Uncertain divides : religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Georgian borderlands
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Citation for published version (APA):

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In the late 1980s, when restrictions on religion were lifted, Ajarians seemed to be converting en masse to Christianity. A local newspaper edition of that time reported that 5,000 people had been baptized in Batumi in a single day and that the recently opened churches were unable to seat all the worshipers who had finally been able to “return to their ancestral faith,” Georgian Orthodoxy (*Sovietskaia Adzharia*, 29-05-1989). Bishop Dimitri recalled those days with delight, remembering that “we baptized from early morning to late at night, one after the other, and still there were people waiting.” These mass baptisms were not only taking place in Batumi and its surroundings - with their heterogeneous population - but also in Upper Ajaria where the position of Islam was much stronger. In June 1989, patriarch Iliia II paid a visit to the medieval church in Skhalta - a small mountainous village in Upper Ajaria. During his visit the patriarch held a requiem for those who had died during a natural disaster earlier that year. He then delivered a speech in which he expressed gratitude that, after centuries of oppression, it was once again possible to pray at this sanctified place (*Sovietskaia Adzharia*, 01-06-1989). “He admonished the Ajarians to return to Christianity [and] told them that the catastrophe that had befallen them was obviously the punishment of God for their unfaithfulness to the Savior” (Lilienfeld 1993: 227). Afterwards, the patriarch carried out baptisms near the walls of the old church. The arrival of the patriarch caused stirring among the population. Rumors circulated that every person baptized by him would receive a cross of pure gold. Whether or not for this purpose, during that day no less than fifty villagers were baptized, among which were a large segment of the village elite like the kolkhoz director, the village council chairman and other state functionaries. However, according to one of the converts from this village, almost none of those who were baptized ever attended a service in the years following their baptism. What is more, about ten baptized families started to attend the Friday prayers at the local mosque which was re-opened a year later in 1990.

Although the church may have interpreted the numerous baptisms (estimations of the actual number vary greatly) as a confirmation of its hope that Ajarians would rapidly ‘return’ to Christianity, it is difficult not to see these baptisms as opportune adaptations to the time or as symbolic gestures towards the nationalist

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1 The church in Skhalta dates from the 13th century and is the only medieval church in Ajaria that has survived both the Ottoman and Soviet periods.

2 I based the estimation of fifty converts on the accounts of villagers. It is significantly lower than the estimate of 3,000 mentioned in the local newspaper *Sovietskaia Adzharia* (01 June 1989).
movement. Moreover, economic and political considerations may have influenced people’s decision to be baptized more than religious concerns. That at least is what the stories of gold and the predominance of the village elite among the ‘converts’ suggest. As such, the events offer a glimpse into the unstable political and economic atmosphere in Ajaria at the time. It is unclear, however, how these events relate to religious change, the direction of which was indeed far from clear in the early 1990s.

Still, what these baptisms point to is the emergence of flexible space for religious renewal after the collapse of state-atheism, a space that at the time was still largely amorphous. Pragmatic and haphazard shifts between religions may have been a characterization of a time of great upheaval, particularly after the official ideology had just crumbled. In subsequent years however, it became clear that there was another current, a slower but more permanent process of conversion to Christianity, which will be the focus of this chapter. This process of ‘permanent conversion’ proceeded steadily in the lowlands – sometimes including the population of entire villages – but was much slower and less predictable in Upper Ajaria where Islam had retained an important role in social life.

Although conversion in Ajaria is intricately linked to the instability of the post-socialist era, ambivalence is not all there is to it. In the previous chapters, I have outlined some of the basic factors that made the adoption of Christianity understandable. This included the amalgamation of religious and ethnic identity in nationalist discourses, and the difficulties of observing Islam while living in a state that privileges Christianity both through state policies and through the dissemination of Georgian ‘high’ culture. Moreover, after the initial turmoil of the early 1990s, slow shifts in the power balance between competing interpretations were taking place, which induced people to make more permanent choices between Islam and Christianity.

Although the complex motivations that underlie people’s decision to convert cannot be fully retraced, by looking at the structure and recurrent themes in conversion stories it is possible to discuss how conversions are related to changing social, national and ethnic identities. The stories are insightful cases that inform us about societal changes and are condensed reports of the ambivalence experienced by a majority of the population. To grasp the implications of the interplay of identity, politics, and morality, conversion stories are especially relevant. They illustrate some of the motivations and actions of converts as influenced by the larger political and economical context and moreover, they reveal how people root themselves in a changing world.

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3 What I have in mind is that during the period of social and political turmoil it might have been in the interest of village notables to adjust to the new political realities, for example to secure their official positions.
Talking about conversion

In this section, I will present four stories of people who told me about their conversion. These stories, as well as the other verbal accounts that are the basis of this chapter, were all recorded in Khulo, the administrative center in Upper Ajaria. The town has important functions for the Muslims in the region as it hosts one of the largest mosques in Ajaria and because both the deputy mufti and several influential families of Muslim teachers live in the town. At the same time, Khulo also functions as the bridgehead for Christian missionary work. Concerning the extent of conversion, it forms a sort of middle ground. At the time of research, the Christian community was still only a fraction of the town’s total population. The Church had approximately 300 members or five percent of the population. Although this number seems small, it is still a considerable group, especially when considering that a large part of the town’s population (perhaps as much as fifty percent) does not openly identify itself with either Islam or Christianity.

The accounts were recorded during interview sessions in which I specifically asked about how they came to be baptized. In most cases this material was supplemented by circumstantial information recorded at other occasions. The reason for including four stories at length is to provide the reader with some ideas of how people explain and talk about their conversions, and to provide a basis to start my discussion on the meanings of conversion. Because presenting lengthy stories automatically favors those who are willing to talk about conversion – by implication the more outspoken converts – in the subsequent discussion I will not only refer to these four texts, but also include shorter comments of less talkative new Christians.

TAMAZ

Tamaz has been teaching at the Christian lyceum for the last ten years and he is the only one within his family who has opted for Christianity. His quest for a satisfactory worldview, which eventually led him away from Islam and towards Christianity, has been long and, in view of his continued ambivalence about his decision, difficult. Now 42 years old, Tamaz grew up in what he calls a ‘true atheistic period,’ although he mentioned that his parents continued to observe Muslim rites even then. Tamaz himself however – at that time an enthusiastic pioneer – refused to participate in these practices and, as a result, his parents sometimes half-jokingly called him ‘our little heathen.’ After Tamaz completed high school, he entered the pedagogical institute in Batumi. He did not see this period as having influenced his later conversion, because “at the institute we didn’t even talk about religion, that was severely forbidden and besides, it was not interesting to me.” After four years Tamaz returned back to Khulo and married a girl from a neighboring village.

Shortly after my wedding in 1982 my wife and I visited Tbilisi. By chance we passed the Church of David. The doors of the church were open and the sounds of the choir filled the air. It struck me as very beautiful and I told my wife that I would look inside. It was one of those exciting moments. I didn’t
even know what rules to observe, and upon entering I was completely taken
back by the peace and beauty of the scene. It was as if I had found peace
and I understood that this was what I had been looking for all my life, that
this was part of my life, of my culture.

Upon their return to Khulo, his sudden interest in Christianity unavoidably slackened,
but when the Christian lyceum opened in 1991, Tamaz was among the first to take up
a position as a teacher (of Russian language). Although it was never required of
teachers to adopt Christianity, working at the lyceum, of course, involved being
exposed to Christianity.

During the period that I worked here, I came to a point - and I don’t say this
to portray myself as better than others - that step by step I returned to the old
religion to which my forefathers three centuries ago had adhered. The final
decision to be baptized was not an easy step, but the [historical] works and
sources I read convinced me that my forefathers had been Christians. In
1999, with the help of Father Iosebi I finally managed to break the barrier.
With his assistance I managed to rid myself of the Muslim rites and customs
that were in my skin and in my flesh and I returned to my native religion.
[...] My father on the whole agreed with my decision, more so than my
mother and wife. Of course there was some resistance from their side, but I
explained that my forefathers had also been Christians. Within my family
they talked badly about me, saying that I had been behaving differently
since I started working at the lyceum... but I remained true to my own path.

BADRI

When I met Badri for a dinner at his house in the upper part of Khulo,
the guestroom was not prepared yet so Badri decided to show me around his
neighborhood. Before long we stopped to look at the neighbor’s baby, who was just
being put in her crib. Badri zealously explained the tradition of the crib.

This crib is made in the traditional style which allowed it to be picked up
and carried away whenever there was a threat of danger. Another custom
was to hide a large knife under the mattress, so that the women could defend
themselves against the Turks. You see; the Turks could have attacked at any
moment, and people had to be constantly prepared. Our people struggled for
centuries to defend not only their families, but also their faith. As you see,
although my neighbors are Muslim, they still hate the Turks and have
preserved our Christian traditions.

Through this story of the crib, Badri revealed his convictions about religion as well as
some of his reasons for adopting Christianity even before I had a chance to ask him
about his conversion. Later that evening, Badri and I eventually got around to
discussing his conversion. He spoke about the period of time when he was a student
of veterinary medicine in Tbilisi.

At that time [1984] I visited churches as if they were museums. I did not
know anything and I did not have a strong faith, neither in Islam nor in
Christianity. At a certain moment my friends made plans to go out. I joined
them without asking where we were going until it became clear we were
going to attend a divine service. This was at the time of course strictly
forbidden. The KGB kept an eye on everything. After we had entered [the church] I watched how the others received blessings, I discovered how I had to act and decided to go myself as well. I was insecure of course; I didn’t know whether what I was doing was allowed. But the priest did not ask me any questions and painted a cross on my forehead with wax. After this event I went more often, also without my friends and every time I became more intrigued. I also started to read literature about Christianity.

After his studies, Badri returned to Khulo and had no further opportunities to continue the quest he had started. Badri became a teacher at the Christian lyceum in 1991, but he wasn’t baptized until the church in Khulo was opened in 1996. I asked him the reason for this delay.

You know, I didn’t baptize earlier because of my neighbors. They don’t even comprehend such a move; it is not part of their understanding. From their perspective Islam is the proper (sobstvennaia) religion, I felt that they were looking at me with strange eyes. Don’t think that it was an easy decision; there were unpleasant responses from neighbors who told me that I had made a big mistake. But I always replied that I had made the right decision, that I had chosen the path of our forefathers. My father had no problem with it, he was and still is a staunch communist, and although his parents were Muslim, he himself is practically an atheist.4

Badri envisioned an important role for the Georgian church in Ajaria. In his view the church should do everything in its powers to repair the misfits in society, “Only the Orthodox Church can do that,” Badri insisted.

On subsequent occasions Badri often complained about his illiterate neighbors who did not understand historical truth, “They can’t see,” Badri explained to me, “that Islam is only here because the Turks imposed it on us.” In a way Badri wanted to rid himself of this Muslim past, and his baptism can be seen as an act of ritual cleaning of what he sees as foreign – inauthentic – influences. Convinced that Ajaria’s future would be Christian, he placed his two children in the Christian gymnasium and later decided to have them baptized, without consulting his relatives. Not everyone was completely happy with his action, but Badri easily dismissed the differing views. Concerning his wife’s reaction he told me that she “started to cry when she heard that I had Giorgi and Nino [their children] baptized. She was upset because she feared that no one would want to marry our children. As if I would accept a son-in-law who is Muslim. It actually made the whole issue easier, this way only the good marriage candidates will be available to marry them.”

**KETEVA N**

Ketevan was still very young when her father died. She was raised by her mother and grandmother. She was about eleven years old when a neighbor (of Georgian-Christian origin) told Ketevan and her mother that she wanted to baptize

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4 It is important to note here that Badri’s grandparents and several of his uncles fell victim to the purges of the 1930s. They were sent to jail in Batumi and possibly deported, but nothing further is known about their fate.
the little girl. Although at that moment Ketevan was hardly able to grasp the meaning of her neighbor’s wishes, she said it was a turning point in her life and stressed that after this incident she became very interested in Christianity. When she was in the eleventh grade she wanted to be baptized. However her grandmother was against it and there was no way Ketevan could make such a decision without her grandmother’s consent. Nevertheless, during those years she began to weigh both religions against each other, “Although I was more inclined towards Christianity, something kept me away from it. It probably had to do with my upbringing and of course my grandmother played a role in this, but it was only recently that I came to understand that it was my past that was sitting in my heart, keeping me away from my religion.”

Only later, when Ketevan entered the school of music in Batumi and had lived with relatives in the city for several years, did she start to think more concretely about adopting Christianity.

My friends, although not all of them were Christians, shared that same lifestyle. At school we often sang religious songs and because of the acoustics we often practiced in the church. Then I realized that I wanted to lead this life, with these friends, but that would be impossible without being baptized. I then remembered what my neighbor had said ten years before. For me it was a confusing period. I even started to have dreams in which I entered the church to be baptized, but I always woke up before the ceremony was completed. I was unaware of it then, but now I know that these were messages from God [...] When I was in the second course we talked about the issue in my family. Mother was not against it or at least she didn’t say that she disagreed.

Her grandmother, however, was against Ketevan’s plan from the first moment, “Although she didn’t threaten me with reprimands, she never gave her approval. But she has come to accept it, and now she merely says that I shouldn’t forget about our religion,” which for Ketevan’s grandmother is obviously Islam. “Of course there are things I can’t say at home. My grandmother is very pious, she observes the Ramadan and she prays. For her it is too difficult to abandon Islam. I respect her, and therefore I hide my icons. In my bedroom I have a corner with religious items, but I only pray there when grandmother is not at home or late at night when they are asleep. My mother is not baptized, but when she sees how I pray from the heart, she sometimes wishes that she too would be Christian. Maybe when grandmother is gone she too will be baptized.”

MARINA

Marina explained to me that she had gone through a difficult period in her life. For several years she has lived separately from her husband, but, she pointed out, they were planning to get back together now. These last few years had been very hard for her and she stressed that this, to a large extent, should be blamed on the

5 Note that in this sentence two perspectives on history come together – the family history as symbolized by the grandmother – and a more abstract perspective on history, symbolized by ‘my religion’.
Muslim clergy: “They have tried everything to get us divorced, simply because they fear that [if we stayed married] it would accelerate the decline of Islam; they are afraid to lose their control over the community. But you know what is so interesting? My husband is now himself preparing to be baptized. He tells me that he is ready for it now.” Marina was one of the first people in Khulo who converted. This, in addition to the difficulties she experienced following her conversion, made her a kind of heroine for other converts – adding to the heroism of becoming a Christian. During a two-hour session we spoke about her experiences, but when we got to the point of her own decision, she seemed a bit nervous, as though afraid that I wouldn’t understand it right.

Of course it did not just come out of the blue. When I was young I often had to travel and I remember very well visiting a church in Sverdlovsk [in the late 1980s]. Then I already understood that only Christianity saves one’s soul. Later, when they opened the lyceum and Father Grigori came here [he became the director of the Christian lyceum] I got more involved. [Besides him] there were also a few nuns, and with one of them I often talked about my feelings. She would give me things to read and we discussed those. But at that time I could still not decide to make that step.

Marina hesitated for a second before she told me about what she presented as the crucial moment for making a difficult decision. She told me that at the time – in 1993 – she joined the priests from Khulo every two weeks on their trip to the church in Skhalta, where sermons were being given. After the sermon had ended during one of those trips, she continued:

I went for a little walk behind the church. It was March, still very cold and a bit foggy. You know, the forest there starts almost next to the churchyard. So I was walking around, captured in my own thoughts, when I saw something between two trees. It was as if there suddenly was a wide, shining path through the forest. On the middle of that road I saw an old man in a black cassock. He stood there, or rather was waiting, with a staff in one hand and a cross in the other. He looked up to me, and told me, ‘don’t wait any longer with what you have to do’. He turned around and disappeared as suddenly as he had arrived. Then I became aware that he was my ancestor, it was even as if I had known his face all along. You see, my ancestors used to be priests. The last priest in Ajaria was one of my forefathers. I know that it was he who had sent me on the right track. The next day I was baptized.

What the stories suggest is a continuing struggle for truth, history, and community, through a reinterpretation of the past as embedded in personal life.

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6 What I think she was referring to was that individual conversions of marginalized (divorced) individuals would be less threatening to the Muslim community than accepted conversions within families.
stories. The people who told their accounts portrayed their conversions as a difficult process, due to the social environment and to the moral considerations inherent in this change. They portrayed their adoption of Christianity as a form of resistance against false village opinions as Badri’s story demonstrated. They also showed that their conversion was a move against local power-balances as in the case of Marina who stressed the obstacles posed by the Muslim clergy. As another informant put it when he talked about his decision: “Traditions are important of course, but you have to differentiate between good and bad traditions. Sometimes 90 percent says that you have to comply while 10 percent says you don’t, but what if that 10 percent is right?” Converts talked about the difficulties in breaking away from that community and stressed that they had managed to remain true to their own path. In that sense the stories were typical for the situation in Khulo where the relation between the Muslim and Christian realms is not only tense but also murky. Converts must learn to deal with the opposing and intertwined forces of these religious realms. The conversions should not just be seen as opportunistic adaptations to the new times or as uncritical appropriations of hegemonic discourses, but as deliberate choices embedded in broader political and economic contexts, choices that moreover had great impact on personal lives.

Narratives of conversion: Continuity, enemies and progress

The conversion stories do not necessarily reflect peoples’ ‘real’ motives for adopting Christianity, nor do they necessarily explain how their conversions came about, but they do tell us something of how new Christians explain and defend their decision to be baptized. Put differently, the language of the stories and the recurring signs and symbols in them suggest how conversions are imbedded in wider discourses. They also display the relationship between religious and other identities. I will comment on the narrative aspects of the stories by drawing out common threads and elaborating on these by using additional stories for support. The goal is not only to show that the conversion stories are related to wider discourses – which is more than obvious – but also to try and find out how they are related. To achieve this, I will focus on those recurring themes in the stories that are important for understanding what conversion entails in relation to national and private arenas.

CONTINUITY

Although non-Christians in Ajaria frequently employed the word ‘conversion’ (perexodit) to denote the actions of new Christians, many converts (I will continue to employ the term) did not use the word because of the unwanted connotation of change.7 What they had experienced in their spiritual life was not to be

7 New Christians did not like the term conversion because of its connotation of change and rather talked about ‘being baptized.’ The Muslim clergy also did not use ‘conversion’ because they didn’t
understood as a personal change or disruption, but rather as a regaining of the true self in Christianity. Instead of a change, the ritual act was presented as expulsion of inauthentic influences. This was evident when Tamaz said, “I managed to rid myself of the Muslim rites and customs that were in my skin and in my flesh.” While ridding the new Christians of inauthentic influences the conversion at the same time enabled a return to – not a change towards – Christianity. One informant, a young woman of 22 years old expressed this notion point blank, saying: “I don’t have the feeling that I am switching from one to another religion, no I have returned back to my native religion.”

What does this ‘return’ to Christianity imply? In many stories it quite bluntly pointed to primordial notions of national and ethnic identity. Tamaz, for example, stressed that Ajaria was historically Christian and that Christianity was the religion to which his forefathers adhered. He portrayed his conversion not as a change to something new, but as an interrupted continuity of Christianity that had remained part of his - Georgian - culture. These notions were made meaningful by referring to the distant past, a past in which the local population was Christian. History clearly provided an important source of approval for the new Christians, who presented their conversions as a continuation of the original faith of their predecessors. This aspect of continuity was true not only for the accounts presented above, but also recurred in fleeting comments made on the subject. During one short interaction a new Christian said the following about his conversion: “It’s simple; if you read history then you start to understand that our religion is Christianity. Everything of value in Ajaria, the bridges, castles, churches, they were all built in the 12th century. And by whom were they built? By us, Georgians!”

References to the heydays of the Bagrati kingdom (12th and 13th centuries AD) were made very often. The relation between this distant past and the present was portrayed as self-evident. Verbally connecting the 12th and the 21st centuries by placing them next to each other into one sentence was generally enough to carry the message across. In many accounts, it seemed as if the 12th century happened only yesterday. How the eight centuries in between were explained away was not a matter of great interest, although some referred implicitly to the issue. For Vakhtangi for example, the historical realities continued in a straight line up to the present. These realities could not be denied nor forgotten, although they had been repressed for centuries: “It is the Georgian soul that pulls us to Christianity. Of course, most people say that they are Muslim but that is just a cover, by way of their lifestyle and customs they are drawn towards Christianity. If you would be able to have a look in their soul you would find out that they truly are Christians.”

The idea that Islam had only had a superficial impact on the local population was also voiced by Badri when, in the story presented previously, he pointed out to
me all the signs of Christianity that had survived centuries of Ottoman rule and the 'superficial' Islamization of the area. That the narrative of an ineradicable Christian past resonates very well with the ideas of the converts is obvious, it provides affirmation for their decision to adopt Christianity. By implication this meant an adoption of national rhetoric as revealed in scholarly works about the history of the region. These books were often presented as proofs of their righteousness. As one informant commented: "I have read those books, I have read them all, and I discovered that our ancestors were Christians. A well-thinking person can not ignore that."

But whereas this historical narrative may be unproblematic in the larger part of Georgia which is often presented as a Christian island surrounded by Islam, Ajaria had been incorporated in the Muslim realm for several centuries. This difference makes the historic narrative sketched above simultaneously more problematic and more crucial for the involved. Indeed, I propose that Ajaria's location on the frontier of the Muslim and Christian realms is an important factor in understanding why new Christians so zealously embraced nationalist historic rhetoric.

The idea behind the numerous statements on historic truth then is that the composite of Georgian culture and Christianity had been obscured - but not essentially changed - by Ottoman rule. From this same perspective it is understood that at present, through reading books about history and increasing one's knowledge of history it has become possible to 'uncover' this 'covered reality,' a reality that according to new Christians had been hiding behind the superfluous image of Islam. Regaining the true self through history is an important element in most stories, an element that is probably so vital because of the fact that it is problematic. When people stressed continuity of the earliest past with the present, they could only do so by putting four centuries into brackets. In other words, these four centuries or rather the memories and traditions of a Muslim past had to be erased or explained away.

ENEMIES

When new Christians talk about history or culture, it is often in opposition to the 'other.' This 'other' manifested itself in speech as 'the Turk,' 'the Ottoman,' or more broadly as 'Muslims' and was presented as radically different from the 'self'. The 'other' is simultaneously a religious and a cultural 'other.' This is well captured in a statement of a young woman who had been baptized several years earlier: "When I read the Quran I do not recognize anything, it is not about our people, not about Georgians. By contrast, when I started to read the Bible I recognized everything, everything struck me as familiar. The bible is about people like me." In this short comment, Islam and Christianity are neatly opposed. The bible is presented as a book about Georgians. It is contrasted with the Quran whose messages which are portrayed as alien. Moreover, Muslims are thought of as having done a great injustice to the Georgians generally and to the inhabitants of Ajaria specifically, as the next comment shows. "I used to have nothing to do with religion; I was a simple farmer, although once in a while I went to the old [closed] church out of
curiosity [...]. But I did read a lot, for example that the Turks had cut off 300 heads and thrown them into the Chorokhi [river] and then sent a message to Skhalta that the same thing would happen there if people didn’t submit to Islam.”

Similar stories about the cruelties of the ‘Turks’ or the ‘Ottoman Empire’ were repeated over and over again. They were exchanged during dinners and discussed over wine-sessions. In addition to the historical injustice that the ‘other’ had inflicted, the ‘other’ was also perceived as a threat to present-day realities, judging from stories, like the following, that discussed the danger of renewed influence of ‘the Turk.’ “[One day] a whole group arrived from Turkey, they called themselves hodjas, but in fact they were secret agents. They studied the situation here, about how people related to religion and the state. Of course the Muslims here are interested in religion in Turkey, but it turned out that the [hodjas] were agents, they wanted to restart the process that took place here 400 years ago.” Although this particular story was ‘known’ by many, the numerous references that were made to publications and scholarly works on the subject points to the active role of Soviet ideology in the creation of an enemy. Whereas part of this Soviet ideology was denounced as propaganda, the rhetoric on the ‘cruel Muslim past’ had remained an active and important part of their collective memory.

Defining who the ‘other’ actually refers to is problematic because the stories are hardly ever about personal encounters with the typical ‘other,’ that is Turks. Indeed, few of the converts who made these comments had ever been to Turkey or had met with citizens of Turkey. The fact that story of the ‘hodja-agents’ was so well known in the Christian community made me wonder what the hidden messages of the story might be. Why was this story repeated, distributed and celebrated? Perhaps it is the little note in the above comment saying “of course the Muslims here are interested in religion in Turkey,” which indirectly suggested that the ‘other’ could also come from the inside, from the Muslims living in Ajaria.

A first insight might be gained if we examine how the ‘other’ is related to conversion. Another look at the story of Badri might justify the hypothesis that the act of being baptized was a form of ritual cleaning from ‘a past contaminated by Turks.’ He stressed that even his Muslim neighbors act in a Christian way and hate the Turks just as much as he does. As he sees it, their mistake is their failure to conclude that Islam is not their religion, but that it is instead a religion of disliked foreigners, the Turks. What this suggests is that the ‘other’ is very near and, in fact, resides in one’s own household, family or street. Doubts about who the ‘other’ is might also be found in the next statement from Marina, “The most important thing is that we never married Turks. It tells a lot about how people here related to the Turks,

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8 I heard the story about the Turks cutting off heads of those unwilling to adopt Islam from at least five informants, sometimes the name of the river or village was changed and it was sometimes added that the rivers had been red with blood for days on end.
6 Surmanidze, probably the original source of this story, claimed to know that the hodjas were secret agents because he had seen them spend the night in the mosque, which according to him was against Muslim law.
about the fact that we were always one indivisible nation.” She referred here to the 19th century and Soviet publications about that period. Although probably largely correct in that the local community did on the whole not marry with Turks (who were not living in the area anyway), what was left out and needed to be left out is that ‘we’ - our parents and grandparents - were Muslims. It omitted that the inhabitants of Ajaria had largely abandoned the Georgian language in favor of Turkish at the end of the nineteenth century, and that they had fought with great fervor against the ‘heathen’ Christians.

The problem is that the historical intertwining of different, sometimes opposing, identities in Ajaria challenges the ideal of a cultural, ethnic and religious ‘other.’ Having their roots in a community that had been Muslim for generations and opting for becoming ‘true’ Christian Georgians, it seemed as if they had to exorcize the ‘other’ from their own past and their own community. Instead of just getting rid of some alien influences, it was this sense of ‘self’ that needed to be purified. I would suggest that part of the reason for the demonization of the ‘other’ stems from the ambiguous position that the New Christians have in relation to their local communities on the one hand, and the Georgian nation on the other. I will pursue this point further, but not before having commented on the theme of progress, which is even more clearly related to the life trajectories of converted families than the two themes discussed so far.

PROGRESS

In the previous sections I argued that conversion was imagined as a return to a glorious Christian past and that the stories that were told about becoming Christian underlined their national affiliation through an oppositional ‘other.’ Important as these aspects were to legitimate the personal adoption of Christianity, the ‘past’ and the ‘other’ also played an important role in ideas about the region as a whole. New Christians endorsed the idea that the ‘backwardness’ of Ajaria could be eliminated by the ‘return’ to Christianity. Through imaginings of the progressive nature of Christianity and its favorable comparison with the ‘backward Turks,’ Christianity contained a promise, a promise of progress and an unambiguous (re)connection of Ajaria with ‘civilized’ Georgian society.

New Christians, but also people without clear religious predilections, worried about the possible strength of Islam. One person told me, “there simply can’t [shouldn’t] be a future for Islam. It is a dark, dark religion. It turns people into slaves of Allah.” An acquainted lecturer from the university of Batumi similarly invoked the idea of Islam’s backwardness. After we had an (unsuccessful) encounter with an imam, he expressed his worries about the activities of Muslim leaders, “You know what would happen if they were in control? They would send us straight back to Arabia of the seventh century, to Muhammad and his camels.” The alleged regressive characteristics of Islam were placed in unambiguous contrast with the achievements of Christianity. Once, when visiting one of the medieval bridges across the river
Acharistsqali, a Christian acquaintance told me the following: “Can you imagine, they [the Ottomans or Turks] ruled here for four centuries and during that period not a single bridge or monument was constructed, whereas these ingenious bridges were built already in the twelfth century when Ajaria was Christian. Architects would not be able to construct them even today.”

The medieval monuments and bridges were symbols of a desirable and unambiguous connection with the rest of Georgia. What the new Christians aimed for was to be part of ‘civilized’ Georgian society. As such, the ‘return’ to a Christian past contained promises for the future.

The new Christians clearly saw themselves as forerunners of an unavoidable process that over time would encompass all Ajarians. As Inga, a young woman of twenty-five commented: “For me Christianity started as a kind of hobby, but now I want to make it official. That is just natural, I think that in a few years everyone will be Christian and it is better that way.” For Inga, Christianity was natural and better, and better not only because Christianity was indivisible from the Georgian character, but also because of the civilizing role it has played as claimed by nationalists. For many converts, the return to Christianity is vital for alleviating the backward position of the region.

The clergy actively appropriated these ideas in their missionary efforts in Ajaria. But, as a result of this appropriation the clergy saw themselves in a difficult position as the idea of ‘progress’ was not easily compatible with the message of Orthodoxy. As Father Miriani explained:

Many people here think that Christianity is progressive. Well, from a certain perspective they may be right. In the third and fourth century we had already constructed splendid churches, cathedrals and monasteries, while when you look at Southern Georgia during the three centuries of Ottoman rule, the area remained backwards. For the people here this proves Christianity’s progressive nature. But, in essence, Georgian Orthodoxy is about the original message of the bible.

Father Miriani’s statement illustrates a tension between the clergy, who stressed the authentic roots of their faith, and the new converts who stressed the modern and civilizing role of the Church. However, for most new Christians this tension did not exist, they simply adopted a Christianity that was an embodiment of modernity.

My assistant and colleague Teimuri also witnessed the modernizing force of Christianity in aspects of daily life, like the way people dressed. Not long after we first arrived in Khulo we walked through the center when Teimuri remarked: “Wow, it is just like Paris here,” referring to a pretty girl whose shirt accentuated her breasts. Jokingly he added, “no wonder people are converting to Christianity, if you compare this to the dark cloths that they have to wear in the [Muslim] villages.” Whether it was his imagination or not, the idea that Christianity enabled wearing ‘modern’

10 In at least one case this tension lead to a conflict between Father Miriani and one of the converts who demanded that the church take a much more active participation in alleviating the ‘backwardness’ of Ajaria, preferably through forced conversions.
clothes and adopting a ‘modern’ lifestyle was an idea that several new Christians held. This was obvious in the warnings people gave me when I went on a fieldtrip to a village higher in the mountains. There, several people told me, life was backward. When I returned many people (especially women) wanted to know whether the women in the mountains really wore veils and whether or not these women really did not speak to men outside their families. “Well, at least here we have some civilization,” Ketevan mentioned once when I returned to Khulo. “For you it may not seem much, but for me [it is different]. I am really glad that here at least I can talk with whom I want and dress the way I like.”

Christianity embodied a modern life that the new Christians were pursuing. This feature supports the argument of Werth (2000: 514) concerning the case of conversions between Islam and Christianity among the Tatars: “Rather than coding religion as indisputably ‘traditional’ and construing modernity in terms of religion’s demise and transcendence, [religion] especially in a colonial context, can serve as a vehicle for inducting subjects into modernity.” But as we have seen in the preceding chapter, Christianity’s role was, in this respect, not all that different from that of Islam, especially for those Muslims who had studied in Turkey.

The modernizing force of conversion and the important role of education are clearly related in this line of argumentation. Most converts would mention that they were from educated families and stressed that they had read not only works of history, but also the Russian and German classics. The argument of how education and Christianity were linked worked in two ways. On the one hand, education was supposed to raise the awareness that Christianity was the true religion (for Georgians) and to help Ajarians discover that had been living with a false consciousness.11 On the other hand, education was meant to provide people with freedom and to allow children to make choices for themselves.

The theme of progress was also evoked when Christians stressed that better education would automatically precipitate conversion, which is visible in the next quote: “If a person is educated and so is his family, then s/he shouldn’t have a problem to arrive at certain conclusions from reviewing our history. And if they are educated and understanding, then they shouldn’t forbid their children to become Christian.” Likewise converts said that although they had met resistance, it was ‘the educated people’ who had supported them. According to the converts, educated people recognized the importance of Christianity in this project of modernization. The importance of the idea of progress, of catching up with the rest of Georgia, the stress on education and ‘modern’ lifestyles did of course not lead to the same conclusions by everyone. Rather, it was a specific group for whom these topics were of particular relevance. By analyzing how the themes are related to their personal lives we will better understand why they mattered so much for the involved.

11 Compare also the statement that Bishop Dmitri made during one conversation: “People have been living in ignorance for centuries; they were suppressed by the Turks and later by the communists. Now they are free to learn about their true selves.”
Baptisms and biography

The numerous comments on the antiquity of the Georgian nation, the references to centuries of Ottoman oppression as well as the claims of the bible as a book about Georgians illustrated the importance of nationalist (and Soviet) discourses in legitimizing converts' decisions to adopt Christianity. However, the comments by themselves fail to explain why these discourses found resonance with those who converted in the first place. Nor can they explain why some people appropriated these discourses while others clearly rejected them. Nor does it explain why the group that appropriated the Georgian-Christian narrative is growing, a question that awaits the next chapter.

This unresolved dilemma kept not only me but also my colleague and assistant Teimuri intrigued. What was the meaning of all these stories about tradition and history? Why were people so obsessed with them? At a certain point, Teimuri got frustrated with it, arguing that collecting all those stories wouldn’t get us anywhere:

They all say that in the bible it is written like this, but when you would confront a Muslim with those ideas he would simply point to his Qur'an and tell you that there it is written in another, the right way. The Christian will say: our ancestors were also Christian, and then the Muslim will say: My grandfather and grandmother have taught me like this [the opposite]. Perhaps a Muslim might confirm that his ancestors were Christian, but he doesn't feel it, he only knows it. For him it is just historical reality, nothing more.

The basic problem was that by collecting stories and verbal statements, we learned nothing about what made people choose between opposing discourses, only about how they legitimated their choices. Asking explicitly about the reasons did not solve the issue. On the contrary, when attempting to do so, all we got were circular arguments concerning historical truth like “I was baptized because the first Georgians were Christians, and thus Christianity is our religion.”

However, the obsession with continuity started to make sense when compared with statements of those new Christians whose conversion had not been problematic within their family or neighborhood. For example, when I interviewed a new Christian who was baptized six years after his father had adopted Christianity, all he had to say about it was, “What can I say, everyone in our family is Christian and that is how I became convinced that Christianity is the true religion. But even if he [my father] hadn’t made that choice I would have pursued in the same direction, because Orthodoxy is the true faith.” Similarly, converts in Lower Ajaria, where the process of conversion had proceeded much further, were often more moderate in the way they mobilized history, using it merely as an affirmative source rather than as a causing force. In short, the explicit appropriation of nationalist sentiment was less important in cases of conversion that were not disruptive of social ties. 12 If the social

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12 The appropriation of nationalist discourse was in those cases less important when talking about conversion, but could be very prominent when discussing other themes, like for example, ethnicity or
position of converts influenced how they talked about their conversion, then the reason for explicit appropriation of nationalist discourses and the obsession with continuity could well be located in the life trajectories of early converts in Upper Ajaria. By exploring how the themes of ‘return to the original faith,’ the ‘demonization of the Other’ and the stress on the ‘progressive nature of Christianity’ are related to personal lives, we might find more clues for why specific people made the decision to be baptized.

THE NEW CHRISTIANS IN KHULO

Although the conversion stories aptly illustrate how ideas about nation, state and religion are integrated in personal biographies, it is important to stress that the new believers do not represent the ‘average’ Ajarian and, in fact, are partly outsiders to their own communities. Some additional information on Khulo and the ‘distribution’ of new Christians over its territory and their social position in the town is needed at this point.

The four persons whose conversion stories have been presented at length earlier in this chapter – Tamaz, Badri, Ketevan, and Marina – lived in two of the twelve neighborhoods of Khulo, and were, as such, representative of the uneven distribution of new Christians over its territory. In fact, almost all new Christians turned out to live in just three neighborhoods, Daba Khulo (center) and two other neighborhoods, Dekanashvilebi and Kedlebi. These three neighborhoods bordered on each other, forming a kind of triangle extending from the center northwards. Apart from the fact that these neighborhoods were located in or near the center with its more dynamic pace of life, these neighborhoods had some other characteristics that made them different from the nine remaining neighborhoods. Whereas most other neighborhoods consisted of just a few family groups who had lived there for at least five generations, the more central districts showed a different pattern. Although in Daba Khulo, Dekanashvilebi and Kedlebi there were several families who prided themselves on having lived there for many generations, the majority of its inhabitants consisted of families or individual members who moved from various mountain villages to the district center between the 1930s and the 1970s, when Khulo was expanding as an administrative center for the region.

The means of living in Daba Khulo, Dekanashvilebi and Kedlebi were also different from the rest of the neighborhoods. Although there used to be kolkhozes in the latter two neighborhoods, most people were employed elsewhere, either in the two clothing factories, the service sector or in the town administration. This pattern is even more evident when reviewing the social backgrounds of new Christians. Among the 64 adult new Christians about whom I have sufficient information, there

world politics.

13 In fact when I write ‘early convert’ I have in mind practically all converts in Khulo, precisely because they (still?) form a minority. The exceptions are children whose parents already had converted.

14 In the other neighbourhoods, the majority of the population was employed on the kolkhozes.
were twenty-two teachers (34 percent), six civil servants working at the town or raion administration (9 percent), five nurses (8 percent), four physicians and other medical specialists (6 percent), while the remaining twenty-seven people had professions such as housewife, sportsman or book-keeper, or had formerly held a position (mostly middle management) at one of the factories in town. What is interesting about these figures is that they almost solely involve representatives of the educated 'middle class,' while farmers and technicians (former kolkhozniki) are virtually absent among the new Christians.

The middle class families in general attributed much value to education and sent their children to Batumi, Tbilisi or other cities to attend university. Members from these families took up positions in the state structure and often lived part of their lives outside Khulo, mostly in urban areas in Georgia. Moreover, they have all seen their social and economic positions deteriorate during the last ten years. The clothing factories closed their gates not long after the Soviet collapse. And although a large percentage managed to retain their position in the administration or in the medical and educational institutes, their wages have decreased so dramatically that they necessarily fell back to income generating strategies which combined official positions and other activities such as small-trading.\(^\text{15}\)

In short, the new Christians were often people who moved 'in' and 'up' during the Soviet period. They were, in a sense, the embodiment of the new 'modern' life that started during the Soviet Union and obtained explicit Christian characteristics in the wake of Soviet disintegration. But this 'modern' life had become problematic for the involved families, since many after moving 'in' and 'up' during the Soviet period, had subsequently fallen 'down' when the Soviet state collapsed.

**LIFE COURSES**

One more look at the conversion stories of Tamaz, Badri and Ketevan may help us further understand the patterns sketched above. In the stories, the decision to adopt Christianity is presented as a turning point for individual lives, as the moment when people saw the light, which brought them on the righteous path. But what is more relevant for our purpose here is to note that the baptisms coincided, or were preceded by, other crucial episodes in the life-courses of the involved. Tamaz, Badri and Ketevan had each lived for considerable time outside their own community, whether it was Tbilisi or Batumi. During those periods they were initiated into a different social environment. Although Tamaz rightfully observed that when he lived in Batumi an atheist atmosphere predominated, his stay in the city nevertheless implied a way of life that was radically different from that in the small community in which he was raised. Whereas perhaps only for Ketevan the period outside the Khulo meant a factual encounter with Christianity, all three were exposed

\(^{15}\) The decline in living standards have been more abrupt for this group than for most former kolkhozniki (especially in the less densely populated neighbourhoods) who were able to reclaim their grandparents' land and manage to sustain a modest livelihood.
to a city-life that embodied Georgian culture and that later was tightly reconnected to Christianity, a life of which they wanted to be a part. Negative attitudes held by other Georgians concerning Ajaria and Ajarians sometimes also played an important role as revealed by the following remark of an Ajarian man who had studied in Tbilisi in the 1980s.

Someone made the suggestion to visit a church, and that exact moment I felt that everyone was looking at me with strange eyes, and the topic was changed. Then I said, 'if you think that I keep Islam somewhere inside of me, then you are just flat wrong, as if I don’t respect Christianity. I am probably more Georgian than you are... So we went to visit a church.

The emphasis on encounters and social environment does not negate the sincerity of the converts’ belief in Christianity – and there is, for example, no reason to doubt Ketevan’s belief in a Christian god – but it suggests that their life-courses made them more susceptible to the Christian message. In other words, because of their experiences they found a connection with Christianity that enabled them to make this religion their own. The prevalent idea among some converts that people only need to be educated and then automatically will adopt Christianity is therefore true enough, albeit in a slightly different way than they see it. It is not education as such, but the content of this education (with a strong focus on Georgian history) and the context in which this education takes place (higher education is always located on Georgian ‘Christian’ territory), that makes ‘educated people’ more receptive to the Christian message.

There were a few other seemingly unrelated characteristics in these genealogies. It turned out that in several cases the families with baptized members had also been victims of the purges of the Stalin period and in a significant number of cases one or more parents of the new Christians had died prematurely. Ketevan, who was introduced above, had grown up in a family without a father and a grandfather, whereas Badri’s grandfather and uncles were arrested in the 1930s, never to return home. That deportations and arrest might have had some influence on later religious change was also suggested by the data on the social background of the converts. Of 36 converts about whom I had extensive biographical information, ten turned out to be members of ‘repressed’ families. This finding was not all that surprising, since it was especially the middle class, the state functionaries, who fell victim to the repression in the 1930s and 1950s. Apart from the overlap between repressed families and middle class families – who were more exposed to national rhetoric – there are several other possibilities how ‘repression’ might have influenced later conversion.

Akaki, a sixty year-old history teacher who converted several years ago mentioned:

My grandfather, father and three uncles were imprisoned in 1937.
Grandfather was killed there, while my uncles and father returned home [...] Father was always scared. He knew Turkish and Arabic, but he never prayed, he didn't carry out any rituals, he wanted to make sure that nothing would inhibit his children from reaching a prosperous life.

In this account, but also in the case of Badri who described his father as a staunch Stalinist, this fear about possible imprisonment resulted in a strict atheist atmosphere
at home, and explicit adoption of Soviet lifestyles. What it suggests as well is that education and repression both caused the family to be only partly integrated in the local community. Whether the convert’s parents had been victims of repression, or whether the convert had spent several years away from the nuclear family to study, it meant that the family members were partly outsiders to their community and family and thus had a relatively large social and conceptual ‘freedom’ to explore alternative paths. Or, arguing from the opposite angle, they experienced less pressure to comply with local values and norms. As for repressed families, they were often treated as inferior long after their rehabilitation. This, and perhaps also the feeling among the repressed that the local community had betrayed them, in a way pushed them out of the moral community.16

Here I have identified three factors that contribute to religious change; education, lack of compactness of the genealogical group, and the social and geographical mobility of its members. The resulting weak social ties and being partly outsider to the local communities meant that the converts were in a sense less inclined to comply with local customs and traditions and more apt to conform to what was seen as ‘modern’ or ‘civilized’ Georgian society. In the case of education, it basically meant stronger integration and more direct exposure to Georgian and thus Christian lifestyles. But while on the one hand making religious change more likely, this ambiguous position in the local community and sometimes even in relation to family members was even enlarged by the act of baptism, thus further challenging the social status of new Christians.

Baptized Georgian: Mobilizing ancestors and other kin

In the previous section I elaborated on how national discourses and personal lives converged. There is one theme, however, that recurred in almost every single narrative, but upon which I have not commented yet: ancestors. They matter so much because they enable new Christians to link the national discourses with their personal lives in a very poignant way. Perhaps the most striking example was in the story of Marina who decided to be baptized after she received a message from her great-great-etc-grandfather that the time had come for her to make a decision about her faith. Although this was a particularly striking incident, it was not the only case in which ancestors literally showed the way to Christianity. Otari, a Christian with rather radical ideas about the need for forced proselytization, had similar experiences with his great-grandmother.

16 One family confirmed this hypothesis too well to pass unmentioned. In this family, three out of five daughters had married priests. The family stood not only ‘outside’ the community but was also disrespected because the mother divorced two husbands and was said (by other Christians) to have been highly promiscuous.
I remember that when I was young she would talk about the time that our family moved from Imereti [region north of Ajaria] to Khulo [...] On June 9th, 1984, she appeared to me in a dream and in that dream she asked me: ‘what are you waiting for? Go to Tsioni’ [central Cathedral in Tbilisi]. The next day I went there and was baptized.

Whereas in Marina’s story the forefather was a priest, in Otari’s account the grandmother talked about the family moving from a Christian part of Georgia, thus connecting the family to a Christian tradition. Yet another informant, Vakhtangi, made a similar claim stating “from childhood onwards I was oriented towards Christianity because of my grandmother, who had told me that we had Christian predecessors.”

What is it that makes ancestors such important metaphors for, and symbolic actors in, contemporary religious change? Given the emphasis on history and the negative experiences with the local community, it is not hard to start seeing why ancestors are so important. On one level, they prove that Christianity is not something new, but actually something that has always existed. This is not only important for the converts themselves, but also for the church which has to counter (local) accusations that they manipulate the youth and talk them into converting. It is thus not accidental that the clergy often prided themselves on having been able to convert the elderly. Bishop Dimitri told me: “every day we have new baptisms, sometimes even people aged seventy or eighty rediscover their true (istinaia) religion.” Later I was shown the video of the ritual act to which he referred, which showed the baptism of an eighty-year old man from Khulo. The video showed how the old man received the sacrament of baptism. Then he was interviewed saying: “I am very happy that I was baptized today, the way that my ancestors were also baptized. I have dreamt about being baptized Georgian for a long time and when I die, I will die as the Georgians used to die, as a Christian.” His words were quite similar to what others might have said, although his statement of being “baptized Georgian” was a very explicit example of the connection between national and religious sentiment. For the clergy, however, the power of this fragment – the reason that they recorded and proudly showed it – was the man’s old age, which reduced the gap between past and the present.

Grandparents were also useful in reassuring converts of the rightfulness of their decision. When I joined Nugzar – a befriended professor of ethnology – on a visit to the bishop a conversation unfolded between them in which Nugzar told the bishop of the fact that his grandfather had been hodja and had been shot by the communists. Hereupon the bishop replied: “I am sure that your decision [to baptize] would have made your grandfather very happy. He himself didn’t have that opportunity at the time, you know.”

Investing old people, and more distantly ancestors, with the wish to have been able to carry out their true Christian nature reduces historical religious disruption. Ancestors thus very powerfully convey the message of continuity of the Christian faith, and they link the issue of faith to that of nationality. Ancestors root
people in particular soils and give a moral and historical weight to nationalist and religious claims. In essence, they make nationalist – and religious – claims more tangible and concrete by linking family-relations to national ideals. They personalize a nationalist narrative of history. By stating that it was our family that was Christian, our family that was forced to become Muslim, and by referring to grandmothers who reminisced about the family being Christian, the martyrdom of the Georgian nation is reconceptualized on the level of kinship.

For the new Christians, ancestors have also more concrete roles to play. For one, they provide a legitimation of their choice to be baptized. Teimuri rightly observed that historical knowledge is not enough to effect religious change. But when framed in a narrative of family and tradition, the converts’ decision at least starts to become meaningful. Ancestors are indeed not only important as historical figures, but also as familial figures that bind family and community together. They, in essence, give weight to the claim that converts are re-included into the original communities rather than being renegades to their community. The ancestor in a way accomplishes what ideology cannot accomplish, that is to root people in time and restore interrupted genealogies.

The ancestor is thus the ideal figure to repair disruptions in locality. S/he is not alone in this task, but often assisted by other kin (especially old ones such as parents and grandparents) who are similarly employed to soften the disruptions caused by the act of baptism.

Mother would also have adopted Christianity but she is afraid that for her things will end if she does. But at the same time she has icons hanging in her room and she has a picture in which she stands in the middle of her icons. She reads Arabic and has read Muslim books, but she is more inclined towards Christianity.

Like in this example, stories about individual baptisms were often accompanied by statements about relatives and friends that indicated that the convert did not stand alone in his actions or ideas concerning religion. The importance of this theme was also obvious in the stories presented earlier. Ketevan for example mentioned that her mother ‘sometimes wished to be Christian,’ while one of the first things that Marina told me was that her husband was now ‘ready to be baptized.’ Similarly, Badri stressed that his neighbors, despite being Muslim, really hated the Turks. Whether these statements really matched the intentions or attitudes of the family members cannot be answered, but what it makes clear is the need to find a place – a new place – in a community that has disapproved of one’s decision to convert, preferably through changing that community.

In short, ancestors translate national discourses to the level of personal experience. Ancestors and other kin also assist the converts in healing the disruption that their baptism caused. Moreover, ancestors evict the ‘other’ from the ‘self,’ out of

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17 This line of reasoning is taken from Verdery (1999:41) who argues that ancestors are vital to national ideology. Similarly, Gingrich (1995) discusses the predominance of ancestors in frontier myths of orientalism on the Balkans.
the local community. They drive out the enemy from within. But sometimes their power is insufficient. Badri, who had always presented himself as a confident convert who aimed to restore historical justice in Ajaria, talked less steadily after a few bottles of vodka. I will end with this last passage from my notebook, which hopefully reflects something of the moral dilemma and the ambiguity in the loyalties that are experienced by many newly baptized Ajarians.

[That] night he was drunk again, at times he murmured prayers, spoke about the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He took the cross from under his shirt and kissed it. "My mother is a Muslim, I am a Christian ... Of course we both believe that our religion is the true one. She is a good woman, how can I even think that she is wrong ... It hurts to think that after our death we won't be together." Then he started to pray, "forgive our sins, forgive my mother, let it not happen that one goes to heaven and the other goes to hell."