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

Pelkmans, M.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Dynamics of Religious Change

The hard and fast line between Islam and Christianity as presented in atlases and recent theories about ‘the clash of civilizations’ is rather fuzzy on the frontier, spurred with contradictions and ambiguity. However, ambiguity is not all that can be said about the new religious dynamics in Ajaria. In this chapter, I aim to theorize about religious change in Ajaria without losing sight of the particularities of the frontier. The main question, in this case study, was how Ajarians dealt with the renewed visibility of religion and how changes in their religious affiliation were related to the Soviet and pre-Soviet past. Instead of seeing religious renewals as ‘a return to the past’ or ‘instances of creativity’ disconnected from historical trajectories, I argued that changes in the religious sphere should be understood as continuous struggles that are constrained by temporal and spatial characteristics of the region and its inhabitants.

Contrary to the predicted return to pre-Soviet religious traditions, we have seen that when state-atheism imploded, the forms in which religion re-entered the public sphere were not (or only indirectly) related to the pre-Soviet past. I argued that to understand contemporary religious renewals, one has to take into account the profound impact of Soviet modernization as well as the gradual dissemination of Georgian national ideology. But although these changes were asserted from the federal and national centers (Moscow and Tbilisi) to the periphery (Ajaria), the relation between these poles was more complex than such a simple model would suggest. To see religious change as part of a process extending from the national center to its periphery, risks underestimating the complexities and ambiguities that bespeak religious change at the frontier. Both asymmetrical power relations and the active involvement of ‘frontiersmen’ in incorporating and rejecting external cultural schemata need to be considered. I will illustrate the complexity of religious change by first summarizing the main trends and then comment on the ambiguities and seeming contradictions that were observed at the micro level.

The dominant trend - the gradual shift from Islam towards Christianity - can be understood by referring to the workings of institutional structures and the dissemination of national ideology during the Soviet era. Although the ‘assimilation’ of Ajarians was not completed, the mechanisms through which it was advanced severely handicapped post-1990 Islamic renewal. During the Soviet period, nationalist Georgian discourse was so effective in Ajaria because Georgian national identity was (at least partly) disconnected from religion. In other words, because religion was banned from the public domain, Ajarians could come to see themselves as Georgians. They could be Georgians in public while remaining Muslim at home. This state of
affairs changed in the late 1980s when Georgian nationality was tightly reconnected to Christianity. In the emerging nationalist discourse, Georgian and Muslim identities became incompatible, creating a dilemma for Ajarians who saw themselves as both. This effectively muted Muslim voices and curtailed Islamic renewal in Ajaria. Moreover, because of the incompatibility of professional careers and pursuing an Islamic lifestyle, Islam had become increasingly a religion of the lower echelons – of kolkhozniki and low-educated workers. This trend isolated Muslim groups from the economic, political and intellectual elite of Ajaria and consequently resulted in a further marginalization of Islam.

In contrast, proponents of Christianity could cash in on societal changes facilitated by Soviet rule and on a nationalist ideology that imagined Georgia as a coherent Christian nation surrounded by dangerous and different Muslim peoples. The fact that regional elites either had been Christians all along or relatively quickly converted to Christianity further contributed to the ‘Christianization’ of the public sphere. These elites used their influence to establish Christian schools and to introduce bible studies as an obligatory subject in ‘secular’ education. Moreover, they excluded Muslim voices from the media and scholarly writings. As was illustrated in the previous chapter, recently converted Ajarians effectively appropriated the nationalist discourse and in doing so contributed to the acceleration of Christian expansion. Conversion followed distinct patterns and was embedded in changing social and political configurations. In Khulo, the first converts to Christianity were representatives of the middle class and conversion was especially strong among those families who lacked a strong cohesion and were weakly integrated in the local community. Because of the crucial positions they held in public institutions, their conversion added to an ideological environment in which many people – especially the youth – abstain from identifying with Islam and increasingly turn to Christianity.

Although this broad outline provides basic insights in the direction of religious change, it is crucial to note that things were messier and more ambiguous at the micro level. The micro level dynamics are crucial to understand the particularities of religious change as well as tendencies that ran counter to the dominant trend. Both Muslim marginalization and Christian expansion were not unchallenged or mechanical processes. Within Christian and Muslim groups there existed significant variations in the way religious ideas were used in distinguishing between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ or in talking about nationality and the future of the region. Equally important, the religious discourses could not be applied smoothly to the level of personal and familial experiences. This was true for Christians and Muslims alike. New Christians needed to ‘restore’ the disruptive qualities of their conversion by recreating genealogical lines and by downplaying their neighbors’ or ancestors’ loyalty to Islamic traditions. For Muslims, on the other hand, the ‘new’ demands of their religion ran counter to the ways they had led their lives until recently. The resulting contradictions necessitated them to find new ways to reconcile religious with national identity.

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This intertwining of religious with national identity raises questions concerning the meanings of the categories ‘Muslim’ and ‘Christian.’ What do these religious labels mean to the inhabitants of Ajaria after seventy years of state atheism and how have their appropriations of these labels changed over the last ten years? What value do these categories have as analytical concepts? These questions are important because they may help us understand how different social identities – religious, ethnic, national, familial – are interlinked and thus the questions can illuminate changes taking place on the religious frontier. The questions are also important because they point to the general debate concerning the nature of religious dynamics in the former Soviet Union, a debate to which the Ajarian case can offer new insights.

The post-Soviet ‘believer’ on the frontier

What does it mean to write about religious revival or renaissance, or to categorize someone as a member of a certain denomination, as Sunni Muslim or Orthodox Christian? The two issues, the ‘belief dimension’ of religion and the categorization of believers into ‘denominations’ are complex issues in any situation, but are particularly compelling with regard to the post-Soviet era, because of the ill-understood effects of state-atheism. How the issues locally play out is different for various post-socialist countries, but a general lesson seems to be that conventional criteria used to classify and analyze religious forms cannot be applied uncritically to the former Soviet Union.

One of the most common questions with regards to religion after socialism is whether it is something more than just an aspect of national identity and political rhetoric. To phrase it differently, are these religious renewals also ‘religious,’ or are they merely a function of political and economic concerns? Estimations of the level of ‘religiosity’ and attempts to decide on the basis of this whether or not we should speak of religious revival have led to a rather unfruitful debate among specialists on religion. The debate is reminiscent of early reactions journalists had when they encountered religious renewal in the former Soviet Union. Whereas some expressed astonishment at the speed by which religion regained its visibility after seventy years of repression, others were perplexed to learn that people who called themselves Muslim consumed large quantities of alcohol. Sociologists have been quick in systematizing these observations. I will confine myself here to a discussion of two sociological studies (Greeley 1994; Kääriäinen 1999). The fact that both articles deal with Russia is caused by the lack of comparable studies for Georgia and does not imply that I assume clear similarities. But the pitfalls of this kind of research and the questions it generates as a result are useful to comment further on religious change in Ajaria.

¹ Nor is there a ‘general’ situation in Russia. As a unit of analysis it is too large and diversified to make convincing statements about the nature of religious change.
The conclusion of these two studies could not be more different. Whereas Greeley contended that “Despite 70 years of socialism, God seems to be alive and well and living in all Russia” (1994: 255), Kääriäinen concluded that “it is an exaggeration to speak of ‘religious renaissance’ in Russia” (1999: 44). Both authors provide extensive statistical evidence that differentiates between gender, age groups, education levels and religious background. But despite these subtleties their conclusions are necessarily blunt. In contrast to what might be expected, the different conclusions do not stem from differences in the gathered evidence. The responses to questions concerning belief in God, miracles, heaven and hell, were almost identical in both articles. Rather, whereas Greeley compared his data to lower levels of religiosity in the former GDR and Western Europe (with which Russia positively compared), Kääriäinen seemed to have taken a 100 % belief in God and participation in religious life as his frame of reference.

But there is an interesting difference in approach. Although both authors paid attention to general issues of Christian belief and practice, the remaining questions showed striking differences. Greeley focused on the attitudes of Russians towards the (possible) role of the church in public life. He asked whether Russians supported, for example, prayer in schools and whether or not they thought the church should be involved in politics (1994: 258). Kääriäinen’s study, on the other hand, was designed to analyze the so-called “belief dimension.” He measured how people related to the sets of beliefs of their respective faiths (1999: 36). The outcome of this exercise taught him that only a minority believes in the basic doctrines of Christianity and that “basic knowledge about religion is still poor.”

Although the observations are interesting, the difficulties faced by the authors in translating their findings into convincing conclusions shows that they can only be the start of research that aims to understand religious dynamics in the post-Soviet era. The apparent discrepancy between the public prestige of religion, and the low conformity to basic doctrines needs to be considered. But the study of Kääriäinen also shows that one has to be careful here. By focusing on the ‘belief dimension’ he reduced religion to a fixed set of norms and practices and by effect separated religion from its context. Moreover, because he took the official (clerical) ‘sets of beliefs’ for granted, he fails to consider how religious meanings are constructed at the local level. At best, the observed discrepancy between what people are expected to believe on the basis of the postulates of ‘their’ religion and what they state they believe, indicates

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2 The differentiations showed a “U” curve relationship between age and belief in heaven; it indicated that women with an atheistic background are more likely to convert than men with similar background, and that civil servants more often say they are believers than low-skilled workers (Greeley 1994: 256, 266-267). But no explanations are given for these patterns apart from unsubstantiated suggestions such as: “[unskilled workers are] less likely than the [skilled workers] to affiliate with the church, perhaps because they feel they might not be at home there” (ibid 266).

3 The measured beliefs in God and miracles were in Greeley’s and Kääriäinen’s articles respectively 47% and 40%. Degrees of belief in heaven and hell differed somewhat more – in Greeley respectively 33% and 30% and in Kääriäinen respectively 24% and 22% (Greeley 1994: 255; Kääriäinen 1999: 36-37).
that the direction of religious change is ambiguous and that the status of ‘pre-Revolutionary’ traditions or denominations is unclear.

This issue - the ambiguity of denominational categories - was discussed more extensively by the postmodern Russian literary philosopher Mikhail Epstein. In a sweeping depiction of post-Soviet spirituality, he argues that Soviet atheism has "produced a type of believer who is impossible to identify in denominational terms. He is simply a believer, a verniushchir" (1995: 363). Epstein rightly questions the meaning of denominations for people who had been "resolutely cut off from all religious traditions" (ibid). But whereas he sees an amorphous sea of ‘believers’ indicating a turn to post-atheist and postmodern forms of spirituality, I would suggest that the ambiguity of the relation between believers and denominations in itself reveals only that state atheism has profoundly shattered religious life and that it needs to be seen whether and how these relations are being restructured.

In other words, it need not surprise us that people who only recently started to engage in religious life show low levels of adherence to ‘their’ denomination, or that knowledge of the postulates of a given religion is low (which is not necessarily unique for postsocialist believers). Focusing on predefined indicators of adherence to a ‘denomination,’ on the one hand, or undefined ‘spirituality,’ on the other, bypasses the important and interesting question of how these two aspects are actually interlinked. What both Kääriäinen and Epstein fail to consider is how the ‘belief dimension’ is related to social and political processes. Former divisions and differences between religions and denominations have been challenged by atheist rule and will in some cases become irrelevant or disappear, while in others they may regain their importance. To make sense of religious dynamics in Ajaria, the aspects of ‘religiosity’ and ‘denomination’ need to be perceived as existing in a dynamic and changing relationship. Moreover, instead of adopting external definitions of religion, we rather should investigate how people locally attach meaning to religious practices in dialogue with their community members. In other words, the question of whether religious change in Ajaria indicates an increased relevance of religion in social life is related to the changing meanings of the labels ‘Muslim’ and ‘Christian.’

What religion means to people who have grown up without (or only restricted) involvement in religious life cannot be assumed a priori and needs to be understood in relation to the public dimensions of religion. In Ajaria, religion returned in a contested space and was from the outset imbued with political messages. During the early 1990s mass-baptisms were organized by the clergy and rumors circulated that Ajarians would be forcefully converted to Christianity. The period saw a sudden and massive construction of mosques and several local oppositions against the increasing influence of Christianity. But this eruption of religious activity simultaneously revealed that religious loyalties were often weak. We have reviewed serial conversions of people who were baptized one day but the following month

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1 I rely here on a short article of Epstein (1995) and discussions of his work by Borenstein (1999) and Miller-Pogacar (1995).
were attending the Friday prayers in the mosque. Often, conversion to Christianity seemed to be a symbolic act of support for the independence movement and to have little to do with personal religious convictions. Likewise, although in many villages the population actively participated in the (re-)construction of mosques, this did not always mean that people were actually planning to attend prayers, and a number of these mosques have subsequently been empty. Religion had suddenly returned to social life in Ajaria, but its contents were not as yet defined.

Later years saw the ‘normalization’ of religion, but not the decline of its relevance in social life. Instead, religion became more firmly embedded in everyday life. As far as the applicability of pre-Soviet denominations is concerned, one has to be careful. In most literature, Ajarian Muslims are classified as ‘Hanifite’ Muslims (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985: 207; Akiner 1983: 244). However, neither ordinary Muslims nor their religious leaders ever mentioned this term to me, nor could they explain what it entailed. This observation is similar to Bobrovnikov’s (2001) who argued that Islamic dynamics in the Caucasus cannot be understood by invoking pre-Soviet distinctions.5

But the fact that certain categorizations have been rendered irrelevant does not imply that people aren’t actively constructing boundaries for their beliefs. As people are constantly confronted with the social and political implications of Islam and Christianity, their ideas about specific denominations gradually obtain more concrete forms. The influence of religious leaders is particularly relevant for this process. Muslim and Christian clergy now perform crucial roles in rites de passage like weddings and funerals and as such stimulate discussion of what is acceptable and desired social behavior. Young men who finished their education in Turkey return to Upper Ajaria, to which they bring new knowledge of ‘proper’ interpretations of Islam. Similar processes take place with regards to Orthodox Christianity. New priests were added to the Batumi-Skhalta diocese and the church has recently become more active in Upper Ajaria as well. The effect seems similar to what Raoul Motika concluded about religious processes in Azerbaijan. He argued that although the relationship between Shiite and Sunnite Islam is “still dominated by ecumenical and sometimes eclectic spirit, the ‘old’ categories are given new relevance by foreign missionaries” (2001: 122). The relation between ‘believers’ and ‘denominations’ should thus be understood not only in terms of ‘spirituality,’ but needs to be tied into the political-economic web in which religious elites play an important role.

In Ajaria, the main divide clearly is the one between Islam and Christianity and differences between Muslims and Christians are becoming more pronounced. This is largely because the politicized situation at the frontier causes the need for explicit definitions of ‘self’ and ‘other.’ Summarizing my argument, I hold that one of the interesting aspects of the religious dynamics in Ajaria is that the last ten years

5 According to him, the divide between Shiites and Sunnites in the Caucasus is being replaced by a new divide in the making between Wahhabis and Traditionalists, while the formerly important differences between followers of the Shafiite or the Hanifite legal schools have disappeared (2001: 29).

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have shown a tendency towards a more active appropriation of religious labels. ‘Muslim’ and ‘Christian’ are no longer only labels of categorization; they are increasingly becoming part of new and distinct lifestyles. This is another important feature of postsocialist religious renewals, the outcome of which is not clear yet.

Frontiers of identity

The more active appropriation of religious labels leads to sharper demarcations of religious differences on the frontier of the Muslim and Christian realms. As I argued at the start of this case study, these processes should be understood by taking account of the asymmetries involved in relations between center and periphery as well as of the internal dynamics on the frontier. To take a phrase from Hannerz, what has to be accounted for is the “diversity within interconnectedness” (1996: 55). Too many theories have taken ‘periphery’ and ‘center’ as if they are bounded units of analysis that act vis a vis each other. The problem is, for example, visible in the relatively old debate that framed itself along the opposites of hegemony versus resistance. In a useful summary, Weller explains that the resistance thesis holds that local groups “maintain their own alternative views of the world in the face of pressures from a hegemonic discourse” (1994:12). The opposing view holds that “whatever such ‘resistance’ appear to oppose, it in fact simply recreates its society.” The paradox in this debate is that if resistance “appears to be everywhere to some, it is nowhere for others, a chimerical vision that disappears under a cold stare” (1994: 13).

On the religious frontier it is not hard to find resistance, but a careful look reveals that it is not all that clear who is resisting what. To the outsider, inclined to take sides with the weaker group, the resistance of Muslims against dominant ideologies and Christian-biased state interventions is the most obvious example of resistance. Muslim believers made clear that they were resisting policies that favored Christian education as well as the increased influence of Christianity in public life. Their defense was typically worded in terms of familial tradition and the value of local life. To them, dominant ideas of nationality and ethnicity were difficult to reconcile with the demands of Islam and local lifestyles. The question would then be to what extent, the inhabitants of Upper Ajaria resist and/or accommodate to the powerful national model.

But new Christians also saw their activities as a form of resistance. A common view among the Christian clergy and converted inhabitants in Khulo was that the current social environment hindered the process of Christian expansion and prevented people from “returning to their religion.” Father Vasili, who had been working in Khulo for two years, told me “people hesitate to be baptized because they don’t want to hurt their parents. It is not without reason that many converts initially hide their baptism from their families, but of course there are also those who speak up and tell
their families that Georgians used to be Christians.” In individual conversion stories moreover, conversion was portrayed as a struggle against the social pressure of neighbors and relatives. Analysis of the background of converts showed that those who were able to resist this ‘village hegemony,’ were partly outsiders to their community and had closer ties to the wider Georgian society.

The fallacy of the resistance – hegemony debate is that it too easily prioritizes one sort of relationship without investigating relationships on other levels. For example, if we look from a national perspective, we witness that Christians have adopted national ideologies, while Muslims resist these ideologies. But as soon as we acknowledge that the relation between center and periphery is more complex, it becomes very difficult to say what resistance and accommodation implies. Simply put, who is actually resisting? The Muslims, who construct identity in opposition to national-Christian discourse? Or new Christians, who phrase their actions as resistance against hegemonic Muslim discourse in village communities? Are they perhaps both resisting and accommodating – in reversed order – ‘community’ or ‘nation’?

In other words, the processes at the frontier cannot be understood as an opposition between center and periphery. As Eric Wolf pointed out some twenty years ago, one of the main problems with the resistance-hegemony debate was its limited scope. The answers proposed by proponents or critics of the resistance thesis were framed within either – or propositions. Instead, he argued that both tendencies take place simultaneously, and differently so among various cultural terrains (Wolf 2001: 357). Wolf furthermore argued that “we cannot come to comprehend these responses unless we see them in the wider context of the economic and political forces that shape the modern world” (ibid: 358). Wolf’s criticism hints at creating a more subtle picture that can describe the simultaneous occurrence of both tendencies.

The particular problem is that too often the layered nature of resistance and accommodation is overlooked. This is especially clear on the frontier, where different social networks and discourses overlap and compete. To understand the ways in which religious labels are appropriated in ideas about ‘self’ we have to understand how such appropriation relate to other aspects of social identities. Religious identity does not exist in isolation of other aspects of identity but develops in dialogue with these other aspects of identity. We should imagine a highly politicized field in which the categories Muslim and Christian make sense not only in reference to a strictly defined list of religious demands – as externally defined denominations – but also in reference to familial, regional, ethnic and national identity. Constructing identity from competing and contradictory sources has ultimately an effect on the religious identity that people on the frontier appropriate.

Table 1 summarizes how various aspects of social identity link up with religious identity. This scheme would appear to be valid only for unambiguous Muslims and Christians and overlook those who are situated somewhere in the middle. As we have seen earlier, people dealt differently with these various questions. The political elite of Upper Ajaria (in contrast to the overtly Christian elite of Ajaria in general) is
very ambiguous in its religious affiliation. As an informant suggested: “Here in the mountains they base their authority on their Muslim identity, but as soon as they descend to the capital they will pretend to be Christians. For them there is no religion, only politics.” But although this may be valid in reference to those for whom ‘only politics’ counts, the mentioned aspects of social identity were, for most people, more than simple labels that could be taken up as suited. Indeed, from this overview it follows that it would be a mistake to assume that ‘non-believers’ could form a neutral category. Even if one would deny the existence of God and avoid calling oneself a Christian or Muslim, this would not relieve the person in question from adopting a stance in relation to the other aspects of social identity, which in Upper Ajaria is quickly reconnected to issues of belief.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Familial identity</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>See conversion as a return to their (distant) ancestors’ religion and downplay recent familial traditions</td>
<td>Stress that immediate ancestors were Muslim and that they continue that tradition by remaining faithful to Islam</td>
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<tr>
<th>Regional identity</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>See Ajaria as an inherent part of (Christian) Georgia; perceive its autonomy as an anomaly</td>
<td>See Ajarian autonomy as confirmation of the region’s Muslim background</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ethnic identity</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress that Ajarians are ethnic Georgians and that the term ‘Ajarian’ has only geographical connotations</td>
<td>Differentiate between Ajarians and Georgians, but are careful not to make politically sensitive statements</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National identity</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underline the unity of religion and nation</td>
<td>Avoid commenting on the relation between religion and nationality</td>
<td></td>
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This schematic overview also shows why Muslims are more modest than Christians about making public statements concerning ‘righteous’ faith. Whereas Christians publicly claim that Orthodox Christianity is the only true religion and that others have been misled or are fundamentally wrong, Muslims on the whole would say that the specific religion to which one adheres is only of secondary importance and that acknowledgement of the existence of God is more crucial. The reason for this is that statements concerning Muslim identity immediately prompt connotations with other social and political issues, to which most Muslims have at least ambivalent attitudes. The difference of strength by which the truthfulness of personal convictions can be expressed illustrates the asymmetries in the balance of power at the frontier.

Besides playing a constitutive role in national ideologies, religion also served as an important vehicle in people’s conceptions of personhood. The confrontation of Islam and Christianity not only challenged one’s own faith, but also the faith of one’s
predecessors and offspring. Moreover, since religion cannot be confined to one sphere of life, it is not only faith that is contested. Local customs and traditions, indeed, people's entire way of life is challenged in the process. Religious identity, like any form of social identity, is formed around notions of difference and commonality. Being Muslim or Christian in Upper Ajaria is involved in a continuous process of trying to relate personal experience to ideas of past and future, as a "logical extension of maintaining boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Sahlins 1989:270).

The process of differentiation seems to result in the creation of a new religious boundary. This boundary in the making does not follow clear social or geographic lines and as a result makes definitions of 'us' and 'them' ambiguous. Assertions of Muslim and Christian identity should be understood not as resistance against a clear and distinct 'other' but as struggles for constructing 'self' in relation to loosely imagined multiple 'others.' Stereotypes of the 'other' were highly relevant for both Muslims and Christians, but there was always the inconvenience that the 'other' was not really the 'other' but actually part of one's own community. Nevertheless, the dividing line between Islam and Christianity was being reinforced by religious elites and increased participation in religious life; as a result, views of the 'other' are becoming more negatively pronounced. Whether this trend will continue into the future will depend on the interaction between the groups living at the frontier, the wider cultures of nation and state, and the renewed contacts across the international border.

Pierre Vilar poignantly worded the importance of applying a frontier perspective to the study of social processes by provocatively stating that "[T]he history of the world can be best observed from the frontier" (1985, cited in Sahlins 1998: 31). The reason for this, according to Peter Sahlins, is that "the perspective from the periphery challenges much of the received wisdom common to both histories and anthropologies of contemporary national states" (1998: 31). The frontier perspective allows a more subtle understanding of how dominant ideologies are accepted, reinterpreted, rejected and molded at the local level. Although this issue can be studied everywhere, the contradictions between national ideology and local histories are more manifest on the frontier.

As this case study also made clear, the religious dimension intertwines with other temporal and spatial divides. Besides a junction of two religious traditions, the frontier is at least also a junction of states and nations, in which ideas of ethnicity and modernity are challenged and reformulated. In Khulo, the religious dimension became very important not only in a confrontation between two faiths, but also in political, economic and cultural domains. Ideas of the state and the nation were challenged and as a result religious lines hardened. In Khulo, and more generally in Upper Ajaria, the religious dimension and the differences between Islam and Christianity became central in the post-1990 cultural developments and formed the
focal point to which discussions of ethnicity and nationality, even of modernity, were centered.

However, one of the intriguing aspects of research along borders is that one is forced to accept the flexibility of given sets of tensions. The ethnic, religious and national dimensions interact with each other to form combinations that can significantly vary throughout the border region. Whereas the religious dimension came to dominate public discussion and motivated social action in Upper Ajaria in the 1990s, other parts of the border region showed different accentuations, the workings and consequences of which can only be understood through in-depth localized studies. I will change the perspective in the next case study by moving to the village Sarpi located in the immediate vicinity of the international border, where life was highly restricted until recently. Although several of the religious processes that were discussed in the previous chapters also apply to Sarpi, this is not what was locally seen as the most significant aspect of contemporary life. Instead, the particularities of Sarpi challenged and reinforced other aspects of social identity, the most central component being ethnicity. The reason for this can be understood from the fact that the Lazi of Sarpi formed a tiny minority in Ajaria who witnessed the disappearance of their ethnic brethren behind the Iron Curtain in the 1930s. This next case study thus serves to comment on another crucial ingredient of social identity formation in the Georgian borderlands, as well as to explore the more physical dimensions of borders – the border as a fixed line and barrier that restricted movement and communication and served as reference point for the inhabitants of Sarpi for several generations.