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

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The myth of undisrupted Christian-Georgian continuity, as propagated by the clergy and the intelligentsia since the 1980s, is a central tenet that gives weight to the missionary activities of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Upper Ajaria. According to the myth, Ajarians had never really been Muslim, but rather had always, if only subconsciously, perceived themselves as Georgians. In this chapter I will explore the genealogy of this myth. Obviously, the purpose of this investigation is not to present an equally mythical description of pre-Soviet Ajaria or to claim an ‘authentic’ Muslim past for Ajarians. Besides my limited knowledge and access to primary sources of pre-Soviet Ajaria, such an attempt would run into serious epistemological difficulties. Rather, I intend to demonstrate the contingency of identity and to illustrate how social, political and ideological processes on the frontier had an impact on the relation between religious, national and ethnic identity.

Katherine Verdery recently wrote that “throughout the postsocialist world there has been a veritable orgy of historical revisionism, of writing the communist period out of the past” (1999: 112). This is equally true for Ajaria, where the local intelligentsia, the Christian clergy and the political elite are actively rewriting the past. However, in assessing the historical revisionism occurring in Ajaria, one should add three considerations. First, this revisionism did not only write the communist period out of the past, it also obliterated the three centuries preceding 1878 when Ajaria was a part of the Ottoman Empire. Second, one should recognize that in the case of Ajaria, the historical revisionism was not only a post-Soviet phenomenon, but in part also a continuation of Soviet historiography, now modified to fit the renewed importance of Christianity. This earlier origin of historical revisionism also implied that it became the only existing narrative, at least in print. As a result, and that is the third point, this historical revisionism was not only useful to the promoters of Georgian-Christianity, but was also accepted by foreign (western) experts writing about Ajaria. My attempt to deconstruct the Georgian-Christian myth then, is not so much a response to the narratives advanced by the clergy (whose uses of the myth are more interesting than the involved distortions), but a critique of those authors who have accepted the same aspects of primordialism in their analyses of contemporary processes in Ajaria. Typical examples of this type of primordial understanding of nation, ethnicity and religion in studies on Ajaria come from the often-cited authors Gachechiladze (1995), Cornell (2002) and Castells (1997).

1 For an English version of this myth, see Mgeladze 1994. Versions of the myth in Russian and Georgian will be discussed extensively in this chapter.

2 Gachechiladze’s The New Georgia (1995) was the first book on modern Georgia written by a Georgian to appear in English. Cornell is a political scientist and well-known specialist on the
Georgian Muslims, the Adjarians, easily intermix with the Christian Georgians, even allowing their women to marry the non-faithful, as they realize they belong to the same nation (Gachechiladze 1995: 98).

Ajaria [...] represents the only case of a South Caucasian autonomous region not involved in armed conflict with its central government. This is not surprising, given that few indicators ever pointed to a high risk of ethnic conflict between Ajaria and Georgia. Most importantly, Ajars are in fact ethnic Georgians, differing from the majority population on account of their Muslim religion (Cornell 2002: 273).

Georgia’s second autonomous republic, Adzharia, is also Sunni Muslim, but from ethnic Georgians, thus supporting Georgia, while seeking their autonomy (Castells 1997: 40).

The primordial qualities that the authors attach to ethnicity, nationality and religion are not very different from the views advanced by the clergy, despite the fact that the cited authors would probably reject the idea that Christianity could be conserved on a subconscious level for many generations. However, in order to explain the absence of conflict between the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria and Georgia, they resorted to the same mechanism of explanation. First, the authors turn religion and nationality into immutable building blocks and essentialize them by attributing explanatory power to them. Second, they place these immutable categories in a hierarchical position relative to each other and assume ‘nationality’ and/or ‘ethnicity’ to have a greater explanatory power than ‘religion.’ It is this two-fold core of their argument that needs deconstruction in order to better understand the dynamics of social identification on the frontier.

The quotations are taken from larger arguments that aim to understand why the relation between Georgia and its autonomous republic Ajaria had not resulted in violent conflict. The authors argue that violence was a likely outcome for Ajaria following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In support of this they note that violent separatist movements occurred in most other autonomous republics that showed religious or ethnic differences with the newly independent Republics to which they belonged. To explain the lack of violence – the ‘Ajarian Paradox’ – they reference the primacy of the inhabitants’ Georgian identity. This argument based on national identity is obvious in phrases where they claim that Ajarians “realized” they belonged to the Georgian nation or where they noted that Ajarians “are in fact” ethnic Georgians. For Cornell, the primacy of ethnicity explained the anomaly of Ajaria as the only Autonomous Republic where war did not erupt. For Gachechildze the fact that Ajarians realized they were a part of the Georgian nation was the reason that Ajarians easily intermixed with other Georgians. Finally, the quotation from Castells was part of an argument which intended to prove the primacy of national identity. For him, the

Caucasus, while Castells’ trilogy on *The Information Age* is widely cited in the social sciences.
‘fact’ that Ajarians supported Georgia proved his theory that “when people were finally free to express themselves in the 1980s” they returned to the “only source of identity that was kept in the collective memory: national identity” (1997: 41, emphasis original).

Why conflict did not erupt between Ajaria and Georgia proper is interesting and so is the authors’ suggestion that ‘identity’ has played an important role in this outcome, but their depiction of identity is highly problematic. Because the authors essentialize and separate the involved categories, they fail to understand how ethnic and religious affiliations affect the phenomena in which they are interested. Moreover, they fail to understand how various social identities act upon each other. The mentioned categories - Georgian, Ajarian, Christian and Muslim - play an important role in this chapter; however, they are not employed as immutable categories but as frames of references that changed in relation to wider processes that unfolded on the frontier. The discussion will not provide direct answers to the question of why conflict between Georgia and Ajaria did not erupt after 1991. However, by analyzing the identity politics that were waged on the frontier during and after Soviet times, this chapter will explain why and how Ajarians came to identify with the Georgian nation and thus why an ‘ethnical’ basis to conflict with Georgia did not exist. Moreover it will explain why, after a long period of state-atheism, a further decline of Islam and increasing conversion to Christianity took place in Ajaria. This discussion will demonstrate that religion did not enter a ‘post-atheist vacuum’ but was instead tightly entwined with unfolding political struggles on the frontier, which held very different consequences for Muslim and Christian groups in Ajaria.

The making of the frontier

Written sources on everyday religious life until the Russian conquest of the region in 1878 are scarce. Informed guesses of historians suggest that although Ajaria had been part of the Ottoman Empire since the end of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, adoption of Islam occurred much later. In general it seems that Islam was adopted earlier in the coastal region than in Upper Ajaria, possibly because of the difference in the intensity of contact with the Ottoman heartland. Likewise the pace of religious change differed among social strata. Throughout the 17\textsuperscript{th} century cases of conversion are reported for members of the elite, the beys and aghas.\(^1\) Little is known about the conversion of lower strata, though several authors estimate that it was much slower and only completed in the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\(^2\) A reason for this supposed late adoption of Islam, at least when compared with the neighboring Lazi and

\(^{1}\) Since the mid 16\textsuperscript{th} century the genealogy of the Abashidze family (ancestors of Ajaria’s present-day leader Aslan Abashidze) only mentions Muslim first names like Suleiman, Ahmed, and Mustafa (Abashidze 1998: 232-323).

\(^{2}\) This view is based on the conclusions of the Georgian publisher Zakari Chichinadze who collected oral testimonies of conversion during the 1890s (1915). See also Meiering-Mikadze (2000: 241-261).
Meskhetians (Bellér-Hann 1995: 489; Benninghaus 2002: 483-484), might be that the region — especially Upper Ajaria — was only weakly integrated in the Ottoman Empire and up to the 19th century economically and strategically unimportant. For a long time, the Ottomans pursued a policy of indirect rule and did not interfere directly in local politics. Actual power remained in the hands of rivaling valley-lords or derebeys (Allen 1929: 135-156; Allen and Muratoff 1953: 9).

The ‘peripheral’ status of Ajaria changed during the first half of the 19th century. The advance of the Russians in the Caucasus and especially their successes in the Russian-Ottoman wars of 1828-1829 increased the strategic importance of Ajaria. It is likely that the changed geopolitical position of Ajaria in effect strengthened the position of Islam. There are some indicators that support this claim. First, this period saw an increase in the construction of mosques, not only along the coast where Ottoman influence was larger, but increasingly so in the mountain villages of Upper Ajaria. Moreover, the most powerful family of Upper Ajaria — the Khimshiashvili — is said to have adopted Islam as late as 1829, immediately after the first incursion of the Russian army into Ajaria (Potto 1912: 129-130; Geladze 1969).

Over the following decades Ottoman and Turkish cultural forms were gradually adopted, not least because of extensive patterns of circular migration that developed between Ajaria and Istanbul. In the 1870s, Georgian and Russian visitors to Ajaria noticed that villagers had adopted Turkish names and only vaguely remembered their former Georgian family names. Likewise, the chadri and the fez became accepted attributes of the local dressing code. As far as language is concerned, it was noted that Georgian became less important throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1870s it was spoken only at home and the men predominantly spoke Turkish in public. Ottoman Turkish was also the literary language, suggesting that Turkish had firmly established its position as the lingua franca (Kazbeg 1875, cited in Allen 1929: 146-7; Seidlitz 1884: 441-2).

The increased importance and visibility of Islam in the public sphere coincided with the changed strategic position of the region; Ajaria found itself on the frontline between the Ottoman and Russian armies. During these Russo-Turkish wars, Islam became a force that motivated inhabitants to continue their struggles against the giauri (non-Muslims). After the first aborted invasion of Ajaria in 1828 the Russians tried in vain to persuade local beys to side with them. Instead, the beys became some of the most determined opponents of the Russians and were characterized as “fanatically anti-Christian, stoutly conservative, and attached by many personal interests to the court in Istanbul” (Allen and Muratoff 1953: 40). From the late 1850s onwards the Russian army was severely challenged by a continuing partisan war with “fierce Ajarians and Laz irregulars” (ibid 214). The war was eventually decided far away on

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5 Three of the oldest and most important mosques of Upper Ajaria (those of Didachara, Ghorjomi and Khulo) were built between 1820 and 1830.
6 Young Ajarians would live in Istanbul for several years to earn money and upon returning would be able to set up businesses and support a family (Megrelidze 1964: 81-83). These circular migratory patterns with Istanbul existed in many Ottoman provinces (Quaestur 1993: 787).
the highlands near Kars. Ajaria itself passed to the Russians only after an agreement had been reached at the Berlin Conference of 1878.7

ENCOUNTERS

The 19th century witnessed the emergence of a nationalist movement within Georgia, which saw its own interests coincide with the Russian advance.8 In this nationalist perspective, Ajaria was perceived as a lost region which ought to be brought back into the orbit of the Georgian nation. In the newspaper *Iveria*, the leader of the nationalist movement Ilia Chavchavadze wrote the following shortly after the incorporation of Ajaria in the Czarist Empire: “The Berlin treaty has done one tremendous good deed for us, and because of this a highly memorable year has passed. Our brothers in blood, the nest of our heroes, the cradle of our civilization, our ancient Georgia, was united to us” (cited in Abashidze 1998: 117)

It came as a shock to members of the nationalist movement that the ideas of brotherhood and Georgian unity did not encounter much enthusiasm among most Ajarians. Instead, during the years 1878 to 1880 a large portion of the native population decided to seek refuge in the Ottoman Empire.9 The shock that this migration or *muhajiroba* caused for the Georgian bourgeoisie was well conveyed by the Georgian novelist Tsereteli when he wrote in the newspaper *Golos* that “For a long time I could not believe that the Ajarians could wish to emigrate to Turkey.”10

The reasons for this emigration were discussed extensively at the time. In a letter to the viceroy of the Czar, a Georgian official wrote: “Now the inhabitants of Ajaria and Kars [...] run away from us, as if they are running from the plague! Is it possible that the single explanation for this is [religious] fanaticism? Of course, fanaticism partly causes it, but there are other, not less important reasons.”11 The alleged ‘fanaticism’ was blamed on the Muslim clergy who according to the Georgian press stressed the incompatibility of living a true Muslim life under the ‘heathen’ rule of Russians and who spread the rumor that the Russians would force the inhabitants to convert to Christianity. The other reasons mentioned in the Georgian press included economic and political motives. First, with the exception of a handful, the Ajarian elite had lost their official positions that had secured them a steady income during the Ottoman Empire. Emigration was also blamed on a policy of the Ottomans which promised Ajarians that after immigration they could settle on fertile land and

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7 See Jelavich (1970) for an extensive discussion about the Russian acquisition of Batumi.
8 Suny (1996) explains the emergence of Georgian nationalism as an effect of the incorporation of Georgia (minus Ajaria) into the Russian empire, which created the modern basis of nationality – economic stability, modes of communication, western education - and as such enabled the emergence of a national elite. His analyses explicitly draws on Gellner’s theoretical framework of nationalism.
9 A rough estimation has it that about 30,000 Ajarians (35 percent of the population) left the region, temporarily or permanently (Seidltz 1884: 446).
10 Newspaper *Golos*, 5 February 1879, No. 36, reprinted in Megrelidze (1964: 84-87).
11 From a letter of Grigol Orbiliani, 9 November 1879, reprinted in Megrelidze (1964: 79).
furthermore that during the first years of residence they would be exempt from military services and all taxes.\textsuperscript{12}

It may be that economic and political factors played a larger role in the emigration than religious difference did. What is interesting though is that in the responses given by individual migrants one finds flat rejections of Georgian national rhetoric. An interviewed Ajarian emigrant expressed his reasons for leaving his homeland as follows: “Every man, every soldier, in one word every non-Ajarian takes us for people whom they can treat as dogs, because we are not Christians, because we are not Russian. And that is exactly what they do. They [the new rulers] are not even punished if they murder an Ajarian.”\textsuperscript{13} Another emigrant expressed similar feelings concerning the political situation after the incorporation of Ajaria, saying: “We are not used being treated this way. The Turks respected us... We go to them... There, if not better, it will certainly not be worse either.”\textsuperscript{14}

The Georgian nationalist movement responded to this exodus by downplaying the religious difference between Georgians and Ajarians. The earlier mentioned Ilia Chavchavadze for example wrote: “Neither unity of language, nor unity of faith and tribal affiliation links human beings together as much as unity of history” (1955:9). Along with other Georgian intellectuals, he strongly opposed the emigration of Ajarians from the region and contributed to a campaign for the rights of Muslim citizens in Ajaria (ibid 13; Broers 2002). Apparently this campaign had some success because in 1880, under pressure of the Georgian national movement, the Czarist authorities circulated a proclamation that attempted to stop the emigration. The proclamation guaranteed that Islam would be inviolable and that Muslim courts would continue to deal with familial and heritage disputes according to the shariat. Furthermore, it guaranteed that taxes would remain the same as under Ottoman rule, that the local population would be exempt from service in the army and that Ajarians would be eligible to hold higher administrative functions.\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps because of these guarantees, between 1881 and 1882 half to two-thirds of the emigrants returned to Ajaria.

Like the texts about the \textit{muhajiroba}, the descriptions of Georgian scholars who traveled through ‘Islamic Georgia’ during the 1870s and 1880s are equally interspersed with sentiments of disappointment. They had to acknowledge that the local population plainly rejected their bourgeois nationalist ideas. The disillusion is reflected in the writings of the Georgian historian Dmitri Bakradze, who traveled through Ajaria in the 1880s and wrote about his astonishment with what he saw as prevalent religious fanaticism in Ajaria.

To everything that is not related to religion they look with repulsion [...] .

Leading one’s life according to the Quran, that is what the Muslims are

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Golos}, 27 June 1879, No. 176; reprinted in Megrelidze (1964: 88).
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Golos}, 27 June 1879, No. 176; reprinted in Megrelidze (1964: 88).
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Golos}, 21 August 1880, No. 230, reprinted in Megrelidze (1964: 91-93).
drawn to, indeed, that is what they consider as the only demand of their soul and body. No matter what subject is discussed, in every case they trace it back to a religious theme (Bakradze cited in Chanturia 1932: 14).

These personal impressions of Bakradze once again suggest that a sense of Georgian national identity was generally absent among Ajarians, the most important reference for identity instead being Islam. The absence of a sense of Georgian nationality in social identification is effectively illustrated by a passage from Akhvlediani’s work (1941: 16). The conversation he recounts took place in the first decade of the 20th century between the novelist L. Kldiashvili and a student who attended a medrese or Muslim school in Batumi:

‘Who are you?’ asked Kldiashvili.
‘I am an Ajarian,’ the student answered.
‘Ajarian. Ajarian, is that all?’
‘Well, Tatar’.
‘What do Tatars have to do with all this?’ he angrily exclaimed.
‘Gürji’, the student corrected himself.
‘Man, you don’t even know who you really are’.

The student clearly identified himself as Ajarian, while his subsequent reply mentioned the name that Russians attributed to all Muslims, that is, Tatar.16 His last statement was Gürji, which was the Turkish word for Georgian, but locally understood as radically different from Kartvelian or Christian Georgian. These answers may suggest that the student had been honest though confused about what the stranger wanted to hear from him. For Akhvlediani however, the fact that the student did not ‘acknowledge’ being a Georgian (kartveli) proved the poverty of his education at the medrese. But, leaving aside the quality of religious schools, I think the striking aspect of this conversation is the primacy of religious identity in the student’s answers.

SCHOOLS, HODJAS AND THE CZARIST STATE

Georgian scholars have frequently asserted that the Czarist administration followed a deliberate policy of divide and rule, and thereby factually strengthened the position of Islam (Sanikidze 1999; Baramidze 1996). In Ajaria this is a popular interpretation as it explains the existence of Islam not only by pointing to Ottoman oppression but turns it into an even more recent development. However, the available primary documents suggest that the Russian administration had only limited control over the social processes on the frontier and was forced to mediate between the Georgian bourgeoisie and the Muslim population. For example, a letter from the governor of Batumi to his superior shows the weak hold the Russians had over Islamic institutions. In this letter the governor complained that the medreses were

16 During the Soviet period ‘Tatar’ became the official name of an ethnic group living north of the Caspian Sea. In common speech it was, and still is, used in a derogatory way to refer to any Muslim.
organized without consent of the Czarist administrative bodies and that the quality of education was completely dependent on the individual teachers or mullahs (Chanturia 1932: 14). Part of the reason for the weak hold on the Muslim clergy was that the clergy retained intimate relations with Islamic centers abroad. In 1913, that is 35 years after the incorporation of Ajaria into the Czarist Empire, 76 out of 295 registered hodjas had received their education in Istanbul or other large Ottoman cities (ibid 1932: 6-7; CSAA 1916). In several instances when Muslim leaders faced prosecution because of anti-Czarist activities, the involved hodjas fled into Ottoman territory, thus greatly hindering the attempts of the state to control their activities (ASMA 1911: 91).

The influence of religious structures on local life and the compromised position of the Russian administrators are well illustrated by the problems connected to the establishment of a church in Upper Ajaria. The church was intended to serve the religious needs of Russian and Georgian (Kartvelian) soldiers that were based in the region. The inhabitants and especially the Muslim clergy perceived the presence of a Christian institution as a threat to their community and suspected that it was a part of a conspiracy to spread Christianity in the region. In 1910, not long after the establishment of the church, the Russian authorities received letters of complaint in which the priest was accused of public drunkenness and insulting Islam. Although the priest himself denied the accusations and claimed that the Muslim clergy had manufactured the letters out of fear of losing its influence, the Russian authorities nevertheless decided that the complaints of the Muslims were valid and dismissed the priest (ASMA 1900-1917: 61-79).

At the outbreak of World War I, both Turks and Georgian nationalists distributed pamphlets to encourage the population of Ajaria to take part in the war. The Georgian pamphlets emphasized that, after centuries of repression, the time and the need had come to achieve independence from both Turkey and Russia in a united Georgia. The Turkish pamphlets incited the Ajarians to take up weapons against the Russian and Georgian ‘infidels,’ to liberate Ajaria from the rule of non-Muslims and thus to defend their religion (ASMA 1917: 126-8). The call of Islam found much more resonance than the call for Georgian independence, at least according to the memoirs of the Georgian General Kvinitadze. Although he initially had the idea to “unite the Ajarians with us as fellow-tribesmen,” he was forced to accept that “those fellow-tribesmen made openly clear, with weapons in their hands, that they didn’t want to unite with us” (Kvinitadze 1985: 213). Summarizing his impressions he wrote that, “The population of Ajaria, the vast majority, was extremely hostile to us” (ibid 209). This hostility, which for him was difficult to understand, he attributed to

17 Archive of the State Museum of Ajaria, file 50. Hereafter I will refer to this source as “ASMA,” followed by year and page. The source consists of field reports of state agents, communication between various levels of the Russian administration and letters of citizens to the Russian administration.
“Turkish emissaries, the [Muslim] clergy, and the majority of [Ajarian] beys” (ibid. 209).

These short historical descriptions give of course only very limited insights in pre-Soviet Ajaria. What the documents of the Czarist administration and travel reports of Georgian scholars nevertheless suggest is that up to the Soviet period there was no indication that Ajarians identified themselves as Georgians. This means that both the assumed continuity of Georgian-Christianity and the primacy of ethnic Georgian-ness are problematic. If we want to understand the contemporary advance of Christianity in Ajaria, it would thus be a mistake to claim ‘superficiality’ of Islam. Equally problematic would be to accept Castells’ argument that people returned to the “only source of identity that was kept in the collective memory: national identity” (1997: 4, emphasis original). National identity, especially Georgian national identity, was simply absent in Ajaria prior to the Soviet Union. To understand post-Soviet trajectories, issues of identity are very important. But we need to examine the ways these identities unfolded during and in response to Soviet rule to understand how. In previous sections, we saw that the local population rejected the ideas of ethnicity and nationality advanced by the nationalist movement. In the next section, we will examine why these same notions were increasingly accepted and how, despite atheist ideology, these notions became tightly connected to Christianity.

The transformation of the frontier

The claim that the inhabitants of Ajaria had never been ‘really’ Muslim is very popular in present-day Ajaria and is used to explain why people ‘return’ to their ‘original’ Christian faith. But although this theory is the only one that reaches the press, several intellectuals in Batumi hold different opinions. During an interview Gia Masalkin, lecturer at Batumi University, denounced this mythical portrayal of Georgian-Christianity in Ajaria. In his opinion, it was not so much ethnic immutability but the Soviet period that had brought the Ajarians back into the orbit of the Georgian nation. What he had in mind was that Soviet rule had weakened or even destroyed the Muslim structures and as such had reduced the role of Islam as the prime reference for identity. By destroying religious institutions and by banning religion from public life, Soviet rule had turned Muslim Ajarians into pliable ‘material’ that subsequently could be cast into the mould of Georgian Christianity. The continuing decline of Islam in Ajaria and the explosion of nationalist Georgian sentiment among Ajarians after the collapse of the Soviet Union seem to justify this theory. To explain the post-Soviet outcome, the physical repression of Islam is an

18 See also Kazemzadeh who, on the basis of archival research, concluded that “it became painfully clear that the population of Ajaria [...] was helping the Turks” (1951: 102).
19 See also Tishkov (1997: 14) who writes “The irony is that ‘Georgian’ as a group identity is in fact a recent construct [which was] finalized during the Soviet period when the borders of the republic configurated an ethnically complex territory with a dominant Kartli culture component.”
important factor and definitely a more plausible explanation than theories that explain religious revivals and ethno-nationalisms in terms of a return to pre-Soviet identity. I will argue that Soviet rule in fact *created* the groundwork for the later expansion of Christianity, but in more ways than just the physical repression of Islam. To make claims about the relation between Soviet rule and the decline of Islam, we need to look both at the anti-religious measures as well as the sociopolitical environment within which these were enforced. That is, we should look at the position of Ajaria within Soviet political structures and at the reactions of the Muslim community to understand how the peculiar intertwining of religious and national identities developed that was favorable to later Christian expansion.

**THE ERRATIC CONSEQUENCES OF MUSLIM AUTONOMY IN ATHEIST GEORGIA**

Let me return briefly to Cornell’s argument that was introduced in the beginning of this chapter. Cornell made an important point in tracing the eruption of conflict in the Caucasus in the 1990s to the administrative and political division in SSRs and ASSRs. In the Soviet Union, the largest administrative structure was the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR), which was then subdivided into Socialist Soviet Republics (SSRs) like the Georgian SSR. On the basis of this division, economic allocations were made and policies were effectuated, which then flowed further down to the level of oblasts (provinces), raions (districts) and cities, and finally to local political structures and economic enterprises. For ‘nations’ or ‘ethnic groups’ that were “not yet significant/sizable enough to be created a Soviet republic” specific arrangements were created in the form of Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR).20

Cornell argued that a structure that grants territorial autonomy to minority groups did not prevent conflict but instead, in the case of the Soviet Union, increased the likelihood of conflict between ASSRs and SSRs. He rightly argued that this outcome was related to the sets of powers involved. Because ASSRs were not arrangements below a federal state with a civic ideology (in essence the USSR), but were subordinate to ‘ethnic’ republics (SSR), the formation of ASSRs increased the likelihood of ethnic strife (2002: 248). First, by providing autonomous status to minority groups, the legitimacy of the SSRs increasingly rested on the majority ethnic group. It thus created an opposition between minority groups and majority group instead of forcing the republic to become more ‘civic’ and adopt policies that better reflected existing ethnic difference in the SSRs (Cornell 2002: 248). Second, although the ASSRs were subordinate to the SSRs, the political leaders of the ASSRs were able to move back and forth between power centers in the relevant SSR and the USSR by using their rights as titular nationality. The titular nationality of a given ASSR could claim rights to fulfil certain (strategic) political positions in the state structure, and could contest attempts by the SSRs to enforce (undesired) policies by

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appealing to the Soviet ideal concerning the ‘development of nations.’ To some extent the federal structures functioned as counterweight to integrationist tendencies of the SSR, and could be used by the leaderships of ASSRs to advance their interests. When the Soviet Union collapsed this counterweight disappeared, and by implication, led to major tensions between the ASSRs and the respective SSRs.

This rough sketch is often used to explain why conflict in the former Soviet Union mainly occurred between the former ASSRs and the now independent SSRs (Cornell 2002; Smith 1998). However, this model is still static and that explains why Cornell and others did not understand why things were different in Ajaria. In fact, the political structures themselves cannot be understood without taking into consideration the identity politics involved. Although ethnic and national categories played a key role in the relations between ASSRs and SSRs, these categories themselves were far from stable. Instead, the administrative divisions (and the related policies) had a large impact on the content and form of ethnic and national categories (see especially Hirsh 2000 and Tishkov 1997). Francine Hirsch explains that in the early 1920s the Soviet regime adopted policies that aimed to “give nationhood to peoples without national consciousness in order to equalize power relations among groups at different levels of national-cultural development” (2000: 207). Local elites quickly understood the advantages afforded to members of titular nationalities. By affiliating themselves with a titular ethnic group, elites were granted certain privileges through the policies of korenizatsia (indigenization), such as special access to higher education and priority in fulfilling positions in national and union institutions of literature, art and science (Karpat 1986: 7).

At first glance the Ajarian ASSR fits the outlined principles of ethno-territorial autonomy fairly well. The principle of national-cultural development was also present in the official description of Ajarian autonomy, as can be seen in the following quotation.

Taking into account the religion and customs of the working population of Ajaria and some other specific circumstances, the communist party and the Soviet government recognized the necessity to grant autonomy to the workers of Ajaria. Via a decree of 16 July 1921 the Revkom of Georgia formed the Ajarian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the structure of the Georgian SSR (Merkviladze 1969: 164).

Several factors however contributed to the unique position of the Ajarian ASSR. First, the immediate reasons for the creation of the Ajarian ASSR were not prompted by ideas of ethnic or cultural difference but were the direct outcome of peace negotiations between the Turkish and Soviet governments that were effectuated in the treaty of Kars (October 1921). The Turkish government had insisted on this arrangement to guarantee protection to the Muslim population and probably to leave the possibility open for later territorial claims. Second, the status of Ajarians remained vague. As can be seen from the quotation, autonomy was said to be based on religion, customs and “some other specific circumstances,” and not on the basis of officially sanctioned nationality, as was the case with all other ASSRs. The issue of whether or not
Ajarians should be considered a separate group was vigorously contested. Already at the outset, the Georgian political elite had been radically against the idea of Ajarian autonomy and claimed that Ajaria was and should be an integral part of Georgia. The resistance of Georgian communists was only broken after the personal interference of Stalin during a visit to Tbilisi in 1921, when he forced Georgian communist leaders to announce autonomy for Ajaria (Chavleishvili 1989).

Although the autonomous status still might have resulted in a certain degree of cultural and religious respite, this did not happen in the case of Ajaria. As early as November 1922, a year and a half after the institution of autonomy, and at a time when Soviet officials were still relatively free to express their views, K. Yust, consul of the RSFSR (Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic) in Batumi summarized some of the excesses that had taken place since the installation of Soviet rule. According to him local Soviet administrators created an unbridgeable divide between workers and farmers by starting excessive raids on Muslim leaders (Yust 1922: 14). Instead of contributing to the construction of Soviet society, those in power in Ajaria were more concerned with combating everything that was not considered truly Georgian. Moreover, the makeup of the leadership in Ajaria alienated a large part of the local population from Soviet rule; “The Ajarian intelligentsia has been imprisoned, they started to avoid Soviet structures and generally moved to the opposition [...] At the helm of power remained only Georgians, and among them often workers that were not in the least qualified for the job” (Yust 1922: 17-8).

For Yust this state of affairs explained why the local population had such a negative attitude towards Soviet rule. He even wrote that he could not blame the Ajarians for wishing to return to Czarist rule, which for them had been better than living under any other regime, including Soviet power (1922: 14). He described the state of affairs as the “Georgian kolonizatsia of Ajaria,” which according to him started during Menshevik rule and had even worsened since the Bolsheviks came to power despite the autonomous status of Ajaria (1922: 15). He thus concluded, “Regarding the autonomy one needs in the end to make a firm decision on the future trajectory. Either one should choose for autonomy, that is, real autonomy, which means liquidating the Georgian colonization of the region and advancing self-government by real Ajarians. Or, one should liquidate the factual autonomy and enforce strong centralization” (Yust 1922: 30). According to Yust, without such changes the relation between Soviet authorities and the local population would remain disinterested and hostile. Consequently it would inhibit the modernization of Ajaria. However, the status of Ajaria was never changed nor were any attempts made to advance self-government by ‘real’ Ajarians.

Yust was the last official spokesman to write about these issues. Soon after that not only did it become dangerous to deny the achievements of Soviet rule or to write about religion other than in terms of its demise, it also became impossible to

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21 Yust provides some further details. The Batumi party organization had in its ranks only one Ajarian member, who was subsequently removed from the party list in a ‘cleaning’ (1922: 19).
write about Ajarians as a distinct group. Whereas until 1926 the local population was still registered as 'Ajarian,' in the 1930s the category 'Ajarian' ceased to exist in official registration, leaving the population little other choice than to register as Georgian.\footnote{The other possibility was to register as (the later deported) Meskhetian Turk. Few did so, probably because it was safer to belong to a category named after the republic (see also Tishkov 1997: 20).} In this respect it is interesting what Shirin Akiner, one of the best known experts on Islam in the Soviet Union, wrote about Ajarians:

Number and distribution [is] only known for 1926: large numbers of Adzhars (possibly the whole population) were deported from the Adzhara ASSR in 1929, after an uprising of Adzhars in April of that year. As they are no longer listed separately in the census reports and no reference is made to them (or their language even) in Soviet sources, it is impossible to know how many are still left and what their present location is (Akiner 1983: 244).

I presented this example not to show its mistakes (Ajarians had no separate language and were not massively deported), but because the dearth of literature about Ajarians during the Soviet years reflects something more essential. Ajarians had 'ceased to exist.' They had officially become Georgians. The re-classification of Ajarians was in itself nothing exceptional. Dragunskii estimated that, of the 191 licensed ethnic groups that 'existed' in the Soviet Union in 1924 about half had 'disappeared' by the late 1930s (1994: 69).\footnote{These groups were classified under larger ethnic categories which fit within the ethnoterritorial division of the Soviet Union in SSRs, ASSRs, and Autonomous Oblasts (Tishkov 1997: 15-21).} This reduction of ethnic groups fitted the framework of ethno-territorial division of the Soviet empire. But in Ajaria, although the titular group 'disappeared,' the administrative structures continued to exist. This meant that Ajaria was still endowed with the same governmental structures as all ASSRs – including executive, legislative and judicial bodies as well as institutions for higher education and cultural expression – but with no 'Ajarians' to fill them.

As a result, other non-Ajarian Georgians who had either migrated to Batumi because of the economic opportunities it provided, or who had been sent there by Tbilisi, began to benefit from the privileges normally given to the titular ethnic group. Since in pre-Soviet Ajaria most education stressed literacy in Turkish and Arabic, Ajarians were in a disadvantaged position to enter state-structures and to develop intellectual elites. Moreover, the rurally based Muslim Ajarians, who already formed a minority in their capital Batumi, were excluded from the higher political circles of the autonomous republic. Instead, the political elite consisted predominantly of non-Muslim Georgians. It is important to note here that until the 1950s the first secretary was never native Ajarian, and only in the 1960s were Ajarians becoming part of the autonomous republic’s political elite (Darchiaishvili 1996). But by then the predominant attitude among native Ajarians who had worked their way up the hierarchy was to stress the similarities with Georgia and to deny or combat any tendency that might challenge this ideal.
Several authors have noted that the outcome of the communist struggle against Islam depended largely on the attitudes of local cadres. Since the political cadres in Ajaria consisted predominantly of Georgians with Christian roots who held strong anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic sentiments, the local political elite eagerly adopted Soviet policies aimed at curtailing the influence of Islam as the writings of Yust already indicated. Many have taken this argument as an explanation of the decline of Islam in Ajaria (Derlugian 1995; Meiering-Mikadze 2000; Sanikidze 1999). Derlugian pointed to the extraordinary harsh repression of Islam in Ajaria writing that “the Bolsheviks in Tbilisi and their local comrades in Batumi unleashed what amounted to a war against Moslem authorities and institutions of Ajaria” (1995: 33). All 172 medreses and 158 mosques in Ajaria (save the one in Batumi) were destroyed or transformed into stables and storage-houses (Sanikidze 1999: 16-7). Religious leaders fell victim to the repression, fled across the border into Turkey or had their movements and activities strictly controlled. The result was that the institutional basis of Islam was effectively broken by the end of the 1930s.

The conflict between the Georgian-oriented authorities and the rural population came to a climax in 1929. The central government had decided to close all existing religious schools and moreover, decreed that Muslim women were to be required to remove the chadri (veil) (Suny 1994: 244-5). By March of that year it appeared that resistance was starting to spread through Ajaria. One informant, now in his eighties, told me about these events:

It started after the communists ordered the women to come to a meeting. Then [the communists] ripped off the [women’s] chadri and threw them into the fire. But it was not a large conflict, only a few villages were involved. The people had no weapons, no bombs, no cars, nothing. Just some hunting rifles. Of course when the army arrived it was all over. What could those farmers do against a professional army? Nothing of course. Like this informant, others told me that the resistance was short-lived and they portrayed it as a hopeless and easily suppressed rebellion. Oral testimonies indicate that not more than a handful of people were killed in the rebellion. Immediately thereafter, the army demanded that all weapons be collected from villagers, something to which terrified village functionaries complied obediently.

Religious leaders that are now remembered for their important role in ‘preserving’ Islam in Upper Ajaria were all characterized as men who held a moderate stance concerning the relation between state and religion. Reportedly they assisted state representatives in overcoming resistance against the establishment of Georgian-language schools, and urged their followers to let the interests of the state prevail over that of religion. The NKVD (predecessor to the KGB) might well have de-

24 J. Anderson (1994: 383) explains from this angle the discrepancies in the percentage of mosque-closures between republics.
25 As in other anti-religious campaigns, the Soviet government upheld the image that the population had demanded the measures. In this case, the banishment of the chadri was demanded at the first congress of ‘Muslim Georgian women’ in February 1929 (Sanikidze 1999).
manded this assistance in exchange for not being imprisoned. Locally well-known Muslim leaders like mullah Osman and Abdulkadir hodja, had been subject to strict supervision by the NKVD. Overall, the reaction of Muslim leaders, especially after the 1930s, seems to have been one of accommodation and retreat.

Although ‘physical repression’ was an important factor in relegating Islam to the domestic sphere, this is not enough to explain why the counter-reaction was so weak. Several factors may have contributed to this ineffective resistance. First, the delimitation of the international border between the Soviet Union and Turkey had isolated Muslim Ajaria from its former religious centers. Whereas even during Czarist rule many religious leaders obtained their education in Istanbul, these contacts were made impossible after the establishment of Soviet rule. Instead, the Islamic leadership became formally accountable to the so-called spiritual directorate in Baku, which was predominantly Shiite in orientation and for whom Ajaria would remain of minor importance. This implied that it was hardly possible for Ajarian Muslims to voice their interests through official bodies.

Another reason for the easiness with which Islam was relegated to the private domain can be found in the nature of Islamic institutions prior to the Soviet conquest. It has been noted that a basic difference existed between areas like Ajaria where Islam spread as a consequence of Ottoman expansion and had an overt and public role, and areas like the Northern Caucasus where Muslim brotherhoods were responsible for the propagation of Islam (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985: 5). This difference is important, for as the brotherhoods easily went underground (they formed secret societies par excellence) in Ajaria, Islam had a far more open role and drew much of its organizational basis from these public institutions. With public institutions now openly hostile to Islam and without the traditional flexibility of brotherhoods, the Muslim leaders of Ajaria could not effectively deal with the changed political situation and they were easily controlled by the new Soviet authorities.

It is difficult to determine which factors are the most important in explaining the retreat of Islam, especially because so little information is available. What is clear though is that even in the most peripheral villages, Islam retreated into the domestic domain and lost a large part of its institutional basis. Still, the possibilities for continuing religious practices were much higher in the highlands than in administrative towns. In Ghorjomi for example, people were able to continue most religious practices in secret. As a hodja explained, “We knew exactly, of every neighbor, what you could and what you couldn’t say and in this way we were able to spread information.” Despite these possibilities of continued observance of religious demands, the kind of Islam that survived Soviet rule was increasingly localized. There was only

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26 According to a grandson, Abdulkadir had been denied a passport for ten years, something that (in the restricted zone) made it virtually impossible for him to leave his native village.

27 Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union all religious ties with the Islamic centre in Baku were ended and an independent muftiate was created in Ajaria.
infrequent contact with Muslim visitors to Batumi and the hodjas had to keep their own lunar calendar to keep track of the right times for religious rituals.

Islam became isolated in another important way. Throughout the Soviet period local historians and ethnographers were engaged in recreating Ajaria’s history in a way that tightly connected the region and its inhabitants to deep Georgian history and removed it from its more recent Ottoman past. Soviet historians generally held that sheer force and violence, rather than persuasion or economic pressures, were responsible for the widespread adoption of Islam during the Ottoman era (Japaridze 1973: 101-105). In Soviet historiography, the portrayal of Islam was strictly connected with a denouncing of the Ottoman past. Starting as early as the 1940s, a central preoccupation of local historians was to separate indigenous history from Ottoman suppression:

Ajaria is one of the oldest regions of Georgia. It went through a difficult historical process [...] part of the population was massacred, while the remaining part, trying to save their life, adopted Islam. Despite this oppression, the inhabitants of Ajaria preserved their language and culture (Birina 1956: 328).

The same tone of description was related to the previously described emigrations following the Russian occupation of the area. Soviet authors stressed that the Turks forced the population to emigrate and sent them to “swamps full of malaria where the majority died from diseases and starvation. The few that survived tried to make their way back to their motherland” (Akhvlediani 1941: 14). In short, the Ottoman period was portrayed as one of poverty and economic decline following an earlier ‘golden age’ when Georgia was united.

Although framed in Soviet ideology, this denouncing of the ‘evil Turk’ and Islam has fit in perfectly with the contemporary nationalist discourse that presents Georgia as a Christian island surrounded by threatening Islamic powers. The Georgian nationalists and Christians in Ajaria, for whom the ‘Soviet’ criticisms of Islam and Ottoman domination are useful tools to foster their own interests, have adopted the same rhetoric. For example, when in early 1991 one of the first churches in Ajaria was reopened, the newspaper reported the following: “More than once the enemy has destroyed our region but we have risen from ashes like the Phoenix. The Georgians of our region did not abandon their feelings of discontent. For decades they have dreamed about a return to their faith and of the resurrection of churches”. The Ajarian intelligentsia became and is still actively involved in the creation of a comprehensive Christian-Georgian Ajarian history. This image of Ajaria is not only laid down in academic works, but more importantly, in newspapers and television-broadcastings, and has gradually become a part of dominant – though not uncontested – discourse of the history of Ajaria.

28 See also Zhgenti (1956: 1) who introduces his voluminous work with the words: “The period of Turkish domination constitutes one of the bloodiest periods of the Georgian nation.”
29 “Tserkov’ budet vosstanovlena” [The churches will be resurrected], Adzharia, 11 January 1991.
Despite the fact that Islam was scattered and localized and relegated to the domestic domain, it did not disappear. In the 1980s, when the restrictions of the Soviet state concerning religion were relaxed, there was an immediate increase in religious practices. But by this time the harsh reactions against Muslim revival were no longer backed by atheist ideology but solely motivated by nationalist views. The ‘reappearance’ of Islam was seen as an attack on the Georgian nation and as a denial of Ajaria’s position within Georgia. Tellingly, the harshest reactions came not from Georgia but from within Ajaria, from Ajarians who had moved up the sociopolitical ladder. In the 1980s, when it became obvious that Islam was again gaining ground in the region, a local newspaper spoke of self-styled mullahs who extracted large sums of money from gullible believers before being unmasked. 30 Pridon Khalvashi, a famous Ajarian writer, published an article in the newspaper, complaining about ‘these dregs of society,’ who try to drag the region back into ‘the Dark ages.’ 31 The main conclusion in a recent novel of Khalvashi, with the suggestive title Is it possible or not that a Muslim be Georgian? – is that Islam is incompatible with the Georgian national character because it preaches submissiveness (1994: 14). Islam had become the historical enemy of Georgia, an enemy that undermined Georgia’s sense of national identity.

Public religion in contested space

The renewed visibility of religion throughout the former Soviet Union has provoked commentators to stress the strength of “pre-Revolutionary religious traditions and ideological trends which had apparently been rooted out in the Soviet era” (Filatov 1998: 267). However, understanding religious renewals in terms of pre-Soviet traditions hinges on the idea that Soviet rule had merely a superfluous impact, something I have tried to disprove in the previous section. Religion left the Soviet period differently than it had entered it, and moreover, related differently to (ideas of) nation and state. One crucial aspect of religion in post-Soviet Georgia is exactly the penetration of religion into other aspects of social life. 32 The intermingling of religion and other markers of social life draws up a variety of responses on the religious frontier, where the link between the Georgian nation and Christianity is not univocally accepted. In this final section I will explore some of the consequences of the return of religion into the public sphere and of the shift in the locus of religion from a space of personal refuge during socialist rule to its more public significance in

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31 From the newspaper Sabchota Ach’ara, 22 January 1986. Khalvashi is long-standing chairman of the Ajarian Society of Literature. His view on Islam is the more provoking because his roots are from Upper Ajaria. His recent baptism (March 2000) was given wide coverage by the national media.
32 Dragadze noticed that an important new dimension of religion in Georgia is “the national symbolism which the villagers now associate with the construction of every mosque or church” (1993: 154-155).
present times. This general shift has had consequences both for local interpretations of Islam and Christianity and for the relative success with which they can advance their cause. The public arena into which religion returned should not be understood as some sort of ‘free market place’ where different faiths could compete on equal terms. Rather, the links between religious groups and regional and national authorities turn out to be crucial for the relative success of Islam and Christianity in the public arena.

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN POST-SOVIE T GEORGIA

When the nationalist movement gained influence in the 1980s, one of its major concerns was to defend the interests of the church along “geographical, historic and ethnic lines” of the republic (Lilienfeld 1993: 224-6). The nationalist movement and the first leaders of the independent Georgian republic presented Georgian nationality and Georgian orthodoxy as an undividable composite. The speeches of both the Orthodox establishment and the new government were permeated with expressions like “A Georgian is Orthodox by nature and way of life” and “Georgian means Orthodox” (Shatirishvili 2000: 24-25). Georgia’s first president, the ultra-nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdi a, employed a theocratic image of dominion and envisioned a future for Georgia that would be ethnically pure and closely linked to Christianity (Crego 1996: 26; Kurbano v and Kurbano v 1995: 237). Although the most radical ideas of Gamsakhurdi a were not effectuated in political action after his death in 1993, the church has nevertheless been successful in gaining numerous privileges and significant power in local politics and issues like public education (Nodia 2000).

The close connection between religion and other aspects of social identification in Georgia implies that even people without strong religious convictions have to take sides. This has been true of political leaders in many post-Soviet countries, who have been quick to adopt religious rhetoric in political speech. Georgia’s president Sheverdnadze was no exception to this trend. After this former communist was appointed head of the new Georgian republic in 1992, not only did he become a ‘democrat,’ but also became ‘a son of the Georgian Church.’ Whether or not his baptism was motivated by personal conviction, it was certainly a strategic move that cleverly responded to the dominant mood in the country and showed appreciation of the new role of the Georgian church (cf. Shiratishvili 2001).

Whereas Sheverdnadze’s turn to Christianity parallels religious sentiment in Georgia proper, in Ajaria the situation is more complex. Aslan Abashidze, the leader of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic since 1992, was one of the few political leaders in the former Soviet Union who has not openly expressed loyalty to a singular faith and has avoided answering questions concerning his personal convictions. On
numerous occasions he circumvented the question and instead declared by way of answer: “My religion is Georgia” and “I pray in that church the name of which is Georgia” (Adzharia 01-08-1998; Smirba 1999: 63). These statements contained a double message. On the one hand, they were a patriotic reply to critics in Tbilisi who accused Abashidze of separatism and who had named him a “Turkish bey” and the “pasha of Aslanistan.” On the other hand, the statements intended to demonstrate his neutrality towards the unclear and changing religious situation in Ajaria. In fact, both Muslims and Christians claim that Abashidze is a member of their religious community. Muslims stress that Abashidze is of Ajarian – meaning Muslim – descent and that he takes the problems of the Muslim community to heart. Christian supporters, on the other hand, point out that Abashidze’s grandchildren were baptized and that he himself is predisposed towards Christianity.

Abashidze’s rise to power was facilitated by support of the Muslim population. Shortly after the nationalist Gamsakhurdia became Georgia’s president, public unrest among Muslims in Ajaria got out of hand. In a large demonstration in 1991, several thousand Muslims came to Batumi to demonstrate against the proposed abolishment of Ajarian autonomy. During the demonstrations, grievances were expressed against the expected campaign of forced Christianization. As a conciliatory gesture Gamsakhurdia appointed Abashidze as the leader of Ajaria, because as a descendent from a family of Muslim Ajarian nobles he could count on support from a large portion of the population (Aves 1996: 41). Although Muslim support aided Abashidze to further consolidate his power, this does not imply that the regime itself was favorable towards Islam. In hindsight, the mobilization of rural Muslim groups appears to have been a one-time strategy of the ruling elite to secure their position in Ajaria. In Batumi, Abashidze’s position was dependent on alliances with other factions, most of whom were from non-Ajarian descent and who were strong supporters of the Georgian church. In recent years moreover, even Abashidze himself has become explicit in his backing of the Georgian church. For example, while he ordered several of his ‘clients’ to contribute to the building of a new church in Khulo and had this extensively covered by the local press, not a single Lari was spent on the numerous newly built mosques. In a recent interview, Abashidze did not leave much doubt about his stance towards Islam when he stated, “Islam is slowly dying in

35 The Russian newspaper Izvestia wrote about this issue in an intentionally humorous way. When a journalist entered the mosque he was told that Aslan Abashidzde, like 80 percent of the population, was Muslim. But when he asked the same question in a church, he was told that 80 percent of the population was Christian and that Aslan Abashidze, “that speaks for itself, he is a Christian” (21-12-1993).

36 It has been suggested that Abashidze personally orchestrated the demonstrations to consolidate his position (Hin 2000: 9)

37 Early resistance against Abashidze came solely from the Christian Georgian population of Batumi, which is at the same time the center of gravity for political power in Ajaria (see also Fuller 1993: 23).

38 Nevertheless, support for Abashidze remains high among Muslims. Most see no alternative in other political parties, which are even more overtly predisposed towards Christianity.
Ajaria,” and insisted that only some elderly people still carried out Muslim practices (Meiering-Mikadze 2000: 255).

The backing of Christian institutions by the political establishment filters through into the coverage that the regional media provide of Muslim and Christian institutions. The television channel Adzaria, which is closely linked to Abashidze’s Revival Party, frequently broadcasts special church events and invites priests to give their opinion on moral and social issues. Similarly, the local newspaper Adzharia publishes accounts of all the church-openings. However, in the last ten years not a single article has appeared on the opening of mosques. Only once did the newspaper report Abashidze’s joint visit to a mosque and a church, but the article paid more attention to Abashidze as ‘the tolerant leader’ than to the activities of the Muslim community (Adzharia 12-01-2000). There is some irony in the fact that newspapers controlled by the Revival Party publish stories in which church representatives express gratitude to Aslan Abashidze for “the enormous work he has done to unite Georgia under one religion” (Adzharia, 14-09-1994).

RELIGIOUS TRENDS IN AJARIA

During the 1990s the political leadership of Ajaria became more explicit in its support of Georgian Orthodoxy. This increased public support for the church paralleled the normalization of political relations between the Autonomous Republic and the national government in the second half of the 1990s. The demarcation of spheres of interest meant that support from the rural Muslim population was no longer crucial to the Ajarian regime. Given these shifts in the political atmosphere it is interesting to look at changes in the scope of activities performed by the Muslim and Christian clergy.

Whereas during the late 1980s and early 1990s some sixty mosques had been reopened or were newly constructed, ten years later a number of them were no longer being used. In coastal settlements rumors circulated about the misuse of community money by self-styled mullahs and the disappearance of grants from Turkish benefactors, and jokes were made of the fact that several mosques which had been newly constructed remained completely empty. During this same period the Georgian Orthodox Church increased its scope of activity. In the early 1990s churches were mainly opened in Batumi and other coastal towns, but in the second half of the 1990s, churches were constructed inland as well. In 2001, some fifteen churches were functioning in the lowlands and five new churches had been constructed in Upper Ajaria. A new geographical pattern between Islam and Christianity is taking shape, which roughly corresponds to the locally employed distinction between Lower and Upper Ajaria. The most conspicuous exceptions to this pattern are the incursions of Christian activity in the administrative centers of Upper Ajaria and continuing influence of Islam in several settlements in Lower Ajaria that only became populated in the 1960s by labor migrants from the highlands.
In Lower Ajaria the population became tightly integrated in Soviet Georgian society as a result of the proximity to urban centers and the educational and occupational patterns of residents. Demographic processes like intermarriage with ‘Christian’ Georgians and a continuing influx of non-Muslim Georgians added to a gradual adoption of Soviet-Georgian life-styles, which, although atheistic in outlook later came to be identified with Christianity. Accordingly, in Lower Ajaria the process of conversion to Christianity is relatively unchallenged and the Georgian Church is rapidly expanding its influence. Besides the construction of new churches, Christian schools have opened their doors and a significant portion (possibly the majority) of the population has been baptized during the last ten years. The influence of the Georgian church is particularly clear in the provincial capital Batumi. During the last decade, the old churches were renovated and new ones constructed, often on prominent places: along the boulevard, in the historical center of the city and next to the main market.39 Priests show up at official meetings and are invited to television shows, and many of Batumi’s youth wear Georgian crosses. But while Christianity has made a rapid appearance, the wish of Muslims to reconstruct the former central Sultan-mosque, which was demolished in the 1930s, has been discarded by the Ajarian authorities. The call-to-prayer from the only mosque in town was shortly reintroduced in the early 1990s, but again abolished after residents complained about the noise.

In Upper Ajaria, Islam continued to play an important role in domestic life during socialism, though was equally banned from public life. In the 1980s, when Soviet policies towards religion were softened, local networks were activated to restore Islam. However, this Islamic renewal was severely handicapped because it lacked financial resources and an educated clergy. Moreover, it also lacked links to the economic and political power holders of Ajaria who could have supported its growth. At present, Islam is influential only in small mountain communities. Here, villagers have participated in the reconstruction of mosques and they send their children to local medreses. In the mountain village Ghorjomi, for example, the mosque is usually well visited and the Muslim clergy has regained significance in social life. The imams perform important roles in weddings and funerals and negotiate in conflicts between neighbors. By and large the Muslim leaders have become the factual authorities in these villages, despite expressions of discontent from some youngsters about the prohibition on the sale of alcohol as proclaimed by mosque leaders. In some villages, the mosque appears to be the only adequately functioning organizational structure. The Muslim leaders have little difficulty in gathering regular contributions from the community, whereas the state is unable to collect nominal fees for electricity and land-use.40

39 The old churches date from the city’s ‘golden age’ between 1878 and 1914, when Batumi was an important oil-harbor inhabited by significant Christian communities (Greeks, Armenian, Russian, Christian-Georgians) as well as Muslim inhabitants (Persians, Abkhaz, Lazi, Kurds and Ajarians).
40 The overview is based on a two-week research stay in the mountain village Ghorjomi, which is situated 20 kilometres east of Khulo and locally known for its strict Muslim life.
Between Upper and Lower Ajaria lies the ‘transitional zone,’ which consists of the district centers in the highlands. These are towns with a native Ajarian population that have been selected by the church as a prime location to start their missionary activities in Upper Ajaria. These settlements are particularly interesting because here the intertwining of Georgian national identity and Christianity is much more contested than in Lower Ajaria.

Khulo, a center and important locus of communication and trade in the region, is a good place to investigate the changing positions of Islam and Christianity in Ajaria. The town is an eighty-kilometer or three-hour ride eastwards from Batumi. The town is located at an altitude of 1,000 meters in the valley of the Acharistsqalı which cuts deep into the mountain slopes. The center lies approximately 100 meters above the river, where the mountain-slopes flatten a bit and the fields allow the cultivation of crops, mainly potatoes and corn, but in communist times also tobacco. The center of town seems a bit out of place in a region that is predominantly rural. Run-down apartment buildings, the large but empty post-office and cinema, the shops that have closed their doors and the rusty workshops of the textile factory are conspicuous reminders of wealthier times. The town of Khulo once represented Soviet modernization and now equally represents the collapse of an economic and ideological system. But whereas in the center the atmosphere of the foregone ‘hey-days’ can still be felt, the neighborhoods that stretch out from the center into the hills lack the visual signs of the Soviet past. Life in these neighborhoods was and still is primarily focused on agriculture. Most inhabitants used to work on the kolkhozes. Their year cycle was mainly defined by the demands of crops and of privately owned cattle which needed to be guided into the mountain pastures during spring and summer. Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet economy, nearly all visible traces of the 70-year Soviet development campaigns are gone. The kolkhoz buildings have been decomposed and its parts have been sold or reused. The land, formally still part of the kolkhoz, has been reclaimed by descendents of its former owners.

Although the heydays of Khulo are gone, the town retains much of its importance as the economic center and knot in transportation and communication for the region. Because of its proximity to the international border (approximately ten kilometers), the state security agency and other governmental bodies are well represented in town. Moreover, Khulo is an important center of the Muslim community as well as the basis from which the Georgian church has attempted to christen the region. The convergence of these two religious traditions in Khulo is mirrored in the close proximity of the mosque and the church. They are located a short walk uphill from the center, on land that both parties consider historically significant.

MOSQUES, MEDRESES AND SUSPICION

Oral sources indicate that the first mosque in Khulo dates from 1829 when the bey of Upper Ajaria, Hasan Khimshiashvili, adopted Islam. After a fire destroyed the original wooden building in the 1890s, a new mosque was constructed
of stone. This mosque and the attached medrese was the largest Islamic complex in Upper Ajaria and had further prestige because the qadi and the political power holders resided in Khulo. Soviet authorities closed the mosque in 1938 and initially used the building as village school. The town-administration planned to destroy the building, but the director of the kolkhoz reportedly convinced the local authorities to transform the building into a storage house instead. The man is still venerated for ‘saving the mosque.’ The historical importance of Khulo’s mosque as well as the centrality of the town meant that reopening the mosque was a major issue not only for locally residing Muslims, but also for the Muslim community of Upper Ajaria at large.

In 1988, after Gorbachev announced that believers “have the full right to express their convictions with dignity” (Bourdeaux 1995: 8), Muslim believers throughout Ajaria reclaimed the long abandoned mosques. The actual pace at which former religious buildings were reopened and new ones erected varied greatly throughout Ajaria. One important reason for this was that in 1987 no one was very sure about the enforcement of these new laws. Many feared that they were only temporary whims of the new leadership and that the situation would later backfire on the people. If Muslim believers doubted the sincerity of the new laws, it is no surprise that the local authorities were reluctant to allow believers to perform religious services in the mosques. In Khulo, the opening of the mosque was delayed several times, until hodja Muhammad, the son of the last imam of Khulo, and a group of believers simply occupied the building. Hodja Muhammad told me about the events: “On a rainy Friday morning we broke down the door and removed everything stored inside. [...] But as soon as we had completed the prayers, the police and the town administrators arrived and forced us to leave the mosque.” The conflict did not proceed further as the police-commander took the leaders aside and promised to help them receive official permission for the re-opening of the mosque. In the meantime, the Muslims could use the mosque for their Friday prayers. The town administration, according to Muhammad “kept on delaying official permission. It was a hectic time then. They themselves were probably also afraid.”

In 1990, the re-institution of the mosque still had not been officially approved and the situation grew tenser when the nationalist movement came to power in Georgia. The town administration decided to shut down the mosque completely and made it clear that the mosque would not be reopened until official permission had been granted. Thereupon, the Muslim community sent a delegation to Moscow to demand that local authorities comply with the new laws on religion. But as one of the delegates told me, it was all for nothing because “in Moscow we were told that they could do nothing because the [Georgian] government would interpret it differently,” meaning that any interference from Moscow would be interpreted as a hostile attack on the nation by the nationalist movement. The delegation then tried to obtain the needed documents in Batumi but again this was in vain; “So then the people decided to open the mosque by force. People from the town administration and from Batumi
[tried to intervene], but the people did what they wanted to do.” The precarious situation ended not long after Abashidze was installed as the chairman of the Upper Soviet of Ajaria, and official permission was granted.

The coming to power of Abashidze combined with the general weakening of state structures in the early 1990s meant that Islam could return to the public arena. For several years it seemed that Islam was steadily securing ground. In 1992, the leadership of the mosque in Batumi created the mufiata of Ajaria and ended its official link to the ‘Spiritual Directorate’ in Baku.41 Instead, extensive contacts were established with Muslim organizations in Turkey and the Arabic world in the 1990s. In 1992, a group of approximately 50 Ajarian men was invited by the Saudi government to perform the hadj to Mecca and between 1992 and 1996 approximately 300 men followed religious courses of varying length in Turkey. Brochures and booklets about Islam were sent from Turkey to Ajaria, first in Turkish but in later years also in special Georgian editions. Significant contributions were made to the renovation of Ajarian mosques and madrasas. Although statistical information is unavailable, Muslim leaders estimated that 20 out of 60 mosques in Ajaria were partly or completely financed by Turkish citizens and Muslim organizations. In Upper Ajaria, people stressed that these benefactors offered their contributions in order to obtain madli (virtue) and explained that most benefactors had singled out Ajaria because they had familial roots in the region.42 But non-Muslim residents looked with suspicion at this assistance and several new Christians told me that they suspected that Turkey was using these religious contacts to further its political interests.

During this period differences between the Muslim clergy in Lower and Upper Ajaria became evident. Iusuph, an elderly Muslim, told me that in the early 1990s the Muslim leaders had made plans to form a separate mufiata for Upper Ajaria; “At that time such possibilities existed, because it was a period of chaos.” But the one person from Upper Ajaria who had the necessary education and organizational talent, Merjivan, preferred to work through Batumi and was chosen by the majlis as mufi in 1994. However, shortly after his appointment he got involved in a corruption scandal. What people believe happened is that Merjivan accepted gifts from Abashidze including a car and an apartment and was subsequently forced by the secular authorities to abandon his position. Merjivan’s relatives stated that the scandal had been a set up, intended to restrict the potential of Islam in Ajaria. This allegation is supported by the fact that the new mufi Mahmoud Kamashidze, appointed in 1996, had no formal religious education and readily accommodated to the demands of the authorities.43 Since then the call to prayer is only heard irregularly in Batumi and

41 This ‘directorate for the Sunni and Shi’i Muslims of Transcaucasia’ was one of the four official Muslim Spiritual directorates in the Soviet Union (Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay 1967: 171-172). The Ajarian Muslims had always been of marginal importance to the Baku directorate.
42 The investors often descended from migrants who fled the region during early Czarist or Soviet rule.
43 Kamashidze had no formal religious education (Sanikidze 1999).
close cooperation with Turkish Muslim organizations has ended. In Upper Ajaria, there is much dissatisfaction about the Muslim leadership in Batumi. The comment of one hodja that “The mufti doesn't help us with anything because he is someone of the government” seemed to be the prevailing opinion.

In Upper Ajaria, attempts to set up organizational structures independently from the muftiate in Batumi have been taken up and dropped more than once. Since 1996, Muslim leaders from Upper Ajaria have cooperated with foreign Muslim organizations without interference of the muftiate. In the late 1990s, religious leaders once again explored the possibilities of an independent muftiate in Upper Ajaria with the center in Khulo. The goal was to be able to assist and coordinate religious education, facilitate contacts with other Muslim countries and to communicate concerns of Muslims with the authorities. But before action was taken, mufti Kamashidze appointed a special representative to “maintain contacts with the Muslims in Upper Ajaria” as he explained to me during an interview. The appointed representative seemed an odd choice because, although he was a Muslim believer and regularly visited the mosque, he had no formal religious training. What seemed to have motivated the choice for him was his son’s position as officer in the state security apparatus in Khulo. As a result, many Muslims saw the representative of the muftiate as a figurehead for the intelligence services. His appointment, even according to one moderate townsman, was motivated by political concerns: “sixty Lari a month [30 US$] for basically doing nothing, do you really think that such wages are provided just like that, that’s not how things work here.”

The renewed religious connections with Turkey as well as attempts of the Muslim clergy to set up organizational structures are interpreted by the dominant (Christian) group as expressions of national disloyalty, thus putting further pressure on Muslim voices in Ajaria. Their activities, moreover, raised considerable suspicion in the political establishment. In the press as well as in parliament, commentators speculated about the danger of Islam to the Georgian nation, and about the possible threat of the infiltration of Turkish interests through religious practices. Although it is impossible to determine the exact pressure put on Muslim leaders, the fact that their activities are closely monitored suggests that the policy of making religious life controllable and manipulative is carried out more successfully against Islamic than against Orthodox institutions.

CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS, NEW CHURCHES, AND RESISTANCE

Whereas Muslim leaders were underdogs in the public arena, the Christian clergy was primed for success because it could build on its relations with the central authorities of Georgia. In 1991, president Gamsakhurdia personally transferred the authority of the Internat (boarding school) in Khulo to the Georgian Church, as part of his new nationalist-Christian policies. Because the Internat,

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44 Sanikidze (1999) mentions that Georgian newspapers alleged that many of the youth studying in Turkish religious schools return as Wahhabis and maintain close contacts with Chechens.

renamed the spiritual lyceum of the apostle Andrew, was the only institution for vocational education in the region, the (still) predominantly Muslim population revolted. Shortly after the changes in the status of the school, several hundred Muslims from Khulo and the surrounding villages marched up to the district center to demonstrate against the presence of priests in the school. The besiegers consisted mostly of farmers, manual workers and technicians, while the defenders of the clergy were middle-class inhabitants (teachers, medical staff, administrative personnel) of Khulo. The position of the police and local authorities was ambiguous; they were native Ajarians and a portion of them must have sympathized with the demonstrators, but taking the side of the demonstrators would have meant professional suicide. As one informant put it, “Christianity is the religion of the state, so it was out of the question that [state representatives] would not support the new school, that was out of the question because, because ... you need to earn a living, don’t you?”

The clergy was not all that sure of the backing it would get from the local police and called for military assistance from Adigeni, a predominantly Christian region. Within a few hours all roads to and from Khulo were blocked by the military, while at the same time the situation near the lyceum grew tenser. Father Grigori locked himself in one of the rooms on the second floor of the school. According to one witness, he almost jumped out of the window, fearing that the gathered crowd would lynch him. However, with the help of some local followers, the priest managed to escape to Batumi and was never seen again in Khulo. Negotiations were initiated by the town administration but resistance ended only after Aslan Abashidze sent a delegate to convince the Muslim leaders to allow the priest to remain in Khulo. The Muslim demonstrators accepted the existence of a Christian lyceum on the condition that the rector would no longer be a priest but a layman. Nevertheless, within a year of the compromise, the position of rector was once again given to a priest.

The Christian lyceum received official recognition despite the wishes of the majority of the citizens. Moreover, because it was the only vocational school in the region, poor Muslim families who wanted their children to continue their education were left with no choice but to send their children to this Christian lyceum. The Muslims’ dissatisfaction did not only concern the Christian lyceum but also the new style of ‘secular’ education. In the mid-1990s a special governmental committee had prepared a new subject that was to fill the lack of teaching ‘morality’ in primary education in Georgia. This subject with the sympathetic name ‘culture and religion’ was added to the school curriculum in 1997. But despite its name the textbooks only covered Christianity. Consequently, the introduction of the subject caused great

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46 Information is based on oral testimonies. The media did not report about the short-lived conflict.
47 In 2000, this delegate became the official representative of the mufti for Upper Ajaria.
48 Education at the lyceum, which includes a nursing-school and teachers-school, has a strong focus on bible studies and related subjects. See also Pelkmans (2002).
49 A representative of the Ajarian ministry of education pointed out that the goal of the educative system is to teach students the Christian basis of Georgian culture (Meiering-Mikadze 2000: 259-60).
dissatisfaction in Ajaria. Cases were reported in which parents refused to have their children follow this subject, while in a few mountain villages the subject is still not being taught. According to the secretary of education, the absence of the class in those villages is the result of a lack of specialists on the subject and has nothing to do with discontent in these villages. However, several teachers who were ordered to teach the subject told me that they had refused to comply on moral grounds.

Muslim believers complained that by making the subject obligatory, the state turned their children away from their religion. "During communism", an imam commented, "we had more freedom; we still had our own life, while now we are losing everything." The stated reason for this longing to the Soviet period was that then both religions were forbidden. As one informant commented, "They lifted the prohibitions and gave them [Christians] all the rights, while Islam stayed as it was. [Christians] have opened a school while there are not even Christians in Khulo. [Instead], Muslim children go there. There is constant propaganda for them. We want to have equality of religion in Ajaria. When an article about Christianity is published, we want there to be one about Islam as well."

Despite these expressions of dissatisfaction, the introduction of a class on 'religion and culture' did not lead to any organized attempts by Muslims to change the nature of education. Instead the majority of the population silently accepted the new policies of the state, even though the policies were seen as threats to Islam. This compliance is partly a result of the absence of an organizational structure through which Muslims can express their grievances. Moreover, since Muslims form the lower echelons of society, they have very little tactical power to alter these (as they see it) attacks on their community. Instead, most people retreat into forms of silent resistance. The assistant rector of the Christian lyceum explained how Muslim students deal with Christian education. "Most students probably think 'well, the government has decided that this is necessary, so what can we do.' For you this attitude might seem strange, but here people have always adjusted to the requirements of the state. They don't really study, they come to the lessons and that is all." So while Muslim children (and their parents) outwardly adjust to the new policies, just as they did during the Soviet Union, to a certain extent they remain true to their own or familial ideas. But it is questionable how effective this silent resistance is. Meanwhile, the Georgian Church is expanding its influence on the population of Ajaria.

The steady penetration of Christian ideas has not escaped the attention of Muslim leaders who greatly worry about the declining influence of Islam. An imam of a neighboring village conveyed the difficulty of countering this Christian expansion: "[In 1991] we had great strength, but after the priest came to stay our strength has weakened. Now it's very difficult for us. Let God help us. If the people wanted it we would have the school closed within 24 hours, but unfortunately the people don't

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50 The original intention was to name the subject 'Cultural history of Christianity,' but this was changed into 'Culture and Religion' in order not to upset Muslims (personal communication).
think in one direction.” Another imam told me a fable to convey his vision of what was happening to Islam in Ajaria.

Once some people decided to boil a frog, so what they did was to throw it into a kettle with steaming hot water. But as soon as the frog touched the water he immediately jumped out. The men understood that it would not work like this, and came up with a new plan. Instead they put the kettle on a tiny, almost invisible fire. The water had a nice temperature and slowly became warmer, without the frog even noticing it. This continued, until the frog was unconscious. That is what they are doing to us now...

**Conclusion**

In a comparative study on Abkhazia and Ajaria, the sociologist Derlugian stated that the “assimilation of Ajaria was, arguably, among the biggest successes of the Georgian national project” (1995: 36). In this chapter, I have described the processes by which this assimilation took place by analyzing the changes in the relation between Islam and Christianity. During the 19th century, when Ajaria served as the battleground between the Russian and Ottoman Empires, Islam increasingly became the main reference for identification among Ajarians. Ajarians certainly did not perceive this incorporation as a “happy reunification of the Georgian historical lands,” as it was at the time seen by the Georgian nationalist movement and later came to be presented in Ajarian historiography. Instead, aside from a small part of the Ajarian elite, Ajarians continued to identify themselves as ‘Muslim’ and as ‘Ajarian,’ and their political orientations remained directed towards the Ottoman Empire.

Soviet rule in Ajaria radically changed the course of history. Through the repression of religious leaders and the closure of mosques and *medreses*, Islam was relegated to the domestic domain. In analyzing the effects of atheist policies, it becomes clear that the physical repression of Islam and the annihilation of religious institutions were only partly responsible for the decline of Islam in Ajaria. It was only because these measures were accompanied by identity-politics that they managed to engender a Georgian national identity among Ajarians that a strong revival of Islam was precluded. When in the late 1980s restrictions on religion were loosened Islam was fractured, fragmented and marginalized, while Christianity was being re-imagined and re-rooted in Ajaria’s deep past. Moreover, during Soviet rule the higher echelons of Ajarian society became firmly integrated in Georgian society that, although atheist in outlook, retained strong sympathies for Christianity. During the same period, Muslim Ajarians increasingly started to identify themselves as Georgians, a process that was greatly enhanced by the efforts of the local intelligentsia to rewrite or reinvent Ajaria’s past. In this new historical discourse, Ajaria was perceived as having been oppressed by ‘evil’ Turks for centuries, and Ajarians were
portrayed as fierce Georgians, who relentlessly continued to struggle against forced Islamization and Turkification, and kept hoping for better times under a united Georgia. This historical discourse became official history, propagated by the intelligentsia, reproduced by the media, and adopted by new Christians.

Since the end of the 1980s, both Muslim and Christian clergy have expanded their range of operations and have been active in the construction of religious buildings, in providing religious education and have been prominent actors in other spheres of social life as well. Religion has also become increasingly important in public discussions concerning the nature of the state and the nation. The outcome has been strikingly different for Muslim and Christian groups. The activities of Muslim leaders were denied recognition by the media, were suspect in the view of nationalist oriented elite groups and were subjected to state interventions. The Christian clergy, on the other hand, drew on financial as well as political resources engendered through the state. In short, the kind of public space that emerged after socialism in Ajaria enabled Christianity to claim a prominent position in public life, while it relegated Islam once again (though not always successfully) to the lower levels of the public sphere or even back into the domestic domain. The religious confrontation that ensued after state-atheism has consequently been unequal. It has led to the general retreat of Islam and the advance of Christianity. This is true even in Upper Ajaria where the position of Islam, until recently, went unchallenged. The confrontation between the two religions resulted in a series of small but locally very important clashes in which struggles for control over social domains were waged. The outcome of these struggles showed the importance of politics and more broadly the state, for changes on the religious frontier.