Uncertain divides: religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Georgian borderlands
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INTRODUCTION

At midday on a July afternoon in Khulo, I was asked by an acquaintance to accompany him as he paid his last respects to a former colleague. We entered an apartment where his colleague’s body was being displayed. We walked around the coffin and softly said our condolences to some family members. Then we left the apartment and spent a few minutes more outside talking to other men who had gathered in the street. At the time, I didn’t think the event was anything special but my opinion changed when Murman, an acquaintance of the deceased, dropped by one night to tell my assistant Teimuri and I the ‘full story’ of the funeral. After he recounted the events, a lively discussion ensued in which it became clear to me that for Murman and Teimuri the particularities of the funeral were an apt representation of the dilemmas currently facing Ajaria.

Otari Abuladze was born in Didachara, a village in the mountains of Upper Ajaria, which is known throughout Georgia for its ‘persistent’ Islamic character.¹ His parents met in his mother’s native town in the north of the country, where Otari’s father had been dispatched during World War II. They married and ‘returned’ to Didachara where Otari, their first child, was born. When Otari was ten years old, his father died. He and his mother moved to the Ajarian capital Batumi. Otari finished his education in Batumi and was subsequently assigned to a position as police officer in the district center Khulo, which is located between Batumi and Didachara. After having completed his professional career in Khulo, Otari retired and moved back to Batumi. Here he spent the last years of his life until he died unexpectedly at the age of fifty-three.

During the two days preceding his burial, Otari lay in a wooden coffin in the center of the living-room of his apartment in Batumi. He was dressed in a black suit, his eyes were closed, and his folded hands rested on a small cross. A bible was placed against the front end of the coffin. Flowers and floral wreaths presented by friends and colleagues encircled the body. Female relatives from his mother’s side sat on chairs against the walls and took turns wailing.

On the day of his burial, Otari’s body was brought to Khulo where his former colleagues paid him their last respects. The set-up in Khulo resembled the room in Batumi but some items were no longer present. The most colorful floral wreaths as well as the relatives from his mother’s side were left behind and both bible and cross were conspicuously absent. The ritual was very sober and involved little more than a walk around the coffin and the soft whispering of condolences.

¹ In Georgia personal names are indicative of someone’s ethnic, religious and regional background. Thus, for this dissertation I have used existing names that reflect the background of a person while obscuring his or her real identity. I chose Otari because it is a common name among educated middle-aged Ajarians and Abuladze because it is a name from Upper Ajaria not held by this particular person.
But still the body had not arrived at its final destination. Otari’s paternal relatives had insisted that his body be buried in the family-graveyard in Didachara. In preparation for his final journey, Otari was undressed and wrapped in white cloth. He arrived in Didachara by car, where a group of village-men were waiting for him. The imam led the prayers on the mud path in front of the paternal home. Women were absent from these public prayers. They did not arrive until after the actual burial was completed, though they remained at the graveyard until the evening verses were recited from the Koran.

What Murman and Teimuri saw immediately in this story, and what took me some time to figure out, was that Otari’s funeral succinctly summarized some of the most important effects of the complex social and political changes that had taken place in Ajaria. Moreover, it illustrated how people have re-ordered their lives in response to these changes. The funeral highlighted how cultural boundaries have changed during and after socialism and pointed out some of the new contours and rigidities that constrain negotiations of identity in the post-Soviet era. I chose to open my dissertation with the story of Otari’s funeral because it depicted the major issues I will grapple with in this dissertation: How do inhabitants of Ajaria construct and negotiate social identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of the Iron Curtain?

Otari’s post-mortem trajectory reflected a life entwined in social networks formed during state-atheism. His own birth from a ‘Muslim’ father and a ‘Christian’ mother was not uncommon in the ‘atheist’ 1940s. However, even then such a marriage was considered sensitive and thus it was only logical that Otari and his mother left Didachara after his father’s death and started a new life in Batumi. Various strands of his biography – the different background of his paternal and maternal relatives as well as his own bureaucratic career – came together in his funeral and as such were reminiscent of the complex legacy that communism left behind. Otari’s funeral entailed a reversed tour of his life journey – from the regional capital Batumi where he had spent the last years of his life, back to the raion center Khulo where he had been employed as police officer, and finally to his place of birth in Didachara. The funeral also revealed the change in religious landscape of the region following the collapse of the socialist state.

Otari’s funeral reflected the ambiguities and contradictions that are inherent in a borderland situation during a time of rapid change. The dead body moved through an ambivalent cultural space in which religious practices overlap and confront each other. The corpse was initially inscribed with Christian symbols, but subsequently was unwrapped and prepared for a decent Muslim funeral. As the corpse moved through cultural spaces, it was bestowed with Christian and Muslim qualities while the sober ritual in Khulo was to some extent reminiscent of official Soviet funerals.
Despite the fact that Otari was dead, he was also the architect of his own funeral. This at least was the opinion of my assistant Teimuri, who held that funerals reflect the life of the deceased. As he stated it at the time, “if you don’t stick to one truth during your life, then it is only logical that your funeral will equally be hotch-potch.” But perhaps the significance of this ‘hotchpotch’ funeral was not that Otari had wavered between ‘truths’ as Teimuri intimated. Rather, the funeral revealed that the messages, experiences, and loyalties which informed Otari’s life had suddenly become contradictory when social identities were redefined following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The redefinition of Otari’s corpse’s identity was dramatic – it completely altered three times in the span of a few days. This transformation was possible because Otari was dead and because his identity was being defined by his friends, relatives, and colleagues. They could isolate and prioritize one aspect of his identity while ignoring others, a feat of identity transformations not always possible in the living. But, the struggle of relatives and colleagues over the identity of the corpse went beyond their concern for ‘who Otari was.’ It was also a struggle for their own identities and their own convictions of religion and ethnicity as well as nationality and homeland. This was also the reason why Murman and my research assistant Teimuri discussed the funeral in lengthy detail.

The struggles of those involved in Otari’s funeral point to the changing relations between place and space as discussed by Donnan and Wilson: “Space is the general idea people have of where things should be in physical and cultural relation to each other. In this sense space is the conceptualization of the imagined physical relationships which give meaning to society. Place, on the other hand, is the distinct space where people live and the actuality of where things are” (1999: 9). Otari’s funeral was just one instance which demonstrated that in the Georgian borderlands connections between cultural identity and geographic location had become problematic and that people struggled to grapple with the resulting dilemmas. In border regions like Ajaria, daily life is marked by symbolic signs of what does or does not belong to one’s own space. These signs need to be reinterpreted at the moment when the make-up of place – the economic and social arrangement as well as the limits posed on movement – suddenly changes as it did in the Georgian borderlands in the 1990s. The distinction between place and space is useful for this dissertation as its main goal is to understand how the opening of the Iron Curtain and changes of the political and economic environment had an impact on cultural and social identities in the border region. In other words, it aims to understand the shifting linkages between state borders and cultural boundaries along the Iron Curtain between (Soviet) Georgia and Turkey.

The Ajarian case shows that the end of socialism has been accompanied by attempts to establish unambiguous cultural boundaries, and that the demarcation of such distinctions is especially urgent on the frontier. The new distinctions that evolved in the process of post-socialist change often follow lines that are very differ-
ent from their pre-Soviet referents and instead tend to follow paths set out during the Soviet period. The recent changes illustrate the tensions and paradoxes inherent in the interconnections between space, place, and time as they draw attention to the ‘imperfections’ of the supposedly natural units of nation, state, identity, and culture. It is one of the central aims of this dissertation to explore how and when aspects of identity become primary identities, capable of subsuming, and demanding change of, other identities. It also explores how the renewed importance of cultural identity produces new patterns of inclusion and exclusion as well as new hierarchies and inequalities. As such, this dissertation aims to contribute to discussions on the nature of borders in a world increasingly characterized by transnational and trans-cultural contact and contrast.

Disruptions in the Caucasus and the Ajarian exception

The Ajarian Autonomous Republic is a small triangle in the Southwest corner of Georgia. The region rises up from the Black Sea and shares a border with Turkey. It has an overall territory of 2,900 square kilometers (4 percent of the Georgian republic) and a population of approximately 400,000 (8 percent of Georgia’s population). Apart from the provincial capital Batumi, with its seaport and oil-refineries, Ajaria used to be highly dependent on agriculture; during the 1980s approximately 60 percent of the population was employed in the agricultural sector. Regional variance is reflected in the locally employed differentiation between Lower Ajaria and Upper Ajaria, that is, between the subtropical coastal region and the mountainous hinterland. The differences are particularly apparent to the eye when driving up the only road that connects Upper Ajaria to the coast. Eastwards from Batumi one drives first through large plantations with tea bushes and citrus trees. After some ten kilometers the road traverses deeply carved canyons surrounded by densely forested slopes. Once the 1,000-meter altitude is surpassed, the valleys widen again and allow for the cultivation of corn, potatoes and tobacco, often in combination with animal husbandry.

Soviet encyclopedias about Ajaria give the impression that it was a region firmly integrated in the Soviet Georgian Republic. Ajaria was presented as economically thriving and firmly embedded in the wider planned economy. Its population was classified as predominantly (85 percent) Georgian, and it was seen as a politically well-integrated part of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Though these depictions may appear to be only political rhetoric, they reveal a certain felt truth. Nowadays people often remember the Soviet period in exactly such terms. But beyond what these depictions show they are equally interesting for what they attempt to hide. A reading that focuses on the silences and exaggerations in the portrayals quickly reveals that the Soviet ‘certainties’ as presented in encyclopedias were based on ideologies that have since evaporated, on an Iron Curtain that has lost its rigidity and
on a state that has given up many of its former functions. As I will show in the next three sections, the ‘hidden ambiguities’ returned with the recent changes. In Ajaria, the trajectory from socialism involved the destruction of the regional economy while simultaneously creating new economic opportunities. It involved the end of the party-state while also enhancing possibilities for elite groups to strengthen their domination. The changes facilitated the upswing of nationalism but, as a result, also revealed the ‘imperfections’ of the national ideal in the border region.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE PLANNED ECONOMY AND THE UNCERTAINTIES OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

A 1967 Soviet encyclopedia writes that Ajaria “will always be associated with citrus plantations and perfectly well trimmed tea bushes, with the glossy fans of tropical palms rustling in the wind, and with the scenic Batumian bay [...] with its ocean steamers and oil-tankers” (Davitia 1967: 262). If we take the ‘tropical palms’ to stand for tourism, the description covers three important pillars on which the Soviet Ajarian economy thrived. Wealth connected with oil goes back to the 1880s when Batumi developed as the transit capital of oil from the Caspian Sea. The cultivation of subtropical crops first became important in the 1930s when the collectivization of agriculture was connected to the large-scale program of clearing up swamps and preparing hill-slopes for cultivation. In the 1970s, some 60-65 percent of all citrus fruits in the Soviet Union were grown in Ajaria and together with tea they were seen as the (green and yellow) gold of Ajaria (Davitadze and Khalvashi 1986). With the development of Soviet tourism, Ajaria became a popular destination (though less prestigious than Abkhazia or the Crimea). A whole series of turbazy (hotels, pioneer camps, health resorts) was erected along the Black Sea coast. On a yearly basis some 230,000 tourists visited the region, contributing significantly to the regional economy (Putkaradze 2001: 31).

To a large extent, these sectors thrived because in Ajaria ‘the world ended.’ Indeed, the climate was neither optimal for citrus fruits nor tourism, but due to the protection offered by the Iron Curtain, tea flourished as if Ajaria was the wettest region, and citrus fruits and tourism as if it was the sunniest place on earth. The border opening in 1988 meant that Ajaria lost this protected position and was no longer able to attract tourism or to sell its subtropical crops. Many hotels are now empty while others have been converted into homes for war refugees from Abkhazia. Production levels of cash crops fell to approximately twenty percent of their volume in the 1980s and prices of these crops dropped far below their Soviet level. Although Batumi has retained some of its importance in the oil-trade, this function will be lost when the new oil pipelines from Baku to Supsa (Georgia) and Ceyhan (Turkey) are completed. Moreover, despite the fact that GDP levels have stabilized in recent years,

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2 Between 1985 and 1999 tea production dropped from 68,621 to 7,347 ton; tobacco from 5,047 to 605; and citrus from 89,990 to 39,765 tons. Respectively drops of 89, 88 and 44 percent (Putkaradze 2001).
they have done so on levels far below those of the Soviet period. The economic catastrophe led to a massive retreat to subsistence agriculture, to large-scale emigration and widespread unemployment.

Certainly, the opening of the border with Turkey has also brought new possibilities for economic gain. In the 1990s, Batumi became an important transnational hub between Turkey and the Caucasus. But although the new trade may have seemed to imply a change to a ‘free market’ economy, it has turned out that the ‘free market’ is increasingly dominated by a state that is organized along personal lines. The new economic flows have dramatically illustrated the rising inequality between winners and losers. The abrupt economic changes have lead to new uncertainties and anxieties. Although many ordinary citizens have found ways to deal with the intense economic crisis, they are still astonished by the unpredictable and destabilizing effects of the new economy.

THE END OF THE PARTY STATE
AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF POWER

“By a decree of 16 July 1921 the Ajarian Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic was established,” states the text of a handbook about Ajaria (Davitadze and Khalvashi 1986: 49). Significantly, such one-line statements were everything that was usually written about the origin of the Ajarian Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (Ajarian ASSR). The circumstances and reasons for Ajarian autonomy were preferably left unnoticed and were certainly not presented in popular texts. This silence is strikingly different from texts about other ASSRs, in which the importance of autonomous status for the development of ‘titular categories’ like the Abkhazians or Tatars, was expanded upon extensively. Ajarian autonomy was not deliberately planned by Soviet authorities and ethnographers, but rather came about as the product of a compromise reached between the new Turkish Republic and the USSR in the early 1920s. This compromise granted Ajaria to the Soviet Union under the condition that it would have full autonomy because of the religious differences between Muslim Ajarians and Orthodox Christian Georgians. When the Soviet leadership enforced state-atheism throughout the Union, the religious criteria as the defining feature of the Ajarian ASSR became unacceptable. The titular category ‘Ajarians,’ which in every day life meant ‘Muslim,’ was abolished. While Ajarians disappeared from Soviet statistics in the 1920s, the political structures – in essence the status of autonomy – continued to exist. On the existence of an ASSR without titular nationality, Derlugian

3 Poverty levels for Georgia compare unfavorably with most former Soviet Republics. In 1996 some 65 percent of the population was estimated to live below the poverty line (UNDP 1998).

4 In 1996 the UNDP estimated that in Georgia the richest 10 percent earned over 43 percent of incomes. Their incomes exceeded those of the poorest part of the population by 50 times (1998: 97).

5 “The Ajarian ASSR was formed in June 1921 within the confines of the Georgian SSR” is all that another textbook writes about it (Zambakhidze and Mamuladze 1979: 18).

6 The insistence on Ajarian autonomy by the Turkish government reflected its hope to reclaim Ajaria in the future. In the 1920s however, establishing peace with the USSR was more important to the internationally isolated government.
wrote, “For a student of Soviet nationalities, this is like discovering an egg-laying mammal” (1995). In the Soviet structure the lack of a ‘titular category’ meant the lack of any ‘objective’ ground for political or cultural deviation from the ‘mother’ republic, the Georgian SSR. Thus, Ajaria was subjected to national and federal centers in very much the same way as other regions (oblasts) of Georgia and very much unlike the other Autonomous Republics. Its administrative organs, ministries, educational structure, state security agencies and press continued to exist but were completely dependent on directives from the national center. However, although the existence of these institutions was not even symbolically relevant during the Soviet period, they would become instrumental in post-Soviet political dynamics.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new Georgian national political leaders immediately tried to abolish Ajarian autonomy. But in the unwrapping of power-struggles between Tbilisi and Batumi, Ajaria has managed to withstand these pressures and to reorganize its political coherence. The decline of overall state power clearly played a crucial role in this process. Throughout the 1990s, Georgia was depicted as ‘a state that no longer exists’ and as a country in a state of ‘stable catastrophe’ (Jones and Parsons 1996; Lieven 2001). The impotence of the national state also allowed the restructuring of power on sub-national and regional levels. The ‘dormant’ institutions that Ajaria possessed as a result of its autonomous status became suddenly of crucial importance. They allowed the new political elite to quickly consolidate its economic and political power. Since 1992, when the Revival Party headed by Aslan Abashidze came to power, the security forces, police structures, the customs and tax agencies have been controlled by the government of the Autonomous Republic instead of the national center. This has resulted in de facto independence from the national center. President Sheverndadze, who has been unable (or unwilling) to challenge the power-groups in Ajaria, has since then allowed Abashidze to continue running Ajaria as his personal fiefdom (Aves 1996: 44).

Steven Sampson (2002) recently argued that it may be time to think “beyond the transition.” Although his use of the term ‘post-postsocialism’ may involve too much pre-fixing, its value is that it addresses the need to think beyond the effects of the collapse of socialism. In Ajaria, the state remains an important player, but its nature seems much different from both the state during socialism and the way it was expected to develop after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As an organizing structure the state has different characteristics and the relations between state and society, as well as between nation, religion and ethnicity need to be reconsidered from this perspective.

FROM SOVIET TO POST-SOVIET NATIONALISM

Textbooks about Ajaria celebrated the diversity of Batumi’s population as well as the homogeneity of its hinterland. Batumi was presented as a cosmopolitan place, a place where the ‘friendship between peoples’ ensured cooperation in the steady development of the region. The rural area, on the other hand, was depicted in
terms of homogeneity, where more than 90 percent of the population was Georgian (Gachechiladze 1995: 76). These “rooted inhabitants – Georgians,” a 1967 encyclopedia states, “differ not by customs nor inner traits, nor by language from other Georgian groups” (Davitaia 1967: 265).

The similarities needed to be stressed because it had been subject to much debate and popular skepticism. Well into the twentieth century, the inhabitants of Ajaria had not identified with the Georgian nation and instead defined their loyalties primarily in terms of local residence, family and ‘clan,’ and especially in terms of religion. Religious difference between Orthodox Georgians and Muslim Ajarians had a long tradition that manifested itself in many aspects of social life as well as in violent conflicts. However, as Saroyan writes about the Caucasus in general: “Traditional social identities that had been constructed around social categories such as class, clan, tribe, and local patterns of residence gave way, under Soviet policies, to a newer, overarching identity based on ethnicity” (Saroyan 1996: 403). Ethnic categorization was an important factor in this process. Although until 1926 the inhabitants of Ajaria were allowed to register themselves as Ajarians, the religious basis of this classification was intolerable in an atheist state and accordingly the category ‘Ajarian’ disappeared from Soviet statistics and only continued to exist as a geographical indicator. Ultimately, ethnic categorization, restrictions on religious performance as well as the promotion and institutionalization of ‘authentic’ culture resulted in a growing identification among inhabitants of Ajaria with the Georgian nation.

The Ajarian case strikingly shows that the view of the Soviet Union as a ‘breaker of nations,’ popular during the Cold War (Hirsch 2000) is untenable. Instead, it supports the view that whatever the intentions and predictions of the Soviet state, “the actual history of most of the major Soviet peoples has been of greater consolidations of ethnic nations” (cf. Suny 1993). Although constrained within political and ideological frames, Soviet rule in effect popularized and institutionalized these ‘ethnic nations.’ Some of these ideological frames, notably state atheism, facilitated the emergence of Georgian national identity among inhabitants who previously defined their identity in opposition to Christian Georgian groups.

In the late 1980s when nationalist ideology obtained more exclusive characteristics and religion reappeared as a central element in nationalist rhetoric, the implications for inhabitants of Ajaria were contradictory and ambiguous. It forced inhabitants to redefine their ideas about religion, ethnicity and nation. Georgian independence made it blatantly clear that within each former Soviet republic there are still other minorities like the Ajarians who are instantly affected by changing dominant ideas about the nation and the state. These nationalisms appear to be more stringent in their demands of inclusion and exclusion, but more uncertain in their relation to the state.

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7 Another textbook stated: “Only a few minor customs differentiate Ajarians from the Georgian population of other regions” (Birina: 1956: 328).  

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The end of socialism and the opening of the Iron Curtain spurred contradictory processes that radically altered the social and cultural horizons of the inhabitants of Ajaria. The changes caused the destruction of the regional economy while simultaneously creating new economic opportunities. They brought an end to the party-state while also enhancing possibilities for elite groups to strengthen their domination, and they facilitated the resurgence of Christian-Georgian nationality while at the same time unleashing counter movements. As has been outlined before, the main goal of this dissertation is to understand the cultural contradictions and ambiguities that arose after the opening of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The cultural, political and economic disruptions have shown in a poignant and often tragic way the uncertainty of the road ‘from socialism’ and highlighted the contradictions between nationalism and globalization. “While the Soviet mystique has been demystified, the post-Soviet mystique has only deepened” writes Vitebsky (2002: 181). Vitebsky’s statement is compelling. It is indeed very mysterious where a region like Ajaria is heading. There is clear need for ‘de-mystification’ of the transition rhetoric that dominated many debates about postsocialism and more attention should be given to the discrepancies and links between neo-liberal imaginations of ‘transition’ and the de-stabilizing effect of capitalism, between the decline of the state and the restructuring of power and between nationalism and globalization. At the same time, I wonder how far the Soviet mystique has actually been demystified. The myths of ‘homo Sovieticus,’ of ‘Soviet modernization’ and of the ‘rational atheist worldview’ may have disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but as Caroline Humphrey states, “we still have not worked out what the heritage of actually existing socialism is” (2002b: 12). Indeed, demystification of the Soviet period remains of crucial importance to assess the present changes and uncertainties, and this is especially true for Soviet peripheries that were neglected in Soviet studies (cf. Suny 1993: 293).

Borders, boundaries and frontiers: A research approach

Border regions are privileged sites for the study of “the production, maintenance and subversions of nationality, ethnicity, and identity in general” (Donnan and Haller 2000: 15). This is so because border regions allow us to study the dynamics of the imprecise fit between nation and state and to reflect on the opposed but interrelated processes of the fragmentation and reinforcement of the nation state. Two conceptual maps introduced by Ernest Gellner (1983) to illuminate the difference between the ‘pre-modern’ and the ‘modern’ era form a good starting point to investigate configurations of space and place along the Iron Curtain.8

8 These conceptual maps have subsequently been used by other social scientists to rethink the culture concept in the present world (see especially Hannerz 1996: 65-78; Hann & Bellér-Hann 1998). See Ascherson (1995) for a popular use of the ‘maps’ in thinking about cultural difference along the Black Sea.
Gellner presents two imaginary ethnological maps to illustrate differences between the pre-modern and modern era. On the first (pre-modern) map cultures fluidly merge into one another like in a painting of Kokoschka, in which “the riot of diverse points is such that no clear patterns can be discerned in any detail, though the picture as a whole does have one. A great diversity and plurality and complexity characterizes all distinct parts of the whole” (1983: 139-40). The second (modern) map, after nationalism has done much of its work, resembles a painting of Modigliani, in which “There is little shading; neat, flat surfaces are clearly separated from each other, it is generally plain where one begins and another ends and there is little if any ambiguity or overlap” (1983: 139-40).

Gellner used these maps to illustrate the growing organizing power of modern states and the effect that this had on cultural difference. The rigidities of the Iron Curtain between Turkey and Georgia show clear similarities with this ideal-type as Hann and Beller-Hann (1998) already have pointed out. Indeed, geographical and political maps of the region as they appeared during the height of the Cold War present the state border as a line in a painting of Modigliani. They depict the border as a ‘fault line,’ a divide between socialism and capitalism, Islam and either Orthodox-Christianity or atheism, the Georgian and the Turkish nations, and between Asia and Europe. Of course, in reality, things were more complicated much like there were flaws in Gellner’s ideal type. The cultural differences between two sides of a state border – even in the modern era – are never as clear-cut as Gellner’s map indicates. But to overemphasize these flaws would be to ignore that seventy years of Soviet rule, Cold War rhetoric and nationalizing identity politics resulted in a close approximation of the ideal along the Turkish – Georgian border. Most importantly, the dimensions were locally considered real and influenced the thoughts and actions of authorities as well as ordinary citizens.

While for Gellner and his contemporaries the main challenge was to explain the organizing potential of ‘imagined communities,’ today scholars are faced with explaining trends towards fragmentation. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the subsequent softening of the East-West divide – indeed, the redrawning of conceptual and political-economic maps of Eurasia – have figured high in a growing awareness that our familiar categorizations are less stable than previously assumed (Lewis and Wigen 1997). Recent post-modern theorizing has focused on the blurring of borderlines and characterizes border regions as zones of hybridity, impurity and intermingling. In other words, the contemporary cultural processes would resemble a ‘return of Kokoschka,’ characterized by increased mobility of goods, people and ideas, and by the diminishing roles of the nation-state and declining importance of national boundaries. Some scientists have criticized such ‘post-modern’ theories and argue that for many purposes the nation-state still serves as the most central organizing feature. This seems to be especially the case for the ‘fourth wave of nationalism’ in the former Soviet Union. Benedict Anderson, for example, mentioned in the preface of the 1991 copy of his famous masterpiece that the fragmentation the Soviet
Empire into republics pointed out “that history seems to be bearing out the ‘logic’ of *Imagined Communities* better than its author managed to do” (1991: xi). But this ‘persistence of Modigliani’ also needs careful consideration. No matter the toughness of nationalism and the attractiveness of viewing the state as a bounded and ethnically homogeneous unit, the state (especially in post-Soviet republics) has become less immediately relevant to its citizens. What can be observed is akin to the depiction proffered by the Comaroffs. They explained that in recent years, nation-states witness a “widening rupture in their hyphen-nation; in the disarticulation, that is, between nation and state” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 326).

Still, the question remains what the implications of Gellner’s maps are now that the certainties of the Cold War have disappeared. Did the opening of the border and the changes in the socio-economic landscape result in cultural blending across the international divide or instead in a hardening of perceived difference? And within the Ajarian border region, did these changes incite the creation and accentuation of other (internal) boundaries? Or did the changes instead shape the need to get rid of existing differences and thereby result in an accelerating cultural homogenizing process on both sides of the border? Or perhaps are both processes simultaneously taking place and if so, what defines the direction of change?

In *Transnational Connections*, Ulf Hannerz sensibly writes that in order to apply the images of Modigliani and Kokoschka to the contemporary world, the two artists should “work on canvas together, as there may be parts of the world where the neat surfaces really are even more clearly separated, and others which have a great deal more of the multiple relationships, the complexity, the ambiguity” (Hannerz 1996: 78). Having them work together is a good starting point, but I hesitate to reserve separate parts of the canvas for each of the artists. Since the (imagined) clarities of the Cold War have vanished, the multiple borders implicated on this divide have been in rapid change, changes that have simultaneously led to clashes and blendings between various groups, to the disappearance of cultural divides and to the creation of new boundaries. In my view, the question should not be whether we see the return of Kokoschka or the persistence of Modigliani in certain parts of the world, but how both artists are recombined in new paintings.

**DIMENSIONS AND DYNAMICS OF BORDERS**

Part of the attraction of studying international borders is that they are spatially grounded. State boundaries mark the limits of sovereignty and of state control over citizens and subjects. Borders regulate and sometimes inhibit movement, while at the same time the differences between two sides of a border may constitute the exact reasons for traversing them. Moreover, the spatial effects are not restricted to the actual line on the map or the fences on the ground, but extend into adjacent territories – the zones that are “significantly affected by an international border” (Baud and van Schendel 1997: 216). Here, because of the proximity to the border, state control may be intensified. Or instead the state may have only limited influence
on its subjects. Thus, Martinez describes the peculiarities of the border region by stating that its inhabitants “live in a unique human environment shaped by physical distance from the central areas and constant exposure to transnational processes” (1994: xviii), whereas Berdahl shows that along the German Iron Curtain, the state was even more omnipresent than elsewhere in the former GDR (1999).

As spatial constructs, international borders influence human behavior and social relations. Moreover, because they are spatially grounded, international borders are also of symbolic importance. Borders are the markers of national integrity, of the state’s relations with neighbors and of its own image. Borders are inscribed in territories as well as in imaginations. Fences, military patrols, detection mechanisms and watchtowers can never fully inhibit cross-border contact, although sometimes such contact is limited to the imagination. Likewise, increasing permeability of physical borders may be paralleled by intensified rigidity of cultural and conceptual contrast. In border regions, the ideal of the nation-state often shows its most flagrant inconsistencies and frequently clashes with the loyalties and identities of local residents. That is, “borders matter so much because the state is most vulnerable at its edge” (Driessen 1996: 289). This vulnerability stems from the fact that border regions partly escape the forces of the state, which simultaneously creates the need for the state to attempt to dispense with difference and to vigorously enforce the ideal of the nation.

Mapping the ‘geo-political realities’ of borders is thus only one of the tasks that I have set out in this dissertation. As mentioned, another important task is to explicate the relation between place and space in the border region. More specifically, I wish to understand how the spatial characteristics of borders and border regions intersect with social and cultural boundaries. This involves looking at the relations between state structures and the people living in the border region. Moreover, it entails looking at how these people deal with differences and similarities both across the international border and in relation to the larger society of which they are a part.

The opening of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of the socialist state revealed the imperfections in the ideal of the nation and triggered new configurations of space and place. But this does not imply that the border region has been transformed into a zone of fluidity, ambiguity, liminality, or cultural hybridity, as recent writings on border regions have suggested. On this unbalanced view of border regions Daphne Berdahl notes that “such depictions often overlook the fact that border zones are also places of intense and inflexible lucidity” (1999: 8). Her reminder rings true in the case of the post-Soviet border region where cultural and social boundaries are often being reinforced and endowed with renewed vigor.

In order to understand the simultaneous withdrawing and redrawing of social and cultural boundaries it is necessary to move beyond observations that borders are ‘Janus-faced’ – that they show ‘the contradictions’ between categorization and practice and demonstrate the poor fit between states and nations. Too often such contradictions are eagerly accepted as integral features of borders, perhaps because
they fit well in the hype of ‘deconstructionism.’ The challenge ahead is to explain the concurrence of seemingly contradictory processes of state disintegration and restructuring, of withering borders and constructing new divides, of fix and flux.

The aforementioned contradictions can be better understood by disentangling some of the processes that are taking place in the border region, often in conjunction, but also with varying intensity and with various impacts. Borders are not only the lines that divide and connect, but also zones of asymmetrical power relations and spaces of socio-cultural reconfiguration. A study of borders that pays attention to different dynamics that are manifest in border regions will assist in outlining how these contradictions are interrelated. Of the social processes taking place in border regions, I distinguish between dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, of center and periphery and of creativity and control. By exploring how these different dynamics work in combination, understandings of particular cultural and social configurations on and along borders will be enhanced.

Boundaries are mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that structure and explain ideas about ‘self’ and ‘other.’ In this dissertation, I look at the exclusive and inclusive qualities of ethnicity, religion and modernity. That is, I see these categories as forms of social organization that are important in defining personhood in the midst of rapid social and economic change and as ways of dealing with, even as ways of constituting, difference. Claims to identity are highly dependent on exclusions of difference; every ‘us’ simultaneously defines a ‘them.’ The cultural boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ exist by virtue of constant negotiation of the nature of the divide and are in continuing processes of reinforcement and dissipation. These processes can be observed anywhere, but they become especially interesting along borders in times of social upheaval. In Ajaria ideas about ‘self’ and ‘other’ were suddenly challenged after the Soviet collapse. The return of religion to the public sphere, the narrowed nationalist rhetoric of the state and the sudden economic and political disruptions challenged established ideas of identity and loyalty and demanded the redrawing of boundaries and the re-defining of lines of inclusion and exclusion. In Ajaria, the ‘other’ has often become an immediate and thus threatening danger, whereas previously held ideas of ‘self’ needed to be reconsidered because of the changes in the social, political and economic environment.

The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are important in order to understand how cultural difference is maintained despite (and because of) contact across boundaries. But it is not sufficient to focus only on the points of contact between different categories – on the negotiations and clashes between Muslims and Christians, or on the day-to-day uses of a concept like modernity. Although the interactional perspective is important to gain better insight in how boundaries are constructed locally, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion need to be connected to the larger webs of power (cf. Cole and Wolf 1999: xvi, 1). Ethnicity, religion and modernity are not only constructed at a local level, but are often part of the politics of a state, tied to national expansion or to the dissemination of elite ideologies.
The relations between the day to day construction of identity and the larger webs of power in which they are embedded can be seen as dynamics of *periphery and center*. Regarding the role of the state in shaping patterns of cultural distribution Hannerz wrote: “it is obvious that it contributes greatly to the formation of a cultural center-periphery continuum, in the national setting” (1996: 72). These power differentials, prominent as they may be, should not be seen as a simple dichotomy between center and periphery in which everything flows from the center to the periphery. In his historical study of the French-Spanish border Peter Sahlin (1989) argued that the center – periphery model “denies the role of local communities and social groups in shaping their own national identities.” Instead he argued that “local society was a motive force in the formation and consolidation of nationhood and the territorial state” (ibid: 8). Sahlins rightfully challenges the view of border regions as passive receivers, but his focus on the ability of border-dwellers to write their own history seems less applicable to border regions of the former Soviet Union where the state was omnipresent and the physical border more stringent than in the Pyrenees. Indeed, power differentials on the periphery depend to a large degree on the permeability of the border, the presence of the state, and the endorsement of state ideologies by local elites.

An analysis of the role of various players within the framework of the state can contribute to a better understanding of the processes by which culture and identities change. This analysis also needs to be sensitive to the changing relations between center and periphery over time. Earlier in this introduction I briefly outlined how attempts at national homogenization were enforced in Ajaria. The power asymmetries between center and periphery were extremely pronounced during heydays of the Soviet Union, when the state disposed over a strong apparatus to implement economic, political, but also cultural change. Recent years have seen increasing permeability of the international border and the declining power of the state. Consequently, the power-balance between center and periphery, and thus the room for internal reconfigurations need to be reconsidered. In a way, center and periphery relations have become more ‘symmetrical’ in the postsocialist era, but at the same time this change has been accompanied by renewed insistence on national commonality. This insistence, besides having an ethnic component, now also has a clear religious counterpart.

The variation in the asymmetries of power between center and periphery draw attention to what may be called dynamics of *creativity and control*. As Hannerz wrote, “some situations tend to become the free zones of cultural currents, less immediately affected by center-periphery relationships, often drawing from local or regional traditions” (1996: 73). Another, much older observation is equally valuable. In a discussion on the nature of borders Lattimore wrote that once borders exist they become areas with their own internal dynamics. The differences themselves, and the difficulty of passing borders, often result in the creation of a specific border-culture (1955). These two observations, first that control at the periphery may be low, and
second that the contact between two sides results in a specific border-culture form the basis of the idea that border regions are characterized by ambiguity and creativity. According to Rosaldo, social analysis should reorient itself to the study of borderlands, which should not be regarded as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production (1989: 207).

There is much value in these observations, but again, caution is necessary. Looking at Ajaria, it can be seen that the opening of the Turkish-Georgian border transformed two ‘ends of the world’ into a dynamic area of new ‘cultural production.’ But simultaneously, this cultural production needs to be understood in relation to the earlier mentioned dynamics. New cultural and economic flows confront dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and may thus become part of new distinctions. Moreover, the flows are not devoid of power, but often serve clear interests and may be taken up by elite groups to enforce their vision of the national ideal, and thus be instrumental in creating new asymmetries.

The value of differentiating between these different dynamics is obviously not to single out one mechanism. Instead, they are sensitizing models that point at the different plays of powers and social configurations that can be detected in the border region. It is the interplay of these forces that will be helpful to assess particular outcomes and most importantly to understand better why certain social and cultural boundaries have become obsolete while others have hardened. Moreover, these different forces have to be understood from a historical point of view, a view that looks at changes in the permeability of the international border, the activities of the state and the responses of the people living in the border region. It is this task that is central to each of the three case studies that form the empirical part of my dissertation.

Fieldwork: The anthropologist on the border

As is true for most anthropological studies, the path and eventual outcomes of this research were not anticipated beforehand. In this case, the unpredictability of the research trajectory stemmed from the complications involved in carrying out ethnographic research along a former Iron Curtain and from my initial lack of knowledge of the region. I had read available Russian and English literature about Ajaria but although these works provided (mythologized or ill-informed) details on the history, population and economic development of the region, they did not provide me with an idea of what life in Ajaria was like. In fact, my perception of Ajaria was mostly based on pictures in Soviet encyclopedias, which at least gave a vague idea of what the region looked like during the heydays of Soviet power. Of course I had expected that the stylized pictures – of the sea boulevard, the market, the coffee houses and crowded hotels – would look quite different six years after the Soviet collapse. Still, little had prepared me for the cold atmosphere that I encoun-
tered in early March 1997, when the train from Tbilisi dropped me off in Batumi at six o’clock in the morning. The town was dark and freezing cold and piles of half frozen snow made it difficult to walk with an overweight backpack. Compounding my sense of unease was my lack of addresses or telephone numbers. In fact my only connection to the town was an appointment scheduled for the next day in front of the post-office with an acquaintance of an acquaintance. While I walked through the morning streets – not knowing where to go, nor seeing a place appropriate to kill some time – I seriously began to doubt my sensibility in choosing Batumi/Ajaria as a research site. The rest of that first twenty-four hours were spent trying to stay warm in an over-priced and under-heated hotel room, by convincing policemen that I had no money to give them and by wishing that I had never decided to come to Batumi.

The negative impressions of that first day changed, though for a rather long time I continued to doubt the viability of my research project. The acquaintance of the acquaintance, called Nugzar in this dissertation, accepted me to his home and provided me with an elaborate introduction to many ins and outs of Batumi life. It is thanks to him and our joint visits to his friends, our participation in drinking sessions and attendance at weddings and funerals that I came to appreciate the beauty and hardship of life in Batumi. Nevertheless, I could not rid myself of the feeling that for an outsider it was difficult to move around. Frustration with the slowness and difficulty of fieldwork culminated in a decision to quit doing research altogether. After having conducted two pilot studies in Ajaria and finishing my PhD coursework in Amsterdam, I took up a position with the UN working in Kyrgyzstan from 1998 to 1999. But during that year in Kyrgyzstan it turned out that the particularities of Ajaria, the paradoxes of borders and the intriguing lives of my informants, did not part from my mind. The exact difficulties that made me abandon my research now pulled me back to that same border, to the difficulties and opportunities of life in a rapidly changing border region.

During four research stays of varying length – three months during the spring of 1997, two months in winter 1998, nine months from October 1999 to August 2000 and three months in summer 2001 – I have steadily gained insight into the lives of the people I met and the issues that are important to them. Looking back upon my fieldwork period, it seems to me that it is best characterized as a process of discovery, in which new findings as well as obstacles allowed and forced me to follow distinct routes through a region about which I knew next to nothing when I started. The peculiarities of the border region demanded that the topics and locations of research be chosen while the research was in progress. Doing research in a post-Soviet border region – so-called “uncertain places” on the “last ethnographic frontier” (Herzfeld 2000; Dudwick 2000: 13) – had implications for the fieldwork trajectory. First, I had to radically dismiss the (anyway mythologized) idea that an anthropologist can be an unobtrusive observer. Instead, as a representative from ‘the West,’ I drew attention from the people I studied as well as from state agencies. Second, because the border
region was intersected with social and cultural boundaries, it would be misleading to
describe the relation between researcher and research population in simple opposi-
tions or continuums between insider and outsider. These two considerations also had
implication for the possibilities and limitations of gathering material as will be
outlined below.

CRUCIAL MOMENTS

Difficulties of gaining access to a research population and of establish-
ing rapport with informants play a prominent role in accounts of anthropological
fieldwork, often with the intent to anchor ethnographic description in the intense and
authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork (Pratt 1986: 31-32). These descrip-
tions are often structured as a “fieldwork turning point narrative” that explains to the
reader how the ethnographer was accepted in a given community (Berdahl 1999). Such a linear success story is not applicable to this study and perhaps cannot be
applicable to studies that take seriously the fact that communities (and cultures) are
anything but bounded and homogeneous units. Still, I wish to discuss my own
‘turning point narrative,’ which I have told and retold on numerous occasions, mostly
to explain why I eventually decided to do research in three instead of one locality.
The events captured in the story are crucial to understand the form of this dissertation
as well as the limitations of my study, though they are not typical of my research
activities or my relationships with informants.

To be sure, my initial intent was to carry out a community study and explore
how the various dimensions of borders played out in local life. I selected the border
village Sarpi because it was strategically positioned for this purpose. It was located
exactly on the international border separating Georgia from Turkey, and moreover,
was almost evenly divided into a Turkish and a Soviet/Georgian part in the early
1920s. In the fall of 1999, considerable time after I had carried out some pilot studies
in other parts of Ajaria, I proceeded to find accommodation, in Sarpi. I was lucky
enough to meet a family who was willing to provide shelter and also agreed to
introduce me to their co-villagers. This assistance was crucial because, despite the
collapse of communism and the opening of this once inseparable divide, the border
had not lost all of its harshness.

Right from the start my host family pointed out to me that the villagers
would wonder what my intentions were in Sarpi. My host family also explained that I
needed to adjust to certain codes if I wanted to accomplish anything. For example, I
had to be careful about using my camera, should preferably ask questions about the
past rather than the politicized present, and should not ‘hang around,’ because that
would easily be misinterpreted. Aware of these dangers I tried, with some success, to
obtain the status of ‘village historian.’ The advantage of this status was that most

9 A ‘turning point narrative’ is a text employed to underline the ‘authority’ of the fieldworker and to
mark the testimony of ‘being there.’ Such accounts provide insights into how anthropologists (wish
to) see their fieldwork. They simultaneously veil other, often less ‘successful,’ stories that could be
told.
people were willing to engage in long face-to-face interview sessions, but it hampered my ability to be a participant observer, to engage in everyday activities and to just simply ‘be there.’

The warnings of my host family were less exaggerated than I had thought or hoped. Doubts concerning my intentions may well have risen from the fact that I was obviously not content with knowing the main outline of the village history but was ‘digging’ for more. After having spent five months in Sarpi it turned out that something was in the air. My host sister Nino told me that Koridze, the village council chairman, wanted to have a word with me. I had known Koridze all along so I wondered what the reason was for this official summoning to his office. I asked Nino to join me, as she was always helpful in explicating the unspoken implications of verbal communication. However, this time the unspoken implications were not hard to guess.

Koridze was unsure how to start. He walked around in his office, lit a cigarette and without looking at me he asked, “so what is your research actually about?” The question struck me by surprise because we had talked about it before and because he knew that it was my intent to document the recent history of the village. Did he want to convince himself of something? Had he been ordered to ask me these questions? His next question even more clearly pointed out that my presence in the village was at stake, “So do you think that your stay has been successful?” Trying to avoid the silent implication I told him that it was important for my research to talk to many people, to hear their stories, and to try and grasp something of the personal experiences of living along the border. Koridze seemed unsure what he needed to ask next, and probably it was not so much the questions but the message that he wanted to get across. Uncomfortable with the situation, he switched from Russian to Lazuri and talked for a few minutes with Nino, after which we left. When we walked home Nino told me that Koridze had suggested that it might be better if I went elsewhere. Nino was furious at the man, complained about the Soviet mentality of Koridze, and of people in the village in general.

At that point nothing else happened, but it turned out that the event was not an isolated case. During the following weeks I learned that several of my best acquaintances had been approached by ‘KGB’ employees and questioned about my intentions. Although to my knowledge none of these interrogations were particularly frightening and although no one faced repercussions, it presented me with an ethical and a practical problem. It was highly dubious whether I should continue to confront people with my questions. Even though the KGB appeared to have dropped its investigation (letters sent by my supervisors and handed to the authorities by a mediator had eased the situation), I clearly directed the attention of state authorities to my informants. For me it was difficult to assess the gravity of the situation because I was never approached by KGB employees (nor was I supposed to have known about

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10 I use the somewhat anachronistic term KGB when I talk about the Georgian state security forces. I do so because my informants (among whom some ‘KGB’-employees) always used that term.
their investigations). This uncertainty and lack of transparency was typical of the relation between state and individuals in the border zone and provided much food for thought concerning the ethical implications of conducting or proceeding with research on the border while being watched (if only from a distance) by the state security forces.

I do not know whether these ethical considerations alone would have convinced me to abandon research in Sarpi because the practical consequences virtually inhibited further research anyway. Now that villagers knew that the secret police was watching my steps, they became more hesitant in telling me about their lives and experiences. Although they still welcomed me as a guest, sensitive issues were more frequently avoided, and conversation more often switched to Lazuri when I was around. Of course, obstacles in ethnographic research are often revealing, and in this case it was a good indication of the continuing (and changing) tensions along the border. But although useful for the 'process of discovery,' these obstacles also had the result that my research could not continue in the originally intended form.

The ethical dilemmas in combination with the inability to delve deeper into the dynamics of the border village convinced me that I should change my approach by adding case studies from two other settings. This decision had both disadvantages and advantages. The main disadvantage was that I have not been able to fully disentangle the social history of any particular setting, but have had to restrict myself to more specific questions. At the same time though, this also implied a broadening of geographical scope and enhanced the possibilities for comparison. This comparative component is especially important when attempting to come to grips with the dynamics of space and place in a border region. In its present form this dissertation draws attention to the idea that there are not only multiple borders at play in one given place, but moreover that these multiple borders converge into various knots throughout the region.

MATERIAL

The material on which this dissertation is based was drawn from diverse sources. At the core of analysis are life stories and data on social networks. The life story approach entailed the collection and analysis of stories in three locales and the tracing of the meanings and implications of certain events that seemed to me telling for life in the border region. Data on changing social networks were collected by reconstructing genealogies and residence patterns and included information on a range of indicators such as education, professions and religious affiliation. These core-activities were mutually constitutive and were further complemented by information gained through participation in social life as well as through collection of documents – newspapers, local historical studies and archival data.

In two of the three case studies, those based in Sarpi and Khulo, I started out by collecting material on social networks. This approach reflected advice of senior anthropologists that it can be useful to start with 'counting' when you are over-
whelmed by the complexity of a research situation. Moreover, the collection of oral genealogies was something people were familiar with and was something an ethnographer was supposed to do. It was not considered to be sensitive material and people liked seeing charts of their families. Through collecting genealogies, data on marriage, residency and occupations it was possible to produce diachronic maps of social life. Of course, the 'numbers' did not provide answers but they indicated patterns and as such triggered questions for further investigation.

In each case study informal and semi-structured interviewing techniques were adopted to collect family- and life-stories. These stories were used to study how people position themselves in historical processes and to analyze what notions of identity and loyalty this reveals. The stories were further analyzed by comparing and contrasting them with archival sources and locally produced historical and ethnographical works. In this way, I attempted to present alternative histories of the confrontation between local communities and the wider powers.

The collection of these different kinds of data had different success in the three localities. In Sarpi – except for a small group of key informants – most information stemmed from more or less formal face-to-face interviews. In Khulo these interviews were more often accompanied by other social activities, like festive dinners and drinking sessions. In Batumi, most information was a byproduct of hanging around. Similarly, whereas the data on social networks is most elaborate in Sarpi and actually covers the whole village, in the much larger setting of Khulo, I was not able to do so and instead collected genealogies of selected families. In Batumi, the approach was different again and the social networks that I managed to unfold there were 'event' or topic oriented. In short, different localities and different questions demanded different approaches. In the following, I outline these data in more detail to provide a rough indication of the material on which this dissertation is based.

Sarpi. The main part of research in Sarpi took place between mid-October 1999 and late March 2000. During this period I lived with my host family in Sarpi five days a week. The other two days I spent in Batumi where I processed my material. I started with the creation of a database in which I collected information on the eight family groups in the village. Eventually, this resulted in a database with data on marriages, residency and personal names for most of the 1,500 people who lived in Sarpi during the last century. The data were derived from oral genealogies, village council records as well as the local graveyard. For some 150 people I have complemented this material with information on education, occupations, participation in state organizations, etc. This diachronic network study showed fluctuations in the permeability of the border and in the connection between the village and Soviet-Georgian society. Although vital for understanding the historical dynamics of the village, most information that appears in the text is from a restricted number of people with whom I

11 Several Soviet ethnographers had worked in Sarpi, usually for no longer than a few days, to collect information on Laz kinship structures and social organization.
discussed their experiences about living on the border in more detail. This involved informal conversations as well as more formal interview-sessions with thirty-two informants. In addition to the stories they were willing to tell about themselves and their families, the interviews focused on topics such as the purges and deportations, border enforcements and on the recent changes. In each of these instances, my particular interest was to find out how their experiences related to changing ideas and practices concerning ethnicity and kinship.

**Khulo.** Like in Sarpi, research in Khulo was initially hindered by interest from the state security forces, although this time it was only a personal annoyance. My research assistant Teimuri and I spent many hours in the offices of the police, but in the end I think that the authorities spent more time tracing us than we were obliged to spend in their offices. It was only because of the diplomatic skills of Teimuri that I was able to live and work in Khulo for five months. Research was carried out in two phases. The first part was between early May and late July 2000 and the second part involved a stay of two months between June and August 2001. During the largest part of that time I lived with Teimuri in the center of Khulo, where we shared a house with a family. When my social network expanded, I started to work on my own as I could then move from one house to the other and spend several days at a place.

Because Khulo was, with 6,000 inhabitants, substantially larger than Sarpi, the approach chosen for collecting data on social networks was to focus on a limited number of families. Genealogies were reconstructed for twenty families (usually tracing them back four generations), in which specific attention was paid to formal education and occupations, marriage and settlement, as well as religious affiliation. These genealogies were complemented by stories of the informants concerning a more limited part of their genealogical group. Even in this small sample, it became obvious that there were clear differences between Muslim and Christian families. Subsequent interview sessions with twenty-five informants focused on religious ideas and practices as well as the relation between religion, society and the state.

**Batumi.** Initial pilot studies in Batumi were carried out in the spring of 1997 and winter of 1998. These short investigations focused on the effects and understandings of the border opening and on the incorporation of new cultural and economic flows. During 1999 and 2000, when my main activities were in Sarpi and Khulo, I regularly stayed in Batumi and used that time to enhance my understanding of the city. I ended my work in Batumi with a five-week stay in the city in September 2001. During those periods, I lived with the earlier mentioned Nugzar as well as in various apartments throughout the city. Most of the information presented in these chapters was initially written down in my field logs in which I documented observations and parts of conversations, in essence, everything that resulted from unplanned encounters, informal gatherings and participation in social life.
Only in the Summer of 2001 did I decide to take up my initial interests in the political and economic consequences of the border opening and continued with exploring how new cultural, economic and ideological flows were made concrete by the government and other elite groups. For this purpose I used earlier collected material as a basis to start several short investigations into some of the contradictions of modernity. Although the material is thus less structured than that of the other case studies, my long-term familiarity with the city assured me that it was possible to include it in this dissertation. Moreover, I felt that the dynamics observable in the provincial capital could provide a good counterbalance to the more 'traditional' topics of ethnicity and religion that form the focus of the other case studies.

NOTE ON LANGUAGE

The numerous languages spoken in the region exceeded my language learning capabilities. When I left for the field I was relatively fluent in Russian. Russian seemed to be a strategic language as it was still a lingua franca in the region. Both in Batumi and Sarpi most people (though not the youth) communicated freely in Russian. Reasons for this situation were that in Batumi until the 1990s a substantial part of the population (30%) was Russian-speaking, whereas in Sarpi the continuing presence of Russian soldiers and recently the importance of cross-border trading had kept language proficiency high. Russian was also important because many official documents and books from the Soviet and pre-Soviet period were written in that language. However, as an anthropologist I intended to speak people's first language. Therefore, I immediately started studying Georgian but my progress was rather irregular. Besides my limited talent for learning languages, my progress in Georgian was inhibited by the fact that I started out doing research in Sarpi. In Sarpi many people's first language is Lazuri, which in everyday speech was often mixed with Georgian phrases. These two languages are related but not mutually understandable.¹² It was therefore only gradually that my language proficiency in Georgian grew, and initially, most interviews were conducted in Russian. Over the years my knowledge of Georgian increased, but I have never been able to claim fluency in that language. However, towards the end of the research, I was at least able to understand Georgian, and from that period a larger number of interviews were partly conducted in people's mother tongue.

FIELDWORK, BORDERS AND THEORY

"Fieldworkers may present themselves as delicately lurking, working, and getting results, but the results they achieve are always experientially contingent and highly variable by setting and by person" (van Maanen, 1989: 4). van Maanen's comments point to the importance of reflexivity in ethnographic writing to explicate

¹² The Georgian language family is generally divided into three groups, Kart – Svan – Mingrelian/Lazuri, which are further subdivided into smaller languages or dialects that are partly mutually understandable.
how the ‘fieldwork encounter’ influences anthropological knowledge. Some of the particularities are important but also obvious and therefore not in need of much elaboration here. For example, as a male I had better access to men than to women (and had virtually no contact with Muslim women). Although regrettable, this bias was unavoidable in the given research setting and has resulted in a focus on the public dimensions of religion and ethnicity, rather than on how religion is practiced within the confines of households.

Whereas gender is not easy to manipulate, other roles change according to context. In Ajaria, I was a naïve ‘student’ to some, a knowledgeable ‘scholar’ to others. I have been an acquaintance or friend to my closest informants and an ‘admired’ as well as ‘suspicious’ foreigner in more fleeting contacts. These multiple roles that an anthropologist can play imply that the ethnographic encounter should not be understood as a simple dichotomy between ‘the ethnographer’s world’ and the ‘local population.’ As Dudwick wrote, “fixation on the differences between us and them involves a risk of not seeing the differences between them and them” (2000: 27). Distinctions between outsider and insider, between native and researcher become problematic as soon as the myth of cultural unity is abandoned. In Ajaria, oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and between insider and outsider, were often thwarted by other distinctions. Whereas on one level I was very much the ‘other,’ the outsider, the westerner, I was also a potential collaborator or enemy to the various causes of different groups in Ajaria. I was someone to be converted to the national cause as well as to Orthodoxy and Islam. In border regions, ethnographers become part of the processes of inclusion and exclusion, that is, of the dynamics that are being studied.

But although the contingency of the ethnographic encounter can lead to mutual misunderstandings and disagreement, it is often also the exact trigger of ethnographic understanding. As Bradburd has written, “To the degree that ethnographers are aware of ‘hidden transcripts’ and know what they are, juxtapositions of different positions […] can be created only by the ethnographer (or other party) who is outside the web of local power relations, for others equally outside the web” (1998: 156). To do so the ethnographer has to constantly try and contextualize the encounters, events and observations and to “place them within a framework that facilitates understanding of the encounter even as the encounter shapes and changes the framework” (Bradburd 1998: 168). Thus, van Maanen’s statement about fieldwork contingency seems to work also the other way around – Although the results ethnographers “achieve are always experientially contingent and highly variable by setting and by person,” they can appreciate this contingency only through “delicately lurking, working, and getting results” (1989: 4).
The outcome of this research was largely unplanned. However, the choice for specific locations, topics and approaches had a definite rationale. If we accept Barth’s thesis that it is the “ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses” (1969:15), then it is appropriate to focus on those instances where different categories most closely meet, where they are most severely contested and contrasted, and where the ambiguity and change is best observable. “We should imagine a hundred frontiers, not one, some political, some economic, and some cultural,” wrote Braudel about the Mediterranean world (1976: 160). Applying this metaphor to this dissertation, one can say that these ‘hundred frontiers’ diverge and converge at different places in the border region. In order to explain the fix and flux along borders, it is important to look from various perspectives on these frontiers and to analyze the intertwining of power and identity in their different scenarios.

The choice for ethnicity in Sarpi, religion in Khulo, and modernity in Batumi, was made because initial observations pointed to the salience of these different aspects in the respective settings. Discussions with informants as well as their actions revealed that in each locality different sets of concepts and ideas had become the focal point of negotiating identity. Closer investigation taught that these different key-aspects were tightly related. In providing titles to the respective case studies, I have used the terms frontier, border and borderland, because these fit most closely to the different dynamics at play across and along borders. However, a note of caution is necessary. As the outlines will show, the analytical distinctiveness of the various notions is limited. I, therefore, do not use the different notions of borders as facts, but only as conceptual tools that remind us of the various dimensions of borders and of the forces at play in border regions.

“Part I – The Religious Frontier,” focuses on religious identity in Upper Ajaria. The return of religion to the public sphere has been highly conspicuous throughout the postsocialist world. This also applies to Ajaria, though here, instead of a ‘return’ to Islam, increasing conversion to Christianity is observed. This situation can be understood by studying the Soviet past, and especially the influence of state-atheism. The case of Upper Ajaria shows that by relegating religion to the private sphere, Georgian national identity managed to take root. When nationalist discourse was connected to Christianity, Ajarians ended up in a difficult position and not infrequently converted to Orthodox Christianity. However, this is not a one-way process as the past ten years have also revealed the renewal of Islam in Ajaria. Thus, on one hand, the case study serves to illustrate the importance of ‘frontier asymmetries’ in constituting patterns of religious change, while at the same time, it shows that at present these asymmetries are far from encompassing and that local inhabitants find new ways of reconciling seemingly contradictory identities.

“Part II – The Georgian-Turkish border,” focuses on kinship and ethnicity in the divided village Sarpi. The subject is particularly relevant in this locality because
the border between Turkey and Georgia split the village in two halves and disrupted numerous kinship relations between the two sides of the village. Moreover, the villagers of Soviet Sarpi, who defined themselves as ‘Laz,’ saw the majority of their ethnic group disappear across the border into northeastern Turkey. This case study traces how the villagers of Soviet Sarpi were affected by the existence of an impermeable divide and how, within this restricted environment, they developed new notions of culture and ethnicity. After fifty years during which virtually no cross-border contact existed, the border between Georgia and Turkey was re-opened. But during these fifty years the ethnic boundary between Lazi and Georgians had partly disappeared, while new differences between the Lazi in Georgia and those in Turkey had emerged. As a consequence, the border opening created the need for redefining ideas of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ which eventually resulted in the creation of a new ‘ethnic’ boundary between Lazi on both sides of the border.

“Part III – Borderlands of Modernity” explores the discrepancies between expectations of life after socialism and the actual social-economic processes that took place in the 1990s. It asks why and how, despite the disillusion with postsocialist change, images of modernity have retained their attractiveness and credibility. Part of the answer is that by directing their grievances to immediate dangers as embodied by ‘Turks’ and ‘the Mafia,’ inhabitants of Batumi have managed to preserve their dreams about an abundant future. Moreover, the images of ‘modernity’ and the expectations of ‘the transition’ are actively marketed by local elites who use them to legitimize their rule. The management of these images – both by the state and ordinary citizens – guarantees that the dream of modernity is kept alive. Moreover, by imagining the future through the lenses of a pre-Soviet ‘European’ past, the cultural divide between Georgia and Turkey is reinforced.

The tri-partite division is simultaneously a division in three localities where research was carried out, in three different key-aspects of social identity as well as three different approaches of conceptualizing borders. The three cases-studies inform each other and contribute to an understanding of the variegated outcomes of the interplay between power and identity in the border region. Each of the cases represents unique configurations of more general social, political and economic processes. But although the case studies are presented in a way such that they can be read independently, the different dimensions and aspects of identity construction in the borderlands are to a large extent complementary. Instead of providing a neat comparison of different outcomes, my strategy has been to use both similarities and differences as commentaries on each other. In other words, the case studies follow up on issues that remained implicit elsewhere and as such complement insights in the various outcomes of the interplay between power and identity. Ultimately, the three cases demonstrate the various ways and degrees to which borders impinge on local life. They also illustrate how social identities are restructured in relation to the opposed but interrelated processes of reinforced nationalism and the weakening of political and economic boundaries. This approach allows me to suggest new ways of
thinking about borders and to account for their continuing relevance in an age characterized by flows that transcend them.