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

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Islam in Ajaria is being marginalized in the public sphere. Muslim voices are completely ignored by the regional media and Muslim issues are discussed by the nationalist press only as far as they might pose a threat to Georgian unity. The fact that medreses operate illegally put their teachers in an insecure position, while Muslim leaders in general are closely monitored by state-security agencies. With the basic channels for organization and expression of Islam supervised and controlled by state structures, there seems to be little possibility for renewed proliferation of Islam in Ajaria.

However, Islam’s exclusion from the media and its restriction in the public arena is nothing new and is certainly less oppressive than during the larger part of Soviet rule. Nevertheless, Muslim leaders claim that Islam is more severely repressed nowadays. During socialism, religious expression in general was restricted. At present however, the restrictions apply only to Islam. This, added to the fact that the advancement of Christianity is often aided by the state, frustrates Muslim leaders. Moreover, I believe that the frustration is also partly a longing for times when the relation between religion and the state was – though strained – at least fairly clear and stable. Although during Soviet rule Islam was expelled from the public sphere, Muslims could retreat to the more private spheres of kinship and friendship where religious values were not contested. Islam thus provided a valuable counter-model to state-atheism and as a result became paradoxically compatible with it.

In the post-Soviet era, Islam has lost its position as a place of refuge within a criticized system and its promoters struggle to redefine its position in relation to Georgian nationality. The advance of Christianity has meant that Muslim leaders can no longer stress the values of their faith in opposition to atheism, but are forced to define Islam in opposition to Christianity. The fusion of Christianity with Georgian national identity and the resulting state policies make this task a difficult one. Moreover, they severely limit Muslims’ ability to identify simultaneously with Islam and the Georgian nation. It is in this complex encounter of competing discourses within a changing social field that indications can be found for the decline of Islam in Ajaria. A crucial factor contributing to the decline of Islam is that members of the Muslim community, who have come to see themselves as Georgian, find it increasingly difficult to comply with the religious demands of Islam. The result is that the decline of Islam is not restricted to the public sphere, but increasingly occurring in the private sphere as well.

What then are the possibilities, and the impediments, for renewed proliferation of Islam in Ajaria? In this chapter, I will focus in particular on how Islamic
demands are interpreted locally, and how the dynamics of local Muslim discourses relate to the shifting frontier between Islam and Christianity in Ajaria. I will begin by describing the process of Islamic decline as witnessed by Muslim leaders and then move to the main issue of this chapter which asks how individual Muslims deal with the conflicting Muslim and Christian-Georgian discourses. I have narrowed my attention specifically to young and middle-aged males who at least nominally identify with being Muslim.\(^1\) This age group is particularly interesting because they have experienced the changes in the sociopolitical climate in their personal lives. The particular dilemmas at stake can therefore very well be illustrated by reviewing how they negotiate their religious and national identities.

**The worries of the hodjas**

Muhammad efendi was in his early seventies, but despite his age, he had lost none of the willpower that had given him a prominent position in the Muslim community. His father had been the last imam of Khulo before the mosque was closed in 1938. Muhammad considered it his duty to follow in his father's steps. He was one of the initiators in the re-opening of the local mosque in 1989 and, angry tongues claimed that he was the main force behind the Muslim uprising against the opening of a Christian lyceum in Khulo. Muhammad had many worries and spoke about them agitatedly whenever I visited him. His worries concerned the lack of funding for Islamic institutions, pro-Christian policies and the threat posed by Christians. But he was especially concerned about the 'weaknesses' of the Muslim community.

One afternoon, not long after I first arrived in Khulo, Teimuri and I attended the Friday prayers at the mosque and we were just in time to hear the *vaizi* (sermon) of Muhammad, who instructed the approximately 150 gathered men.\(^2\) Muhammad started by discussing the issue of name-giving, stressing that there was no longer any excuse for giving children two first names as was common practice in Soviet times. Instead he urged his followers to give their children only one name, a Muslim name. He had done so even when the communists ruled, going through thorny procedures to give his son the Muslim name Yusuph.\(^3\) Then he proclaimed loudly: “Islam is a beautiful faith, remember that! Don’t hide that you are Muslim. Also when you leave the *jame* (mosque) you should be proud of it.” Somewhat later he continued in his

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\(^1\) As a male researcher I was not able to discuss these matters with women and the important question how women deal with the same issues awaits research of someone better situated to do so than myself.

\(^2\) Women never attended the Friday prayers, nor did the mosque have a separate place for women. They were supposed to perform the prayers at home and they gathered sometimes in small groups for this purpose. Women only participated in public religious rituals during special celebrations and after funerals.

\(^3\) He was referring to the difficulties to have a Muslim name written on the official birth-registration documents.
loud and authoritative way of speaking, "What kind of believers are you if you don’t raise your children properly? Many of you are weaklings. When a Christian offers you money, you take it without even thinking about his motives. A Christian man is smart and you ought to think twice before you send your children to his school." A murmur of approval resounded through the mosque, after which Muhammad recited from the Quran. Just before it was time for the prayers he concluded with the words, "If you wish to be Muslim be one, and if you don’t, then don’t enter this mosque anymore."

Muhammad’s lecture dealt squarely with the precarious position of Islam in Ajaria. He touched on the threats posed both by the state and the growing Orthodox Church. But even though these issues resounded in Muhammad’s lecture, what made his words interesting was that they were directed not at Christians or at the state, but at the Muslim community itself. In his lecture, Muhammad denounced the continuing practice of giving children two names, one for the local (Muslim) community, and one for official use and dealings with non-Muslims. Muhammad moreover stressed the danger of sending children to the Christian lyceum, something that many of the poorer Muslim families nevertheless did, as it was the only affordable possibility for higher education. In other words, he was worried about the choices Muslims were making. Muhammad condensed his worries in a single frustrated exclamation once, when I caught him working in the field. He was sweating all over and must have thought about the issue for some time when he grabbed my arm and said: “You know what the bitter thing is in all this? Finally we are able to freely carry out our beliefs, but instead Islam is in decline. Satan is playing his own game.” Muhammad efendi was intensely worried about what he saw as the weaknesses of the community members, fearing that they would abandon the path of Islam.

Elderly Muslims considered the waning influence of Islam among the youth to be a serious threat. One of them complained that these days there was “no difference anymore between the village and the city. Islam prohibits wearing short dresses, but people watch television and they copy what they see. The television tells people to kiss and hug and that is what they do.” Causes for the immoral behavior were easily found. The influence of TV was a popular cause, while others stressed that it was the fault of parents, who neglected their duty to raise their children properly. At other times, it was seen as a moral deficiency of the younger generation who wouldn’t listen anymore and had no respect for the elderly.

The improper behavior of children (especially sons) was considered highly problematic, partly because of the conviction that after death the question of raising children as proper Muslims would weigh heavily. During a discussion among imams who had gathered for mevludi celebrations, one who wasn’t very careful with his words put it this way, “At the end of the day you will have to face yourself, asking whether you really were the head of your family or more like a rooster who flies in and out.” Besides its religious motivation, a major fear of religious leaders was that they would lose credibility in the community if they couldn’t ensure proper behavior
of their children, which would then hasten the decline of Islam. During the mentioned meeting, the imam of a neighboring village spoke about the issue as follows:

We try to preserve what God has given us, but that is impossible if our children don't continue [the tradition]. We say that we are Muslims, but we don't act as Muslims should act. I give vaizi (sermons), in which I tell the community what is forbidden and what is allowed. But who will believe me, if even my own son does not as I told him? It is not just about my own family, but also about the general situation we are in.

These and other statements corroborated the hypothesis that Islam, at least as perceived by elderly men, was declining rapidly. There was some important truth in it; mosques that remained empty and large-scale conversion to Christianity in Lower Ajaria proved the waning influence of Islam. Still, in Khulo it was not entirely clear how fast and straightforward this process was. It is difficult to determine whether the process of decline as witnessed by the hodjas was taking place as rapidly as suggested, especially since comparisons with the Soviet period allow multiple interpretations. But it was clear that the renewed importance of Islam that was witnessed in the early 1990s had ended, and that elderly Muslim leaders were losing their grip on their community.

The restrictions on Muslim organization and expression may be important in explaining why the upswing of Islam was essentially short-lived. But another important factor is that Muslim leaders failed to reconcile Islam with the ideology of the nation and with 'modernity.' The defenders of Islam may stress the importance of their faith and the need to stay true to familial traditions, but any attempt to mobilize these values encounters strong opposition from the political establishment and more importantly, ambiguous feelings from their own members.

The issues raised by hodja Muhammad - drinking, education, indeed even kissing as on TV - were not just worries of an old and embittered man. They were seen as problematic by the younger generation as well, although the involved dilemmas led them often to different conclusions. Among those youth who called themselves Muslim (still a majority), discussions about religion unavoidably prompted the difficulty of reconciling Muslim identity and conduct with ideas of nation and state. Their careers and social lives were often tightly embedded in Georgian contexts that had obtained explicit Christian characteristics. The resulting ambiguities in self-ascription mean that it is impossible to provide a general depiction of ‘religious identification’ in Upper Ajaria. Instead, the shifts between particular loyalties indicate the need to pay attention to the way individuals have dealt with the involved dilemmas.

**Difficulties of restoring and maintaining Muslim identity**

We have seen that the Muslim leaders' greatest fear was that their children would abandon the path of Islam. The dangers that were most frequently
expressed dealt with the consumption of alcohol, dressing codes and non-observance of religious rituals. These elements were not very different from what Muslim leaders perceived as the evils of state-atheism but these evils had reappeared in a new context, with renewed vigor. Given that the Muslim clergy sees its grip on the younger generation declining, it is interesting to look at how these young Muslims deal with dilemmas of faith in everyday activities.

I will start the discussion by describing a *supra* (dinner) to which I was invited. The specific encounter had some ‘political’ significance because Otari—a potential convert to Christianity—had urged me to come and discuss the issue of religion with his neighbors Bejan and Enver to show me that they were not as Muslim as I might think. Bejan was formally unemployed but had inherited land which belonged to his grandparents before collectivization. This and his talent for cultivating flowers enabled him to make a moderate living. Enver was a traffic-police officer in a somewhat better financial position than the other two, especially because of the informal supplements to his income. Both Bejan and Enver, although they underlined that they were Muslims, paid very little attention to religious obligations and neither of them had been in the mosque for several years.

When I met Bejan and Enver, they enthusiastically told me that I would experience true Georgian hospitality. Invoking a popular Georgian saying, they stressed that I should express all my wishes since guests were a gift of God. The evening consisted of a rotating table of dishes prepared by the spouses of Enver and Otari, and large quantities of vodka. Otari was given the honor of being *tamada* (head of the table) and as such was responsible for raising appropriate toasts. Otari used his position to start discussions on religion, specifically Islam, its relation to the Georgian nation and the freedom that his neighbors would give their children in deciding what religion to choose.

After Otari asked the other two if they would allow their children to adopt Christianity, Bejan was the first to answer: “Every one is free to choose his/her religion. If my son decides to be a Christian, then he is free to do so, but if he decides to follow my path, then that’s also fine.” Enver had a different opinion, saying: “For my part, I would not allow my children to abandon Islam.” When Otari heard this he interrupted Enver. He leaned over the table, his face expressing disagreement. A quick exchange followed.

Otari: What was your grandfather?
Enver: Muslim, of course.
Otari: and your grandmother?
Enver: The same, Muslim.

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4 Otari worked as mathematics teacher in the village school of Dekanashvilebi. He was baptized in August 2001, a few months after the described evening.
5 This flower-business was quite profitable as competition concerning this crop was still low in Batumi.
6 Enver openly commented on the necessity of taking bribes, not only to be able to complement his meagre wage but also because refusing bribes would mean being fired by superiors.
7 The word used for God was *rmerti*, which is used by Muslims as well as Christians.
Otari: And what about your [distant] forefathers?
Enver: Christians.
Otari: Right.

Otari fell back in his chair and relaxed, seemingly satisfied with having made a convincing point by invoking the Christian past of Ajaria. Enver, however, did not agree with the consequences that Otari drew from his answers and continued the discussion:

Yes, we know that they [distant forefathers] were Christians, but we also know that at a certain point they adopted Islam. How and why they became Muslim we don’t know, nor do we know whether it was voluntarily or with the sword. But we do know that since then they have been living as Muslims, [which means that] they must have considered it the true faith. I live the same way as they did and want my children to continue in the same direction.

Otari remained silent when Bejan, who as it turned out agreed more with Enver than it seemed earlier, joined the discussion. He placed a pencil on top of a dish and looked in my direction when he said,

Do you see this, this [the pencil] is God, and these [imaginary lines from the edge of the plate to the pencil] are ways that lead to God. Perhaps there are 40 different religions. Do we know for sure what the shortest way to God is? No, we don’t! But my grandparents have concluded that their religion, Islam, is the shortest way to God. [...] My grandparents were intelligent people. They taught me everything, so how could I dare to abandon that path?

In this discussion, the ideal of keeping the familial tradition intact was a central theme. As for the continuation of the tradition it seemed of little importance whether one fulfilled the religious obligations, as long as one did not reject the path of Islam. Enver conveyed this when he ended a speech that he had started earlier, “Perhaps I am not actively observing the demands of my religion, but I observe the most important commandments: I don’t kill people, I don’t steal, and I don’t sleep with other women. That is, I don’t undermine my family.” Bejan for his part explained that he did not fulfill the religious demands because he had grown up in an atheist period and anyway did not have time for it. “But,” he stressed, “I gave my father and brother a Muslim funeral and I would have considered it a sin if I had decided otherwise.” The idea behind this is that as long as one did not abandon Islam altogether a continuation of the familial tradition was still possible. As such, it was also an implicit critique of Otari who was about to decide otherwise and convert to Christianity. That evening Otari did not raise the issue again. The next morning though, when we had breakfast, Otari returned to the subject:

You know, Enver’s statements really surprised me. He tells you that he is a Muslim and that he won’t allow his children to adopt Christianity. [laughs] But what kind of Muslim is he anyway? He doesn’t go to the mosque, he drinks vodka and – I wanted to tell him then, but I didn’t – he even eats pork! Last year when it was Ramadan I saw him returning from work early...
in the day. When I went over to greet him it turned out that he was carrying
a bag with pork, someone had given it to him.\(^8\)

Despite the fact that nominal Muslims like Bejan and Enver presented their stance as a
continuation of familial traditions, this perspective was not univocally accepted. Otari did not present his critique in a direct confrontation, perhaps because Bejan and Enver united their ideas on the matter. Nevertheless, it showed that not only converts
need to explain the reasons for their conversion, but that also those who define
themselves as Muslim need to explain and defend their stance. The difference is that
whereas new Christians talk openly and even self-confidently about their choices,
young Muslims speak about their religious convictions – at least to outsiders – in
more covered and modest terms. Perhaps they do so because they are aware of the
gap between their religious orientation and the expectations of the wider society they
live in.

With reference to these expectations, it is possible to identify several
domains in which regaining or retaining Muslim identity was problematic. I will
discuss three of them here, but by no means want to suggest that this would be an
exclusive list. The first is that of Georgian ‘culture,’ understood here from an emic
perspective as those customs that are seen as characteristic for Georgians. Especially
crucial, in this respect, are the codes for social behavior and the resulting dilemma of
alcohol consumption. The next domain is that of Georgian ‘nationality,’ and espe-
cially its assumed relation to Christianity. For Muslims, this means that they have to
position themselves in relation to a national discourse, which stresses the Christian
roots of the Georgian nation. The last domain concerns ideas of the ‘future,’ and here
I refer specifically to the aspirations that people hold for themselves and their
children.

‘CULTURE’ – ALCOHOLIC TESTS

When I asked a man in his sixties what he though the reasons were for
the decline of Islam in his community and especially for the waning interest of the
younger generation in it, he provided me with the following explanation: “You know,
Islam is a demanding religion and people are simply not always strong enough to
cope with that. You have to pray five times a day and you are not allowed to drink
[alcohol] or to eat pork.”\(^9\) Although the man may have referred to insufficient levels
of self-control, the statement also referred to opposing codes of behavior for Chris-
tians and Muslims. The issues of consuming pork and alcohol were of course also
problematic during the Soviet period, but there is reason to suspect that, at present,
the issues have gained new importance. The account of Jemali, a man who grew up in

\(^8\) Secular Muslims in Ajaria told me that eating pork is considered a larger sin than consuming
alcohol.

\(^9\) Other restrictions were mentioned in Okruashvilebi, one of the more conservative neighborhoods of
Khulo. The hodja had forbidden the youth to play volleyball or backgammon, or to wear ‘Christian’
(baseball) caps. Backgammon and volleyball were nevertheless played when no old men were
around.
Okruashvilebi and until recently had not given his Muslim identity serious doubt, sheds light on the subject.

"During Soviet time," Jemali said, "of course we were Muslims, but we could only pray inside our homes. We didn’t think badly of anyone who drank at work or offered wine to guests, those things were simply unavoidable. Of course we knew that for Muslims it was a sin to drink [alcohol] or eat pork, but what could you do?" The new possibilities for religious proliferation after socialism changed the expectations of how Muslims should behave. This was also true for Jemali. In 1989, when the mosque was opened, he was 26 years old. He started attending the local medrese, making it to the position of teacher at the medrese in the mid-1990s. He abandoned drinking and for several years observed all the religious obligations.

However, recently his unproblematic stance towards Islam has been challenged. He received a promotion at work which made him responsible for the telephone lines that run to his neighborhood. But because his position involves attending meetings and receiving guests from the district center, he has started drinking again. According to Jemali, it would simply be impossible not to drink. “It is fairly simple. You know our customs, whenever a guest arrives you have to provide him a meal and since we have a long tradition of wine drinking, you have to serve wine and drink together. People would think badly of you if you said that alcohol was prohibited in your house. It would be the same as saying that you are not a Georgian.”

The issue of hospitality and drinking are crucial issues in the Georgian context. Mars and Altman argued that in Georgia, beyond the family, a male has “continually to prove himself as catso – a man. He is, in this respect, perpetually ‘on show’ and has constantly to demonstrate his worthiness to public opinion in general and to his colleagues and peers in particular. These require the extravagant use of display and consumption, as well as exhibitions of ‘manliness’” (1987: 271). The extensive rituals of drinking and toasting are an integral part of everyday politics, of defining who is who, and of expressing gratitude and respect. Without participation in these activities, it is hardly possible to advance one’s position in professional life. Even for Jemali, a low-level state employee, abstaining from alcohol consumption was practically impossible as it would diminish any future job-perspectives.

Mars and Altman offer valuable insights on the role of drinking in Georgia as a whole, but the issue has an extra dimension on the frontier. In Ajaria, it was not only important to prove one’s manliness through alcohol consumption, but also to prove that one was truly Georgian. Several baptized acquaintances couldn’t imagine that in some mountain-villages in Upper Ajaria there was no alcohol available at all. People would ask, “Then what did you do, you just sat there and ate?” They were amazed at the possibility and showed their disapproval about what they considered to be a lack of hospitality. In Ajaria, drinking has become a very powerful symbol of

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10 Whenever I was invited for dinner, either in the houses of nominal Muslims or new Christians, the level of alcohol consumption struck me as significantly higher than in Christian villages. A reason might be that by showing that they were able to drink a lot they proved their Georgian-ness.

11 Even harsher reactions followed when people heard (from Teimuri) that when I had cut my hand,
Georgian-ness and abstaining from it not only placed you in a difficult social position but was also interpreted as a rejection of the nation.

Again we encounter the same problem noticed earlier. During the Soviet period Ajarians could be Muslim in their homes, while being Georgian in public. Obviously, there were people who continued to observe most or all religious obligations. In order to do that, they had to maintain a low-profile life, take jobs as tractor-drivers or shepherds and refrain from membership of the Communist Party. For anyone employed in a public function, continued observance of religious demands was not a possibility and this was accepted even by Muslim leaders. Informants pointed out that for men with jobs like school teachers, kolkhoz directors or police-officers it was taken for granted that they could not comply to certain religious demands. But whereas then it was accepted behavior for Muslim men to drink alcohol or eat pork or to withdraw from the Ramadan, today it is more complicated to abstain from religious demands and still maintain being Muslim. Today, social behavior needs explanation and is more easily subject to criticism from either other Muslims – ‘you are no real Muslim’ – or cynicism from new Christians – ‘you say that you are Muslim but actually you are not.’

‘NATIONALITY’ – FORCED TO TAKE POSITION

The way the terms Ajarian and Georgian are used locally reveal the issues at stake when people talked of nationality. Once, after Teimuri and I had been talking with some men sitting in front of the mosque, we ran into an old man whom we hadn’t met before. The following short conversation between the two unfolded:

Old man: Are you a Georgian or an Ajarian?
Teimuri: I am a Georgian and an Ajarian
Old man: That is impossible! You are either one or the other.
Teimuri: Isn’t Ajaria then part of Georgia?
Old man: Ajaria is Ajaria

Here the conversation ended. When Teimuri and I were alone again he shook his head and then said: “He is an old man, it is no use explaining to him that he is confusing religion with nationality [...] Anyways, such opinions you will only encounter among the older generation, they never received education you know.”

Teimuri was right in saying that it is nowadays fairly uncommon that Ajarians would present themselves as radically different from Georgians, and instead most people made it clear that they saw themselves as Georgians, sometimes specifying that they were Muslim Georgians. But although Teimuri claimed that it was a matter of understanding the difference between religion and nationality, distinguishing between the two in contemporary Ajaria was often difficult if not impossible.

Most young Muslims I spoke with told me of painful encounters concerning their religious affiliation. These encounters happened most frequently while traveling to places outside Ajaria – to Tbilisi or to any of the other provinces of Georgia. One informant told me about an incident that occurred while on a bus from Tbilisi to
Batumi. When the bus crossed the (administrative) border between Guria and Ajaria a passenger remarked: “I see we have arrived in Tatarstan.” The Ajarian passengers were highly insulted and forced the driver to stop and kick the man off the bus. Other informants had similar experiences, they had been called ‘Tatar’ or ‘Turk,’ or their refusal to drink wine had provoked comments that they were not ‘real’ Georgians.

But although these experiences were extremely painful for some, for others it offered opportunities to talk about religious difference and to stress the possibility of reconciling Muslim and Georgian identities. In front of the mosque I overheard the following monologue in which imam Kemal told some bystanders about an encounter he had had on a trip to Guria, the oblast (province) north of Ajaria.

This [Gurian] man asked me about my family name, and then [after hearing the answer] replied: “that is a real Gurian name.” [...] I asked him: “why a Gurian name, why not Ajarian?” Then the man made some statement about Islam undermining our nation and that Georgians should be Christian. So I asked him: “Christianity came here in the first century, what religion did people before that period have?” Animism was his reply. So I asked him, “were those animists Georgians?” Yes, of course they were Georgians. And he also agreed with me that they stayed Georgian when they adopted Christianity. So then I told him that if Georgians stayed Georgian despite having changed their religion, they also stayed Georgian after having adopted Islam. Then the man gave in, saying: “I’ll have to think about that.”

The bystanders laughed and nodded in agreement. “That is how it is. Kemal knows how to say it,” one of them remarked. Within the Muslim community these and other stories ‘proved’ that there was no real problem in combining Muslim and Georgian identity and that claims to the contrary were those of people who were simply not intelligent enough. Still, the issue troubled many. Even the monologue presented above ran into serious limitations, despite the fact that it skillfully used the contradictions in nationalist rhetoric. It was a response to a dominant discourse but as a reaction it was ineffective because part of the Georgian message was nevertheless accepted. Moreover, because it claimed rights as a religious minority it still placed Muslims in a position of difference, something which was often inconvenient to members of the younger generation.

The negative experiences with expressing religious difference might have contributed to the fact that (especially in public) many Muslims displayed an accommodating attitude. Muslims would stress that the most important thing is to believe in one God and that differences between religions were only of secondary importance. They respected Christianity but it happened that they were Muslim; that was the environment they grew up in. Islam was the tradition of their parents and grandparents, which in some cases almost sounded like an apology. This was also true of Muslim teenagers who attended the Christian lyceum in Khulo. A nineteen-year-old female student wrote in an essay about her view on religion: 12 “We know

12 The (anonymous) essays were written for the purpose of this research. Despite incorporating this quotation, the attempt in general was a failure because of the ‘contextual indeterminacy’ (cf. Baumann 1994); the impossibility of drawing conclusions from statements when nothing is known
that our ancestors were Christians who were Islamized by the Turks during the 300-year domination. Christianity is probably our true religion, but thereafter we became Muslims. [Islam] was handed down from generation to generation and therefore we believe in Islam”. So although she wrote that she is Muslim, in the same sentence she mentions that ‘our true religion’ is Christianity. The quotation not only demonstrates the clash between national and local traditions, but also suggests that this student has internalized the nationalist rhetoric about religion – a rhetoric which makes it very difficult to reconcile being Muslim and Georgian.

CONFLICTING IDEAS ON THE ‘FUTURE’

Despite their stated religious affiliation, many Muslims faced difficulties in giving this religious affiliation a place in the aspirations they had for themselves and their children. More broadly still, it was often difficult for them to imagine an Islamic future for a ‘Georgian’ Ajaria. One of the reasons for this was that the elderly Muslims who had dominated religious life in the 1990s stuck to interpretations of Islam that were difficult to align with the aspirations of the younger generation.

Young Muslims openly distanced themselves from what they saw as an attempt of Muslim leaders to restore a kind of pre-Soviet Islam. Amiran, the 37 year-old judge in Khulo, made it clear what he thought the basic problem was, “I am not saying that Islam is backward. You only have to go to Turkey to see that for yourself. But here it is different. For the past eighty years Islam was isolated, it didn’t move forward. It is a village-kind of Islam.” The consequences of the isolation from the rest of the Muslim world was particularly clear in a conflict over the interpretation of the Muslim calendar in Ghorjomi, a village twenty kilometers east of Khulo. Here the local Muslim community stuck to a deviating Muslim calendar. This calendar was created by the locally famous mullah Osman, who played an important role in religious life in Upper Ajaria between the 1930s and 1980s. Because back then there was no reliable information about the times of prayer or the start of the Ramadan, mullah Osman constructed his own calendar based on the moon and the stars. When the restrictions on religion were lifted and the rest of Ajaria adopted the standard Sunni Muslim calendar, the Muslims in Ghorjomi stuck to the calendar of mullah Osman, with the result that they start their Ramadan two days earlier than the rest of the Muslim world. The local community refused to adjust to the standard timetable, because that was considered a later, impure modification.13

The local inventions made in response to the isolation of Islam in Ajaria were seen by its defenders as attempts to stick to an authentic version of their faith. Fervor to create a pure Islam also led to other and newer inventions. During an informal meeting of Quranic teachers, hodja Muhammad displayed his wish to keep

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13 The previous imam of Ghorjomi – a middle-aged men who followed Quran-courses in Turkey – tried to abolish this calendar but gave up his position after some disputes with elderly Muslims.
true to Muslim traditions in a way that was shocking for several participants. The family with whom the group was having lunch, had arranged tables and chairs in advance. But upon seeing the arrangement, hodja Muhammad decided otherwise. He ordered the men to remove all furniture and to arrange the ‘table’ on the ground instead, which, he explained, was closer to the Islamic tradition. When his wish was realized, Muhammad efendi went into the kitchen and insisted that he would carry the food into the room, thus ensuring that the women would not have to leave the kitchen. When it turned out that the men were supposed to eat with their hands instead of cutlery, one could feel the discomfort among the other men. Little jokes were whispered and one young Islamic teacher remarked: “hodja says it is more Islamic [to sit on the floor], according to me it is more Asiatic.” He continued, “Luckily they let us wash our hands with warm water; that is the minimum.”

These and other situations made less devout Muslims feel that Islam was pulling them backwards instead of bringing them forwards. The version of Islam propagated by men like Muhammad was understood as inhibiting progress. Many people struggled with the decision to send their children to medreses where they would learn to read Arabic, something that they saw as being quite useless in daily life. Moreover, inhabitants of Khulo frequently mentioned that children from mountainous villages with stricter Muslim lifestyles performed very poorly at school. Judge Amiran told me about this, “I pity them, they are prisoners of their traditions” The reservations many Muslims had concerning the ‘old men’s Islam’ of the 1990s are understandable and it was an important factor in the subsequent decline of Islam. However, among the younger generation there are those who found new ways to integrate competing discourses in their personal lives. Moreover, some of the younger imams offer new interpretations of Islam that are more compatible with the aspirations people hold for their own and their children’s lives.

Finding ways out

Muslim men in Ajaria struggle with how to reconcile Georgian expectations of hospitality and the religious obligations of Islam. They must decide how to present themselves in non-Muslim contexts when the ‘wrong’ identity may squelch their opportunities for the future. They are often forced to choose between their religious and national identity, or to create a tenuous reconciliation between the two. Their Muslim identity and its implications even produce crisis when they are making decisions about their children. As has been demonstrated, their struggles to restore and maintain their Muslim identity have been most difficult in the arenas of culture, nationality and dreams for the future.

The men I encountered in Ajaria all dealt with these issues differently in their daily lives. During my fieldwork I observed and was told about countless coping strategies employed by young Muslim men in their attempts to navigate their way
through life as Muslims in Ajaria. Yet, despite the differences, there were similarities in the men’s tactics; the stories of Kemal, Alexander and Teimuri seemed to me apt examples of the types of strategies most often employed. Their tactics, which I have named ‘reinterpretation,’ ‘circumvention’ and ‘ambiguity’ respectively, mirror the ways in which many young men are attempting to deal with the difficulty of being Muslim (Georgian) in Ajaria.14

KEMAL – REINTERPRETATION

After the border with Turkey was opened and restrictions on religious expression were lifted, wealthy Turkish citizens became interested in helping Ajarians re-establish Islamic institutions. Besides making contributions to the construction of mosques and medreses, the Turkish benefactors invited young Ajarian men to study at vocational schools in Turkey. Initially these invitations were handled by the muftiate in Batumi, but in later years young men were selected and recruited through more informal contacts.15 Kemal was initially invited to study in Turkey for one year, though his stay in Turkey eventually lasted for seven years. According to his account, he had been selected because he was the best student of the medrese. During the first two years of his study (1994-1996), he lived with a family in Trabzon, learned Turkish and followed preparatory courses to be accepted at the Seljuk University in Konya. He was accepted and spent the next five years studying Islamic law, which he successfully completed. Upon return to Khulo in early 2001, Kemal was appointed as the new imam, because with his university degree, he was the person with the highest religious education.

The male domain of his house consisted of the visitors’ room and a large study. Kemal was especially fond of his study-room. There was a computer, which he had received from an Islamic organization in Turkey. His bookcases were filled with books in Arabic and Turkish that he had purchased over the years. During one of my visits, he showed the university album and his yearbook, making sure that I noticed the high quality of the paper and the colorful layout, something that was very rare in Georgia. He went through the pages with photographs of students and talked extensively about his professors. He also made me admire the advertisements that had enabled the production of this book, something he considered a wonderful combination of business and good deeds.

In our conversations, Kemal often made comparisons between Georgia and Turkey. Perhaps what struck him as the biggest difference was the way people were engaged in economic life. While Turkey (and especially Konya) had rapidly ‘modernized’ during the years he lived there, Georgia did not manage to overcome the deep economic crisis. To Kemal this was a sign of intense chaos not only of economics but also of the mental state of the inhabitants.

14 At least a fourth strategy could be added, that of ‘rejection,’ but that will be the subject of the next chapter on conversion to Christianity.

You know what the difference is between rich men here and in Turkey. In Turkey, when someone starts to make money, he won’t show it off. Instead, he first wants to expand his business, to guarantee a secure income for himself and his family. But here, as soon as someone has earned a sum of money he will immediately buy a car and spend the rest of the money on partying. People don’t act the way they should.

Many examples followed which showed Kemal’s positive attitude towards Turkey. For him, Turkey represented a model of progress, and proof that it was possible to ‘modernize’ an Islamic country. Well aware of the existing stereotypes in Georgia concerning Muslims, Kemal perceived the Turkish system as successful in tolerating difference without losing the unity of the state, “One of the problems we have here is that people mistakenly equate ethnicity with religion. For example, some people say that Ajarians are not Georgian because they are Muslim. But those two are separate things.” In Turkey by contrast, “there are many religious and ethnic groups but they all see themselves as belonging to the Turkish nation.”

His formal religious training also had changed his view on the religious practices that were commonplace in Ajaria. Although he was careful enough not to mention any names, he regretted that most hodjas had never been ‘properly’ trained, “They learned about Islam only from their parents during the winter, behind closed doors.” This older generation was, in Kemal’s view, not reacting properly against certain superstitions, like wearing amulets against diseases and reciting Quranic verses to cure sickness.

Kemal managed to realign Islam with aspirations to which many of his fellow townsman subscribed. He separated religion and nation, something that worked well within the Muslim community in Upper Ajaria, but as we have seen, is challenged outside the local community. Moreover his ‘modern’ picture of Islam involved a rejection of those markers of Georgian identity (hospitality, consumption) that were vital in social life and that many Muslims in Ajaria explicitly used to stress their loyalty to the Georgian nation. His positive stance towards Turkey as a model of development was accepted by several young Muslims, but also evoked suspicion from those who explained any potential influence from Turkey as a possible attack on the nation. At the same time, his modern depiction of Islam aroused the suspicion of several elderly Muslims like hodja Muhammad who on one occasion expressed his doubt concerning the changes that Kemal had made in the organization of the mosque.

ALEXANDER - CIRCUMVENTION

Alexander’s life had not been easy. Now twenty-nine, he lost his father when he was sixteen years old. As the oldest son he became the head of the household, responsible for the well-being of his family during unstable times. Alexander had done reasonably well though. He had managed to make good money by traveling and trading in Russia and Turkey.
I hadn’t seen Alexander for about a year when I ran into him near his home in July 2001. It came as a surprise to find him working in the fields, cutting and stacking hay. On earlier occasions he had always insisted that there were easier and more lucrative ways to earn money. He smiled when he noticed my surprise and said that he had changed his lifestyle, and that these days he harvested the fruits of real labor. Profits from earlier businesses had enabled him to purchase several plots of land. He declared that for now he had given up on trading, “It is no use anymore; you end up losing money because of all the bribes you have to pay.” Besides the changes in the way he earned a living, I noticed another change as well. Around his neck hung an amulet which, he told me with a laugh, his mother had urged him to wear. That evening when I joined Alexander for dinner, there was no alcohol. To my surprise, Alexander seemed very comfortable with the fact that he had broken their Georgian custom. Instead of making apologies, as was usually the case in similar situations, Alexander told me about an encounter he’d had which had made a big impression on him.

Six months previously Alexander had gone to Batumi to sort things out for a lumber-selling deal in which he was involved. That time he had bad luck and was unable to quickly find Turkish buyers. After searching in vain for several days, he decided to ask his cousin Ismet for help and ended up living with him for an entire month. Many believe Alexander’s cousin Ismet will become the future mufti of Ajaria as he has been studying off and on for six years at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

I can tell you, living with him was quite an experience. You know how I used to live. I like women, company, drinking. Well, Ismet knew this too of course, and he immediately warned me that I would need to adjust my behavior if I wanted to stay in his house. There would be no drinking in his house and he [made it clear that he] didn’t want to see me drunk once. Well, I agreed. But a few days later several friends passed by, wanting to thank me for a deal that had worked out well. I thought to myself, ‘OK, this time I will do it right.’ I refused [the bottles of] vodka they offered me. Of course they didn’t accept it, but I told them: ‘If you want to thank me, buy me a tablet of chocolate.’ You should have seen their faces! [laughter]. The next day I heard that they had been beaten up just after they had turned around the corner – something about a debt or so. So you understand that I was grateful to Ismet, for in a way he had saved me from this fight.

This was only the beginning of the story that Alexander wanted to tell me. He continued,

One evening Ismet and I had a long conversation. Ismet demanded that I give up my sinful lifestyle. I told him, I never steal or cheat and I don’t kill people. My only two sins are that I drink alcohol and that I sleep with other

16 The difficult route through the north-Caucasus – where he had to pay huge bribes and was recently beaten up by policemen – convinced Kemal that it was no use to continue this kind of trade. Because his brother found a job in Abashidze’s private militia, his family responsibilities had also lessened.

17 These amulets contain a piece of paper with a verse or phrase from the Quran, preferably written by an imam. They are considered to give protection against the evil eye.
women. But as long as I am young, I can’t give up the women. Ismet thought for a while and said: ‘Just be careful with women, but the drinking you definitely have to give up.’ After some talking back and forth I gave in, but said that in that case he should help me with one question: how I could be sure about the existence of God? We talked about it and in order to convince me Ismet asked what my strongest wish was. So I told him that I really, really wished to talk once more with my [deceased] father, to find out what had really happened to him when he died. [Kemal followed instructions that Ismet gave him and they apparently worked.] I had never had such a vivid dream as during that night. I really saw my father. He told me not to worry about it, that there was nothing to be found and that I should go on with my life [...]. How can you not believe after such an experience?

After that encounter, I saw Alexander once more. A week before my departure from the field I met Alexander in one of the café’s in Batumi. He was in the company of some men, eating and drinking chacha (strong alcoholic drink). I joined them. We discussed international politics and raised toasts on Georgia, women and good business. Nothing seemed to indicate his previously noticed change in lifestyle. But well, this was Batumi and not Khulo.

Alexander was a man with many faces. He definitely needed those different faces. To survive as a small-trader in a highly unstable region, it was not only vital to have good trading-skills but also to be able to adapt to many social situations. However, this did not diminish the value of Islam for him, which gave him spiritual strength and a place of refuge back in the mountains.

**TEIMURI - AMBIGUITY**

Teimuri’s father Khalid is hadji and well known in the Muslim community. But Kalid’s two sons Anzor and Teimuri hardly observe any of the religious obligations. This causes their father to worry about what went wrong in their upbringing. Sometimes he half-jokingly tells his sons that he made a big mistake in allowing them to go to university in Batumi. It is difficult to characterize Teimuri as Muslim and he himself usually avoids answering the question. In fact, he has been in an almost continuous struggle about how to reconcile his religious and national identity. As my research assistant, he sometimes jokingly remarked that it would be much easier if I would just take him as the subject of my research, because all the tensions in religious and national identifications came together in him. At times he felt compelled to convert to Christianity, especially since many of his friends in Batumi implicitly or explicitly urged him to do so.

I would celebrate Easter with them, and when they would greet me with the words ‘Khristros voskres’ (Christ is risen) I knew I was supposed to say ‘Voistimu voskres’ (He is risen indeed). But then, should I say that or not? I would feel very uncomfortable in such situations. On the one hand I spent an important part of my life with them, they have helped me with so many things, yet I reject their faith. But then on the other hand I have my family.

80
Making a conscious decision to convert to Christianity would mean a slap in the face of his father. At times, Teimuri called himself a lost cause and explained that what he felt was *udvoienie* (two-sidedness). As a result, he was not only incapable of choosing one religion over the other, but it also had prevented any religion from entering his heart. Some of his ambiguous feelings were well expressed during a conversation we had about the position of Islam in Ajaria.

The thing is, Islam might be a good religion, but it is incompatible with the Georgian state. We finally have our independence and we can’t give too much freedom to Islam, because we are still in the process of constructing [our country]. Look at the Muslim children here, they can hardly write a correct sentence. Their parents send them to the *medrese* and only care about their children being able to read Arabic. But what is that going to do for their lives here? Our entire language, our culture, that is all connected with Christianity, so being Muslim immediately draws you away from it and it inhibits integration of Ajaria in our [Georgian] society, it inhibits the development of these people.

The reason that Teimuri stressed the aspect of ‘integration,’ and he did so on several occasions, was closely related to his own experiences. Teimuri often spoke about the disadvantages that he experienced when he went to university, his difficulties in being accepted into the lives of friends with non-Muslim backgrounds, and his unease about not knowing Christian – and thus Georgian – lifestyles. For his children, he told me, this would be different. He was determined to provide them with a better start. At home he taught his children Georgian history and also acquainted them with Christianity, so that they would be ‘free.’ This freedom, Teimuri explained, entailed not only the freedom to choose one religion over the other, but especially the freedom to live in Georgian society. That this was problematic for someone with a Muslim background was very obvious to him, and actually, he could not always understand why Muslims still perceived of themselves as being Georgian, “The Muslims here say that they are Georgian, but besides language, what is it that makes them feel Georgian? I don’t understand that.”

Despite all his doubts, over the past four years changes in his own life drew him closer to a ‘Muslim’ life. In 1997, when I first met Teimuri, he was about to finish his aspirantura (post-graduate degree). He was full of hopes that finishing his thesis would give him a good start in establishing an academic career. However, four years later his hopes had all but vanished. After several delays (partly) caused by the difficulty of combining writing a dissertation with obligations at home, he had finally finished his thesis in 2000. But because organizing a public defense in Georgia requires making monetary or other contributions to the right persons, in 2001 Teimuri still hadn’t managed to complete his studies. During that time several vacancies to which he applied went to others, people whose financial resources and personal networks guaranteed them an academic career. Teimuri’s lack of both diminished all his hopes for being able to make a living in Batumi. During the last few years, Teimuri no longer participated in the supras (festive dinners) organized by his former friends and colleagues, partly because of unease he felt with not being able to repay
these social favors. Instead, after having lived in Batumi for six years he had returned to Khulo. Through hard work and with the help of his relatives he has more or less managed to arrange his life. More actively than before, he now adheres to religious demands and takes part in Islamic rituals.

The three men represented distinctive ways of how young men in Ajaria deal with the complexity of realigning religious and national identity. Each of these strategies also involved risks and could not simply be appropriated and acted out in public life. The ‘reinterpretations’ of Kemal could be seen as an attempt to provide new meanings to Islam but involved the risk of alienation both from the society at large and from the more conservative Muslims. ‘Ambiguity’ as in the story of Teimuri referred to accepting both the messages of Georgian nationalism and Islamic traditions. This meant that one was constantly confronted with the contradictions between the two discourses, which often led to withdrawal from direct involvement in religion. Alexander’s ways of ‘circumvention’ referred to the tendency to try and keep Georgian and Muslim identity separated in different spheres of life. Actually, this last ‘strategy’ seemed to me the most promising in the present national context, with the only ‘risk’ that this interpretation of Islam would not be acceptable to more devout Muslims.

Judging from the stories, it is tempting to equate Islam in Ajaria with a rural lifestyle, and many people in Ajaria would subscribe to this viewpoint. Both nominal Muslims and Georgian nationalists associated Islam with backwardness and lack of civilization, attributes that were considered typical of rural life in mountain villages. In Khulo, these notions were replicated on a smaller scale as evident in the nicknames that were given to the various neighborhoods. Duadzeebi and Okruashvilebi, two neighborhoods that depended mostly on agriculture, were respectively called ‘Meccadzeebi’ and ‘l little Arabia,’ also because most hodjas lived there. By contrast, those neighborhoods that were closer entwined with the state-administration and the service sector were associated with ‘modern’ life. Elderly Muslims referred to these neighborhoods as ‘the center,’ and spoke with contempt about the lack of morality ‘over there.’ This ‘over there’ started near the center of Khulo and extended to Batumi or perhaps even further, to those places they saw as characteristic of immoral city-life.

Like most stereotypes, when stripped of their moral load, these contained a core of truth. During the Soviet period, Islam was of greater importance in rural areas than it was in urban centers and this geographical pattern was also visible in the Islamic upswing of the early 1990s. The differences between urban and rural life also resounded in the stories presented above. For Kemal, Teimuri and Alexander their social background proved important for how they incorporated Islam in their lives. For the three men, as for many Muslims, Islam was important as it was part of social
life in the local community to which they were tightly connected. For Alexander, the Muslim community was a place of refuge from which he escaped his hectic and dangerous life as a small-trader. For Teimuri, it was a place he would rather have left behind, but to which he returned when his hopes for starting a life in the city faded. For Kemal finally, the Muslim community was the place to which he returned after a prolonged stay in Turkey, and where he now held an important position.

But all three had ambiguous feelings about the kind of Islam that was propagated in Ajaria during the 1990s. Teimuri worried about how the preoccupation with learning Arabic influenced kids’ performances at school and how a Muslim life might handicap his children in their future lives. Kemal denounced the ‘superstitions’ that were to him a reflection of village customs rather than of proper interpretations of Islam. Only Alexander did not express such ambiguous feelings, perhaps because he had given both Islamic and non-Islamic traditions a meaningful place in his life.

Muslim identity against the tides

In the post-Soviet era, increased expectations of what being a Muslim entailed ran counter to increased demands for displaying loyalty to the Georgian nation. Thus, it was often quite difficult for Muslims to maintain Islamic traditions.

The initial upswing of Islam, as shaped by devout (and usually elderly) Muslim men who strove towards the restoration of a pure or pre-Soviet Islam, clashed with aspirations of the younger generation and with the state. The portrayal of Muslim life that these elders advanced involved a rejection of the inclusive language of Georgian nationality. They held on to a distinction between Georgian (Kartveli) and Ajarian (Achareli) on the basis that Georgians were Christian and Ajarians Muslim. Their variant of Islam thus contained a message of separation from the Georgian nation. This narrative of difference was difficult to accept for those young Muslims who saw themselves as Georgians and whose careers were tightly interwoven with the Georgian state.

Young males with more moderate views on Islam displayed a preference for a de-politicized and de-ethnicized version of Islam. They claimed that religion and nation were different things and that therefore there was no problem in being simultaneously Muslim and Georgian. This de-politicized version of Islam attempted to soften contradictions in the combination of Georgian and Muslim identities. But, as we have seen, it only worked in the Ajarian highlands when Muslims were among themselves. The combination of religious and national identity lost its cogency and was suspect to criticism when confronted with Georgian nationalist discourse. Moreover, because these Muslims incorporated part of a national Georgian ideology, it limited the appropriation of Islam in their daily lives.

The tragedy of Islam in the first decade after socialism was that it did not manage to advance a worldview powerful enough to function as an acceptable
alternative to Georgian nationalist ideology. The view of elders was contrary to ideas of Georgian nationality, but did not offer an acceptable alternative to the younger generation. The moderate view of younger Muslims, on the other hand, did not solve the incompatibility of Muslim obligations with expectations of ‘Georgian’ behavior in daily life, resulting in dilemmas that over time often became untenable. In part, this was a legacy of the Soviet period, in that, during that period, representations of culture and ethnicity were stripped of all Islamic connotations. This meant that the lifestyles of Muslims could not be legitimized by the language of ethnicity and culture, but were often presented as village traditions or as leftovers of a despised Ottoman-Turkish past. This continues to incapacitate the appropriation of Islam in ‘cultural’ and ‘ethnic’ presentations of ‘self,’ at least among those who had (partly) embraced the promises of ‘modernity’ as modeled on the national Georgian ideal.

**BREACHES IN THE FRONTIER**

Within a changing field of social relations and competing discourses, Ajarians struggle with integrating contradictory identities. The stories in this chapter suggested that although presentations of ‘self’ can and need be adapted to changing circumstances, these adaptations do not necessarily ease the problems of reconciling conflicting identities and loyalties. The case of Teimuri showed this vividly. In Upper Ajaria, he called himself a Muslim, but in Batumi he presented himself as Georgian. At the same time, however, Teimuri was searching for ways to bring together these centrifugal forces. The way he talked about his ambiguous feelings demonstrated that he was caught between the Muslim community on one hand and the urban Christian society where he had studied on the other. As such, Teimuri was a representative of a generation that had studied in Georgian cities or had careers within the state bureaucracy and imagined its future within the bounds of the state.

As Teimuri’s story reveals, using these points of reference for constructing identity in Ajaria often resulted in ambiguous feelings for Muslims and a ‘powerless’ Islam. But we also saw that the state may lose its centrality in how people imagine and construe their lives. As we saw exemplified by the stories of Kemal and Alexander, people’s lives may increasingly be structured around other points of reference, be they transnational trading networks or religious centers in the Muslim world. The opening of the border with Turkey is an important aspect for the creation of new points of reference. On this point, Setene Shami provides interesting insights in her discussion on post-Soviet identities in the North Caucasus. About the Circassians, she writes, “more than the fall of Soviet communism per se, it is the sudden porosity of borders and accessibility of territories that had been largely closed to them, that has been of transformative importance to concepts of ethnic identity” (1999:43).

Although I don’t want to go as far as Shami in attributing a radical transformative power to it, the opening of the border certainly influenced the scope and possibilities to articulate religious identities. First, in line with what Kemal had to say about his experiences in Turkey and return to Khulo, it has offered a renewed
vision of Islam that may be better compatible with aspirations that people hold for the future. Second, the opening of the border produced ways to circumvent the strait-jacket of the state. Alexander’s story is a case in point because it shows that living in a post-Soviet era requires circumventing not only official structures, but also expectations of religious and national loyalties. In the case of Alexander, the nation-state has become less important. It is a place of temporary residence, while his interests, and perhaps eventually his loyalties lie elsewhere. If Islam has a future in Ajaria it is through such shifts in points of reference, which help Muslims conceive of their identity outside the bounds of the Georgian nation state.

However, both cases also suggest that new configurations of religious and national identities depend on a decline in the power of the state. For the moment, it is too early to predict whether this is actually the case. Despite the collapse of the Soviet state and socio-political and economic turmoil of the following years, the past five years have shown a recovery of state structures in Ajaria. Drawing explicitly on Turkish experiences, no matter how relevant this might be for a revitalization of Islam, is not without its drawbacks in the present political context. It raises great suspicion from those who take the Georgian nation to heart, as we will see in the next chapter. This suspicion is especially great on the frontier and illustrates the two-sided nature of borders in general. On the one hand, the renewed contacts with Turkey have created opportunities for religious renewal, while on the other hand, they have increased Islamophobia in Georgia.