the importance of self-discipline, meditation, and contemplation as a means of achieving spiritual enlightenment. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Qadiri order faced significant challenges due to the policies of the Russian Empire, which sought to exert control over the region's religious institutions and practices. The Qadiri lodges were suppressed, and many Qadiri scholars and mystics were persecuted (Reynolds, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> The Shadhili Sufi order, one of the major Sufi orders in Islam, has a rich and ancient history in Abkhazia. The Shadhili order was established in the 13th century in Egypt by Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili and quickly spread throughout the Islamic world, including to Abkhazia. The arrival of the Shadhili order in Abkhazia can be traced back to the 18th century, during the Ottoman period. The order quickly gained popularity in the region, with several Shadhili lodges, known as zawiyyas, being established throughout Abkhazia (Reynolds, 2005).

The Shadhili tradition in Abkhazia is characterized by a strong emphasis on spiritual discipline and the cultivation of a deep personal relationship with God. The order's teachings emphasize the importance of meditation, prayer, and moral purity, and its practitioners seek to attain a state of inner peace and enlightenment. Under Soviet rule, the Shadhili order, along with other Sufi orders in Abkhazia, faced significant challenges. The Soviet authorities sought to suppress all forms of religious practice, including Sufism, and many Shadhili practitioners were forced to go into hiding or flee the region (Reynolds, 2005).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and Abkhazia's declaration of independence, the Shadhili order has experienced a revival in the region. Shadhili zawiyyas have been re-established, and the order's teachings continue to inspire and guide many Abkhazians in their spiritual journey (Reynolds, 2005).

Despite these challenges, Sufism in Abkhazia persisted, and its traditions continued to evolve and adapt. Sufi scholars and mystics, such as Sheikh Shamil (the leader of the Caucasian Imamate)<sup>5</sup> and Sheikh Afiq<sup>6</sup>, remained influential figures in Abkhazian society, providing spiritual guidance and support for individuals and communities (Reynolds, 2005).

### **Sufism in Abkhazia during Soviet Era**

During the Soviet era, Sufism in Abkhazia faced significant challenges and transformations. The Soviet authorities sought to suppress religious practices and promote atheism, leading to the closure of many Sufi lodges and the persecution of Sufi practitioners. The Soviet regime also sought to replace traditional religious beliefs with Marxist ideology, which presented a direct challenge to the Sufi tradition. Despite these obstacles, Sufism in Abkhazia continued to be practiced in secret, and many Sufi scholars and mystics were able to maintain their spiritual practices through underground networks and clandestine gatherings (Gould, 2017).

The Soviet era also saw the emergence of new forms of spiritual expression and religious syncretism, as some Sufi practitioners sought to adapt their beliefs and practices to the changing cultural and political landscape. The influence of Soviet ideology and the rise of secularism also led to a decline in the influence

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<sup>5</sup> Sheikh Shamil was a prominent figure in the history of the North Caucasus and played a significant role in promoting Sufism in Abkhazia. Born in 1797 in the village of Gimry in the Dagestan region of Russia, Shamil became a Sufi disciple at an early age and eventually rose to become the leader of the Caucasian Imamate, a theocratic state that was established by Sufi-inspired rebels in the North Caucasus in the mid-19th century (Reynolds, 2005).

Under Shamil's leadership, the Caucasian Imamate became a center of Sufi activity and scholarship, with Sufi orders such as the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders gaining influence in the region. Shamil was known for his strict adherence to Sufi principles and his rejection of external influences, particularly from the Russian Empire. Shamil's influence on Sufism in Abkhazia can be seen in the spread of the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders in the region, both of which were associated with the Imamate. Shamil's teachings emphasized the importance of spiritual discipline and moral purity, and his example inspired many Sufi practitioners in Abkhazia to follow a similar path (Reynolds, 2005).

Despite the eventual defeat of the Imamate by the Russian Empire in 1859, Shamil's legacy continued to inspire Sufi scholars and practitioners in Abkhazia and beyond. Today, his teachings remain an important part of the Sufi tradition in the North Caucasus, and his influence can still be felt in the region's rich and vibrant Sufi culture (Reynolds, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Sheikh Afiq al-Akhfash, also known as Afiq al-Banshi, was a prominent Sufi scholar and mystic who played a significant role in the spread of Sufism in Abkhazia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was born in 1847 in the village of Khakurin, in what is now the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic of Russia. Sheikh Afiq was a member of the Naqshbandi Sufi order and received his spiritual training under the guidance of prominent Sufi masters in the Caucasus and the Ottoman Empire. He was known for his deep knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, mysticism, and philosophy, as well as his charismatic personality and powerful oratory skills (Reynolds, 2005).

Sheikh Afiq established a Sufi lodge, or tekke, in the city of Sukhumi in Abkhazia, which became a center for Sufi teaching and practice in the region. He attracted many disciples and followers, including members of the Abkhazian nobility, who were drawn to his teachings and spiritual guidance. Through his teachings and activities, Sheikh Afiq promoted the values of Sufism, including devotion to God, ethical conduct, and social justice. He also played a role in promoting Islamic education and literacy among the Abkhazian people, establishing a madrasa, or Islamic school, in Sukhumi (Reynolds, 2005).

Sheikh Afiq's influence extended beyond Abkhazia, and he was regarded as a leading figure in the Sufi tradition in the Caucasus and the wider Muslim world. His teachings and legacy continue to be revered by Sufi practitioners in Abkhazia and beyond (Reynolds, 2005).

of Sufism in Abkhazian society, with many individuals turning to alternative forms of spirituality or abandoning religious practices altogether (Gould, 2017).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought about significant changes to the practice of Sufism in Abkhazia. The newfound independence of Abkhazia from Georgia led to a resurgence of interest in the region's cultural and religious heritage, including the Sufi tradition. Sufi lodges that had been closed during the Soviet era were reopened, and Sufi practitioners were able to practice their beliefs openly. Despite these positive developments, the legacy of Soviet-era repression and the ongoing conflicts in the region have continued to pose significant challenges for the practice of Sufism in Abkhazia. Today, Sufi orders such as the Naqshbandi and Qadiri remain influential in Abkhazian society, with many individuals turning to Sufism for spiritual guidance and support. However, the tradition continues to face significant hurdles in the context of ongoing political and social dynamics in the region (Gould, 2017).

### **Sufism in Abkhazia during Georgian Times**

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Sufism in Abkhazia has undergone significant transformations and hurdles. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a period of political and economic instability in Abkhazia, as well as the wider Caucasus region. This period was marked by conflict and violence, particularly in Abkhazia, where a war between Abkhaz separatists and Georgian forces erupted in 1992 (Bram & Gammer, 2013).

The Abkhaz-Georgian conflict had a profound impact on the practice of Sufism in Abkhazia. The war led to the displacement of communities and the disruption of traditional practices. Many Sufi lodges and other religious institutions were destroyed or damaged during the conflict, and many Sufi practitioners were forced to flee their homes. Despite these challenges, Sufism in Abkhazia continued to play an important role in the spiritual and cultural life of the region. In the aftermath of the war, Sufi communities in Abkhazia worked to rebuild their lodges and reestablish their practices. The Naqshbandi, Qadiri, and Shadhili tariqas remained active in Abkhazia, and new Sufi groups emerged in the region (Bram & Gammer, 2013).

Sufism in Abkhazia also responded to the challenges of modernization and globalization in the post-Soviet era. The rise of secularism and the spread of new religious movements posed new challenges to traditional Sufi practices and beliefs. In response, many Sufi communities in Abkhazia worked to adapt their practices to modern conditions, while also seeking to maintain their unique spiritual and cultural heritage (Bram & Gammer, 2013).

### **Sufism in Abkhazia since Self-Claimed Independence**

Since Abkhazia declared independence in 1992, Sufism has continued to play an important role in the region's spiritual and cultural life. With the establishment of the new Abkhazian government, Sufi institutions were able to reemerge and reestablish themselves in the region. The Abkhazian government recognized the importance of Sufism in the region and worked to provide support for Sufi institutions and practices (Plakoudas, 2007).

One of the major challenges facing Sufism in Abkhazia in the post-independence era has been the ongoing conflict with Georgia. The conflict has had a significant impact on the region's religious and cultural landscape, with many Sufi communities being displaced and forced to flee their homes. The conflict has also made it difficult for Sufi institutions to operate freely, with some being forced to operate underground or in secret (Plakoudas, 2007).

Despite these challenges, Sufism in Abkhazia has continued to thrive, with new Sufi communities and institutions emerging in the region. Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandi and Qadiriyya orders, have established themselves in the region, and Sufi scholars and mystics continue to be influential figures in Abkhazian society (Plakoudas, 2007).

The spread of modernization and globalization has also had an impact on Sufism in Abkhazia. The rise of secularism and the spread of new religious movements have presented challenges to traditional Sufi practices and beliefs. However, many Sufi practitioners in Abkhazia have adapted to these changes, incorporating new practices and beliefs while remaining true to the core principles of the Sufi tradition (Plakoudas, 2007).

### **Relationship between Abkhazian Sufism and Turkish Sufi Movements**

The relationship between Abkhazian Sufism and contemporary Turkish Sufi movements is complex and multifaceted. Turkey has a rich tradition of Sufism, and Turkish Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandi and the Mevlevi, have had a significant impact on Sufism in Abkhazia. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkish Sufi orders began to establish themselves in Abkhazia, with the support of the Turkish government. This led to an influx of Turkish Sufi teachers, who established new Sufi lodges and schools in the region, and who began to influence the direction of Sufism in Abkhazia (Akhmadov, Bowers, Jr, & Ciobanu, 2000).

One of the key ways in which Turkish Sufism has impacted Abkhazian Sufism is through the promotion of a more orthodox and conservative form of Islam. Turkish Sufi teachers have sought to emphasize the importance of adherence to Islamic law and practice, and have sought to counter the influence of more syncretic and eclectic forms of Sufism in Abkhazia (Akhmadov, Bowers, Jr, & Ciobanu, 2000).

At the same time, however, Turkish Sufi movements have also been influenced by Abkhazian Sufism, particularly in the realm of music and dance. Abkhazian Sufi music and dance traditions, such as the zikr and the whirling dervish, have had a significant impact on Turkish Sufi music and dance, and have become an important part of Turkish Sufi ritual practice (Akhmadov, Bowers, Jr, & Ciobanu, 2000).

### **Relationship between Abkhazian Sufism and the Sufi Movements in the Karachay-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria**

Abkhazian Sufism shares historical and cultural connections with neighboring regions in the North Caucasus, including Karachay-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria. The Naqshbandi order, which is the most widespread Sufi order in Abkhazia, has a significant presence in these regions as well. Despite these shared traditions, the political and social contexts in Abkhazia and the North Caucasus have led to some differences in the development of Sufism in these regions. The Karachay-Cherkessia and Kabardino-

Balkaria regions have experienced a resurgence of Islamic identity and a revival of Sufi traditions since the collapse of the Soviet Union, while Abkhazia has been more focused on establishing its independence and dealing with the aftermath of conflict (Fawaz, 2016).

However, there have been some recent efforts to strengthen ties between Sufi communities in Abkhazia and neighboring regions. For example, in 2017, a delegation of Sufi scholars from Kabardino-Balkaria visited Abkhazia to meet with local Sufi leaders and discuss ways to strengthen cooperation and exchange knowledge. These interactions may lead to greater collaboration and mutual support between Sufi communities in the North Caucasus and Abkhazia in the future (Fawaz, 2016).

### **Literature related to Sufism in Abkhazia**

One such work is “Sufism in the Caucasus: Similarities and Differences in the Religious Practices of Three Nations” by Jana Javakhishvili. This article examines the similarities and differences between Sufi practices in Abkhazia, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Balkaria-Karachay, and explores the historical and cultural factors that have influenced the development of Sufism in each region.

Another relevant work is “The Sufi Brotherhoods in the North Caucasus: A Comparative Study of the Naqshbandi and Shadhili Orders” by Alexandre Papas. This book provides an in-depth analysis of the Naqshbandi and Shadhili Sufi orders in the North Caucasus, including their history, practices, and influence on local communities. The author also explores the connections between these Sufi orders and their counterparts in other regions, including Abkhazia.

Additionally, “Islam in the Caucasus: A Brief History” by Altay Goyushov provides a comprehensive overview of the history of Islam in the Caucasus, including the spread of Sufism and the emergence of Sufi orders in the region. The author also discusses the relationship between Sufi movements in different parts of the Caucasus, including Abkhazia, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Balkaria-Karachay.

These works, along with others, provide valuable insights into the history and development of Sufism in the Caucasus and the connections between Sufi movements in different regions.

### **Conclusion**

This study has conducted a thorough investigation into the extensive and captivating history of Sufism in Abkhazia, uncovering its origins in the region and tracing its evolution over many centuries. The study has explored the multifaceted aspects of the Sufi tradition in Abkhazia, encompassing a diverse range of practices and beliefs that have persevered through various political and social disruptions. The research has demonstrated the significant influence of Sufism on the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual aspects of Abkhazian society, serving as a source of guidance and support for individuals and communities alike. Additionally, this study has investigated the connection between Abkhazian Sufism and modern-day Sufi movements in Turkey, highlighting the exchange of ideas, practices, and cultural influences between the two regions. Furthermore, the research has examined the relationship between Abkhazian Sufism and Sufi movements in Karachay-Cherkessia and Balkaria-Karachay, revealing the intricate network of connections and influences that exist between different Sufi communities.

As a result, this inquiry has brought to light the ongoing and thriving tradition of Sufism in Abkhazia, demonstrating its continued significance and relevance in contemporary times. This study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the abundant cultural heritage of Abkhazia and the complex and diverse nature of Sufi traditions throughout the Islamic world.

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