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

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Chapter Six

Jason and the New Argonauts

During a wedding celebration in Sarpi, several young men guided me into the basement of an affluent villager’s house where there was a small exhibition that consisted of a boat, fishing gear and some other attributes. As I admired the artefacts they explained to me that they were all crafted in original Laz style, which allegedly had stayed the same over many centuries. The boat owner emphasized that the Lazi had been extraordinary sailors and traced this tradition back to the famous travels of Jason and the Argonauts into the Kingdom of Colchis. When we left the basement, one of the men, a Sarpi journalist who had recently moved to Batumi, started a conversation. He wanted to know what I was after in my research. I told him that I was interested in the recent history of the village and that I had considered extending my research by adding a comparative case study of Upper Ajaria. Backed by his village peers he explained, or rather stressed, that such a research design was bound to fail. In his view, my research would completely miss the point because it neglected to pay justice to the deep roots of their culture, as exemplified in the ‘cultural’ artefacts they had just shown to me. Instead of going to Upper Ajaria, he continued, I should go to Georgia’s capital Tbilisi. There I should study ancient Georgian history which would help me to find out about the true origins of Laz culture, “When it is your aim to understand people, you need to understand where they come from and where their history started. Now you are only looking at the last hundred years; by that time we had already lost a large part of our culture.”

The journalist’s comments revealed several notions that frequently surfaced in local discussions about what it meant to be Laz. First, the journalist stressed the historical unity of Lazi and Georgians, while simultaneously commenting on the unique and distinguishing features of the Lazi as an ethnic group. Second, he phrased his dissatisfaction with my approach in terms of ‘cultural loss’ that resulted from (Soviet) modernization. But at the same time the multiple references to unique Laz artefacts and traditions suggested that ‘culture’ was anything but lost. The discourse of cultural loss was a central element in local constructions of ethnic identity and was tightly entwined with a view of ethnicity as deeply primordial. Moreover, this discourse was based on the idea that ethnic distinctions should be measured on the basis of a strictly defined list of ‘cultural stuff.’

Preoccupations with ‘the past’ and with ‘cultural stuff’ have their own biographies and it is my intent to trace these in order to understand why and how this emic primordialism became important in present-day expressions of ethnic identity. Phrased differently, to understand the implications of the category ‘Laz’ we need to explore the genealogy of ‘ethnic primordialism’ and the mobilization of ‘cultural...
stuff." In a response to Frederik Barth's famous statement that the "critical focus becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (1969: 15), Handelman (1977: 190) wrote that the "categorical corporate holdings of culture," far from being irrelevant, specify "a corporate history in time and space." They tell a story about why the category is substantial and legimate and provide group members with the elements of a social biography, which connects culture and behavior, and the past to the present. Objectifying culture strengthens the connection between past and present even further and makes 'cultural stuff' important tools in expressing ideas of sameness and difference in a changing world.

In short, this chapter discusses an inherent tension in Soviet politics, which simultaneously weakened existing cultural forms and strengthened primordial discourses on culture and ethnicity. It aims to show how culture and ethnicity became objectified in the Soviet context and what results this has for social identity in the village on the border. My account is structured in three parts. First, I will describe several family histories and discuss the families' responses to the limits and opportunities created by the Soviet state. Second, I will look how the physical characteristics of the village on the border and the life-courses of villagers led to changes in their social and cultural horizons. Third, I will show how the ethnic and cultural politics of the Soviet state created the basis for a specific Laz identity that was tightly connected to the Georgian national idea.

**Soviet trajectories**

When the border was established in 1921, the Soviet side of Sarpi consisted of some forty houses. At that time the inhabitants lived mainly off fishing and the transportation of cargo, supplemented by small-scale crop-cultivation (mostly corn, beans and rice) and limited livestock breeding. Life opportunities varied with the economic dynamics of the nearby port city Batumi, with the construction works initiated by the government and changes in the location of the Russo-Ottoman border. The Russo-Turkish wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries caused patterns of emigration and remigration that not only uprooted village society, but also deepened its interdependence with the coastal regions east and west.

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1. About the juxtaposition of cultural content versus boundary Jenkins wrote that Barth's (1969) argument might "be construed as suggesting that the cultural stuff out of which that differentiation is arbitrarily socially constructed is somehow irrelevant, and this surely cannot be true" (1997: 107). Barth himself wrote later that "the issue of cultural content versus boundary, as it was formulated, unintentionally served to mislead" and wrote that "to grasp what a particular ethnic identity is about, the anthropologist must attend to the experiences through which it is formed" (1994: 14-17).
2. Elderly villagers reported that their grandfathers regularly traveled to Sukhumi and Trabzon to trade, and when economic circumstances forced them, as far as Istanbul and the Danube delta.
3. For example, between 1912 and 1915 the Russians started the construction of a road and a railway, which was part of the expansionist dream of Czar Nicholas to construct transport routes all around the Black Sea. Many villagers were employed in its construction and received payments in gold rubles.
These dynamics were again radically altered with the imposition of Soviet rule. The installation and fortification of the international border, the collectivization of agriculture, and the newly introduced social and political arrangements set new frames for local life and affected the position of villagers in the wider society. To understand how Soviet rule influenced the social and cultural horizons of villagers, it is useful to start by outlining the histories of a few selected families in Sarpi. The two families that will be described represent two distinct though overlapping ways of dealing with the Soviet state. The Abduloghlis were at the lower end of Soviet society, they worked as kolkhozniki and manual laborers while simultaneously exploiting the malfunctions of the plan economy. The Memishishis, on the other hand, were deeply involved with state institutions; their life-courses went, so to speak, through the state apparatus’ core. The family histories that I will present illustrate the wider societal changes that affected Sarpi and demonstrate some ways families ‘muddled through’ the Soviet period.

ABDULOGLI / ABDULISHI / ABULADZE

The Abduloghlis are considered relative newcomers to Sarpi because their forefathers were from Hopa, which was then (as well as now) located across the state border. Compared to other families they are still a small family-group in the village. Six large houses in the village are associated with the Abduloghlis, four of which are in duze – a small and relatively flat plateau centrally located in the village – the remaining two houses located further uphill behind the graveyard. Members of the six houses maintained close contact; they frequently visited each other, assisted each other in household activities and co-operated in various economic undertakings. Yearly visits were exchanged between them and family members who had moved to Abkhazia and the Ukraine, but recent geopolitical changes increasingly narrowed the family’s range of action to their village.

**Generation I.** Osman Abduloghl arrived in Sarpi in 1879 from the Hopa district across the border. As the story goes he was 18 or 19 years old when Ottoman authorities demanded he fight against the Russians. The problem, according to a grandson was that “those Russians included Georgians and Lazi. Therefore he refused to partake in the war and fled to Sarpi.” He intended to return to Hopa after the war, but fate had it differently. Because he was a smith and a carpenter the old men of Sarpi decided that he shouldn’t leave, “The village needed his skills so they arranged for him to marry here.” Osman married into a relatively well-off family who had three daughters but no male offspring.

**Generation II.** Osman’s four sons and two daughters all married within the village, thus firmly integrating the family in local social networks. Reportedly, Osman never taught his children the crafts of smith and carpenter. Instead, the sea became the main

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4 Family members now say that Osman refused because he considered Georgians to be his brethren.
source of income for the second generation. The family owned a small boat on which two of Osman’s sons and several of the oldest grandchildren worked. They transported cargo over sea between Hopa and Batumi, and during the fishing season sold fish on the markets in Batumi. The family ended these endeavors not long after the initiation of Soviet rule; “We knew that there was no future for fishing and that soon they would confiscate all boats, so we sold ours in 1932.” The family members joined the collective farm, but not all at once. They followed a common strategy to have only one member enter the collective. This enabled them to continue their previous occupations while simultaneously obtaining access to new resources provided by the state. Moreover, “It was still considered scandalous to enter the kolkhoz and only a few did so. But within a few years people became convinced that it was the best way. Then the payments became better and soon everyone entered the kolkhoz.”

Living standards in Sarpi worsened during World War II. Villagers did not receive payments for their work in the collective farm but were obliged to make unpaid deliveries of agricultural produce to the front instead. Whereas elsewhere in Ajaria villagers were temporarily allowed to cultivate corn and potatoes for their survival, in Sarpi it was demanded that the collective continued to grow tea and citrus fruits in order to give the enemy across the border the impression that life went on as usual. Three of Osman’s sons moved to the neighboring village Gonio to work in the sovkhoz, “People were starving here, so they went to the sovkhoz where they were fed by the government.” After the war two sons moved back to the parental home while the oldest son settled permanently in Gonio. The difficulties of the times prevented the remaining sons from building separate houses and in the late 1940s twenty-four people lived in the family house.

By that time Osman’s third son Ali had already been married for twenty years. His wife Fadime Hojaoghli, who was born in Turkish Sarpi, had received a Soviet passport. Perhaps because of that she escaped deportation to Siberia in 1949. In his youth Ali received three years of religious education and provided basic religious services in the village during the 1930s. Fadime’s background and Ali’s former activities were incriminating facts at the time and understandably they tried to keep a low profile. They both worked on the kolkhoz’ cattle farm (ferma) which was located in the hills behind the village. The tending and milking of cows paid poorly but also involved little contact with authorities. Attempts to keep a low profile were also visible in the new surname they adopted. In the late 1940s it was expected that families reject their ‘Turkish’ surnames, so Fadime and Ali changed their name from Abduloghlili to Abuladze, while Ali’s brothers chose Abdulishi. The difference in the two names is significant. ‘Abdulishli’ stayed closer to the root and has a Lazuri ending (‘-shi’ means ‘of’), while ‘Abuladze’ drew less attention as it used the Georgian

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5 Villagers were initially allowed to keep their boats and fishing-gear and could continue semi-independent activities as members of the Sarpi fishing-brigade. In 1938 the remaining fishers were forced to sell their boats and enter the collective fishery named krasnyj rybek (red fisher) in Batumi.

6 The collective farm had 17 members in 1932, 65 in 1936 and 200 in 1970 (Bakradze 1971:33).
“...ending ‘-dze’. As one of the children explained, “My parents were afraid of raising suspicion and Abuladze is such a common name – no one would think anything of it.”

**Generation III.** Ali and his family built a new house in 1954 when, for the first time, villagers were able to receive long-term credit. By that time their four daughters had already left the house. Two married into villages around Batumi, while the other two married Sarpians. Not long after the family (including two married sons with children) occupied the new house in the upper part of the village, plans were made for building yet another house for one of the sons. Ideally, the youngest son Aman would have stayed in the parental home, but his older brother Hasan died in 1957, leaving behind a wife and three kids. It was decided that Aman would leave the parental home instead. Construction of a house started in the mid-1960s when the family had engendered enough capital. Aman and his wife worked in various positions on the *kolkhoz*, taking jobs as tea-pickers, tractor drivers, construction-workers, and bricklayers. Most importantly, they took good care of their private plot of mandarin trees. “Of course I worked in the *kolkhoz*, but besides that there was a lot to do,” Aman told me and then elaborated on what it meant to ‘work privately’ during socialism. Through his work on the *kolkhoz* he gained access to construction materials and he told me that he even went to brick-factories in Kutaisi (a city two hundred kilometers to the north-east) to purchase material for the construction of his house. Other important ‘private’ endeavors were Aman’s trading trips to the Ukraine. Every year Aman and one of his cousins bought up the ‘surplus’ harvest of their relatives. They sent their load by ship to Odessa and then took an airplane to meet it. In Odessa they relied on the networks of a male cousin who had settled in the Ukraine. With his cousins Aman would transport the citrus fruits further to cities in Russia or the Ukraine. Such trading trips could raise as much as 6000 rubles or a third of the costs of constructing a house. In comparison, in the 1970s the average year-wage of collective farmers in the USSR was around 1200 rubles. Within twenty years Aman had moved from his grandparents’ house to that of his parents and then to his own house, which he also managed to furnish completely.

Aman frequently expressed favorable memories about life during the Soviet period. More than once he told me that they were much better off than their relatives across the border and he took pride in the fact that their relatively small *kolkhoz* had been the first ‘millionaire’ in the Ajarian ASSR, “It is fashionable these days to criticize the communists, but when you look at it we actually lived very well. Now we get a 12-ruble pension and even then they won’t give to us; we haven’t received anything during the last months.” He contrasted this with the position in which he and

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7 The word ‘surplus’ refers here to the part of harvest that exceeded the ‘plan.’

8 Furnishing houses was often even more difficult than building one due to shortages and waiting lists.
his family had ended up, "Right now there is no work or money. My grandchildren need to have a house, but again it is difficult."

**Generation IV.** The three children of Aman and Ferié grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. Jemal, the oldest son moved to Batumi where he took up a job in the machine-building factory. Their other son Kakha briefly worked on the *kolhox* as truck-driver. Asiko, their only daughter, was still in school when the opening of the border and the break-up of the Soviet Union radically changed life in the village.

Kakha, now thirty-three, abandoned his work at the *kolhox* for a job at the customs house in 1990, where he made a lot of money. He remembered with some regret: "As you see, nothing of it is left. I think it was all pre-arranged, I mean, they encouraged us to put all our money in the bank and then they stole it." He lost his job when the Ajarian government carried out a reorganization of the customs. Since then he has been working as a driver of his cousin’s minibus, but his profits are low. He remembered the stability of old times but equally dismissed the idea that there would be a return, "You know what it is? We don’t need communists to tell us how to live. We are Lazi, we have been sailors and traders throughout history. But the thing is that the mafia is disturbing everything." The experiences of his brother and sister were not that much different. Asiko worked in a kiosk near the border gate, selling cigarettes and drinks since 1992. When the kiosks were replaced with a new ‘trading-center’ in 1998, Asiko obtained a job in one of the shops and received a fixed wage. Within a year, however, she lost her job because the shop was closed.

Jemal, Kakha and Asiko all live in their parental home. Jemal, the oldest son had settled in Batumi in the late 1980s after he married a girl of Azeri-Russian background. Initially, they made a good living by importing and reselling goods from Turkey. Their initial success depended in part on Kakha’s job at the customs, which enabled them to circumvent some of the costs connected to cross-border trade. However, trading opportunities dwindled in the years following and Kakha lost his job. Jemal decided to move back to the village with his family. Although the golden days of cross-border trade had ended in Sarpi as well, in the village they could at least fall back on their social networks.

**MEMISHOGHLI / MEMISHISHI / DOLIDZE / LAZISHVILI**

When I started to gather information about the Memishishoghli family Anzor pulled out a hand-written genealogy from a drawer, which showed the genealogical links between all male family members. The existence of this genealogy already suggested the importance of descent for identity in Sarpi. The genealogy went back to a certain Memish who was born around 1800. According to Anzor, my research would be a success if I could dig deeper than that and trace earlier forefathers; "The tragedy is that the old men who knew about our history have died," he explained. Knowledge about family origins was also important when we discussed the various surnames of his family group. Anzor’s own surname was Memishishi,
which was the Laz equivalent of the Turkish name Memishoghli, ‘child of Memish.’

“What our real name is we don’t know, some of my uncles thought that the original name was Dolidze so they have adopted that name.” Another branch of the family adopted the name ‘Lazishvili,’ meaning ‘child of Laz’ in Georgian, which sounded like a perfect combination of Georgian and Laz identity, though no one knew exactly why that name was chosen. According to Anzor, the origins of Memish were uncertain; “There is a rumor that the Memishishis descended from the Greeks. I can’t tell you if it is true, but anyway we don’t mind, at least the Greeks have an old civilization.” He told this anecdotal remark during a dinner with his friend Zurabi Vanilishi, and jokingly added about his friend’s family: “they say about the Vanilishis that they descended from the Kurds; that is why they are so interested in history. They work very hard to disprove that, they don’t want to be Kurds you see.”

Generation I. Anzor’s father Muhammad Memishishi, later named Mamia, was born in 1908 in one of the largest houses in the village. Here he lived with his parents and paternal uncles’ families. Already in the late 1930s though, Mamia and his family were able to move to a new house. “It was even in the newspaper when my father built a new house,” said his daughter Heva. “Everyone had to be in the picture – mom, dad, and the children. The article said something like ‘Kolkhoz-workers build new houses.’”

After having finished school in Sarpi and in Gonio, Mamia and four other young Lazi were sent to study at the institute of minorities in Leningrad. This institute was established to advance communist cadres among minority groups that were underrepresented in local communist parties. Of his group, Mamia was the only one to finish his education, the others abandoned education before graduation. Upon his return, Mamia worked in the raion administration and was subsequently appointed chairman of the village council and later director of the kolkhoz. Nowadays, Mamia is remembered for the ‘iron grip’ with which he ruled the village between 1943 and 1952. He is not thought of favorably and some older inhabitants still blame his family for their purported aiding in the deportation of Sarpians, something which is vehemently disputed by the Memishishis. Anyway, since the 1950s the family played no significant role in the kolkhoz or other village level organizations. Instead, Mamia’s children predominantly chose careers outside the village.

Generation II. Mamia had five daughters and two sons. The two sons received higher education and both they and their oldest sister left the village for extensive periods. Two of them, Anzor and his older sister Heva, returned to the village in recent years.

Heva finished school in Sarpi and then worked in the kolkhoz as tea-picker. She remembers always having been convinced that she would leave the village. So she did, after she had entered into marriage – at the protest of her parents – with an Uzbek army officer who served at the border. The couple lived for several years in a military compound in Upper Ajaria. They were later transferred to Batumi where they
lived for twelve years. "Then, without my consultation [my husband] wrote to Moscow that he wished to be transferred to Uzbekistan. I didn't want to go there, but I ended up in Tashkent anyway." Difficulties with her husband and in-laws as well as unwillingness to adapt to what she called "their Asian way of life" led to her divorce. "I told him that I would take my daughter with me. We divorced without many words, just like that." Heva and her daughter made their way back to Georgia and settled in Batumi, where she became director of a kindergarten. Her daughter Natasha married not long after she entered Tbilisi University and settled, without completing her studies, in a town near the capital. Heva's son Teimur, who had already entered university in Tashkent when she returned to Georgia, became a successful businessman.

Anzor, ten years younger than Heva, married a girl from Sarpi, Meri Vanidze. Both studied in Batumi. She became a nurse and he finished the pedagogical institute. At that time, in the 1960s, there was renewed interest in the ethnic, and especially linguistic, background of the Lazi. Anzor, together with another young man from Sarpi, was invited to study in Tbilisi. For about twenty years he worked at the linguistic department at Tbilisi University and also held a part-time job at a radio station which sent weekly communiqués to the Lazi living in Turkey. During these years he and his wife maintained close contacts with the village. They managed to retain rights to a private plot in Sarpi and returned every summer and fall to take care of the citrus fruits. Their house in Tbilisi became a kind of center of Lazi students, Meri recalled. For years on end they accommodated students from Sarpi who studied in Tbilisi. Anzor was proud of the high number of 'learned' people from his village. After he returned to the village he became – despite his young age of sixty-one – a valued member of the group of village elders who discussed difficulties in the village.

**Generation III.** Anzor and Meri's children, the twins Irakli and Nino, were born in 1971 and spent the larger part of their youth in Tbilisi. They more or less followed in their father's steps. Nino attended the linguistic department and specialized in Georgian language, like her father. Irakli studied Turkish history and language. When they graduated in 1993, it was unfeasible to start an academic career. Civil strife and deteriorating living standards in the capital made it increasingly difficult to survive; in 1995 the family decided to move back to the village.

When I first met them in 1997, both Irakli and Nino were jobless and were trying to find some sort of official position. Nino had started to work on a dissertation concerning Laz poetry, but never managed to move beyond the initial stages. As she explained it, she never proceeded because she was unconvinced that a dissertation would help her establish a career and also because there was a lack of funding for her endeavor. Nino was regretting returning to Sarpi. She was even more despondent about the seeming impossibility of returning to Tbilisi. She regarded herself too old to find a husband and anyway didn't want one from the village. Half jokingly she would
call me crazy to come and live in Sarpi, saying, "Everyone wants to get away from this place, and you on the contrary are coming to Sarpi, why?"

Her twin brother Irakli showed less regret and to some extent liked the comforts that the village community provided. After failed attempts to secure a job at the customs (for which he saw himself well positioned because of his knowledge of Turkish) he settled for a job with the electricity distribution company and was responsible for securing timely payments from villagers. Besides that, he spent the days hanging around in the center of the village with some of his friends waiting for interesting economic transactions to turn up. The money he made was sufficient for everyday purposes, but not for securing some of his other dreams. Lack of sufficient income he saw as the main reason why his attempt to marry an Ajarian girl from Batumi was flatly rejected by the girl’s parents.

The house in which the family lived was one of the smaller one’s in Sarpi. It was built in the 1970s as a dacha or summerhouse, and certainly not built for occupation in winter.9 Over the last few years the family has worked hard to alter the house to make it suitable for permanent occupation. They built an outdoor toilet and improved the washing facilities. Still, living conditions compared unfavorably to their former life-style in Tbilisi. Heva’s decision to move in with the family brought some relief to their economic troubles, because of Heva’s son who traveled at least once a year from Tashkent to Sarpi to take care of his mother’s financial needs. After his visit to the village in 2000, new plans were made to convert the basement into additional living space. Social networks ensured basic means of living, but misfortune increasingly tied the family to the limits of their village. When Irakli fell ill in 2001 and turned out to have kidney disease, the family saw no other way to pay for medical treatment then to take out large loans. The last time I saw the family, in September 2001, they were seriously considering selling their apartment in Tbilisi.

REFLECTIONS

The ways in which the two families dealt with the Soviet system were markedly different. The Abuladzes’ had focused on improving their position within the village. They invested their capital in the construction of houses for all male family members and they did so by exploiting the margins of the Soviet economic system – by making trading-trips to various parts of the Soviet Union and by seeking informal jobs next to their work on the kolkhoz. The Memishishis had different priorities. They took up positions within the state apparatus and started careers in large Georgian cities. But despite these differences the stories were also remarkably similar. Members of both families pointed out that during socialist times they all had work, that the state provided the basic necessities of life and that they had been able to build large houses or obtain apartments in the city. Whatever the limitations of the Soviet economy or the restrictions on movement and expression, they had successfully developed ways to cope with them. During the numerous informal conversations

9 Anzor’s younger brother Hasan (now deceased) had inherited the much larger parental home.
I had with them, they presented ‘developed socialism’ as a time in which things were in place and contrasted it to the ‘chaos’ they experienced nowadays.

The family stories were also indicative for the patterns of dependency that developed between Sarpi and the hinterland. During various periods the harshness of life at the border had pushed away village residents who instead sought to live and establish careers elsewhere. But ‘the village,’ like in many other shortage economies, continued to play an important role in meeting everyday necessities of life. The importance of the village as a point of reference was enhanced by restrictions on settlement in Sarpi. At least from a male emic perspective these restrictions meant that the ethnic make-up of the village remained stable. As Anzor phrased it; “There was one good thing about the border. Because of it we managed to preserve our community. In other villages there was a continuing stream of settlers from the mountains. But because Sarpi was a restricted zone there never were resettlements. Only native people were allowed to build a house. Therefore our village is still ninety percent Laz.”

When economic opportunities rose in Sarpi in the late 1980s, many who had left the village returned to profit from the opportunities at the border, while later on the uncertainties of life in Georgian cities caused further remigrations to the village. The relative homogeneity of the population makes it understandable that the village continues to be seen as a bounded whole – at least by those who were born in the village – and provides an indication as to why the category ‘Laz’ is still important for them. These preliminary observations though, need to be systematized, which I will do by discussing the changing marriage patterns of Sarpians.

**Marriage and ethnicity**

The described family histories showed some of the ways villagers played the system while being simultaneously formed by it. Here I wish to discuss in more detail how the ‘social world’ of Sarpians gradually altered by tracing changes in ideas about proper marriages as well as actual choices of marriage partners. In order to interpret the data it is useful to know that the Lazi in Sarpi traced patrilineal descent and that as a general rule couples practiced residence with the husband’s kin. Among the Sarpians marriages between (parallel) cousins are strictly taboo, and I came across only one case that violated this rule. The data presented in this section are collected through oral reconstructions of family genealogies, and provide some insight in how ethnicity is managed in Sarpi. Since the patterns are also influenced by factors like proximity, economic considerations and personal preferences of the bride, groom and their families, it should not be expected that they perfectly mirror changing social identities. I will add case material to illustrate how changes in marriage ideals related to social practice.

10 Informants only referred to the male genealogical lines and omitted that through marriage most families had ‘mixed’ with Ajarians and (other) Georgians.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>N (587)</th>
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<th>Marriages with people of Christian background</th>
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<td>Lazi from Georgia</td>
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<td>57%</td>
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<td>1920-1937</td>
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<td>36%</td>
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<td>--</td>
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<td>--</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989-2000</td>
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<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N refers to the number of Sarpians entering a marriage, not the number of marriages.

* "From Sarpi" refers to the whole village until 1920, but only to Soviet Sarpi for later periods.

### OPEN BORDER

Although the data of pré-1920 marriages are not very reliable, as a general indication they show that intra-ethnic marriage was at least the general rule. Before 1920 brides seem to have come mainly from present-day Turkey – from Makriali (Kemalpasha), Hopa and Arhavi. The fact that a large part of brides went to - or came from - Ottoman territory suggests that the border had little effect on marriage practices. Even in the period between 1921 and 1937, the new physical demarcation hardly prevented villagers from marrying across the border. During this period no less than 36 percent of the brides came from - or left to - Turkey, but beginning in the 1930s the Sarpians were looking more often for marriage-partners within the Georgian SSR. There was an increase in the percentage of intra-village marriages, which testifies to the importance of marrying within the ethnic group.

The data are, however, not as straightforward as the table suggests, partly because in the early 1900s people were often on the move. The story of how Fadime arrived in the village in the early 1930s may be taken as an example. When I compiled my data she was categorized as Laz but it was omitted that her mother was Ajarian. She was born in a village in Lower Ajaria but in 1914, when she was still an infant, her parents migrated to Arhavi in Turkey. She lived there until she was twelve. After the untimely death of her parents she returned to her mother’s native village in Ajaria, where one of her brothers lived. Not long after that two women from Sarpi approached her brother’s wife to discuss a possible marriage. Fadime told me that she didn’t want to marry the man in question because he already had children from his

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11 One of the problems with the data concerning the pre-1920 period is that it covers only those people who continued to live in Sarpi and ignores women who married outside the village.

12 It might be that the existence of the border actually encouraged such marriages because of enhanced opportunities for trading. However, I haven’t been able to find confirmation for this hypothesis.
first marriage, but her brother convinced her that he would make sure that she would be treated right. “I still objected, but then a woman visited me and said that I should go. She was Laz herself, and said that I should only marry a Laz.”

CLOSED BORDER

After the border was closed in 1937, it became impossible to marry someone from Turkey. The marriage data covering the subsequent two decades show an increase in the number of marriages with Lazi from Georgia, who lived scattered throughout villages along the coast. Some families went to great lengths to find Laz-spouses for their children. Necat recalled:

When I was preparing for marriage my sister in law’s mother introduced me to a girl from Anakli. My uncle and I went there to talk with her parents, but when my uncle saw this girl he didn’t agree that I would marry her. Instead he said, ‘you are younger than me, so I will marry this girl, thereafter it is your turn.’ That is why my uncle’s wife and my wife are both from Anakli.

At least six brides came from Anakli - a town located some 120 kilometers north of Sarpi - where several Laz families lived clustered in one street. The trend to search for possible Laz-spouses in Georgia suggests that ethnicity was still an important element in marriage preferences. However, the same period also shows other interesting details. World War II and the subsequent deportations of Lazi meant that many villagers lived outside the village for extensive periods of time. These disruptions of the village-community in combination with the changed life-styles meant that it became slowly more acceptable to marry outside the ethnic group. During this period, the percentage of marriages with Georgians, Russians and others increased steeply and was even higher than during the next three decades.

Katja Vanidze was one of the first Russian women who came to live in the village. She had been born in the Altai in Siberia. She met her husband there during World War II while working in the car-manufacturing factory to which he was dispatched. “I came [to Sarpi] in November 1946. My husband told me we would arrive just in time for the citrus season, that we would sell [the fruit] and earn enough money to return. But when we delivered the mandarins [my husband’s] brothers decided that the money was needed for the construction of a new house. I waited another year but again we didn’t go, and this way 20 years passed by.” She told me that adapting to village life in Sarpi was difficult, but that she managed to learn Lazuri “within three months.” Her sons married Ajarian girls and slowly the language spoken at home changed. She complained, “now they all talk in Georgian and I just sit here and watch them. That hurts me, that I don’t even understand them.”

This freedom in choosing a spouse was true more so for men than for women like in other patrilinear societies. Of the thirteen marriages with non-Muslims documented for this period, only two involved women from Sarpi. These two women married during their exile in Siberia between 1949 and 1956.
INTERNAL FENCES

The period after 1956 shows an initial increase in the percentage of marriages with the neighboring Ajarians, but this figure remained stable for the period 1975 to 1988. However, during this period the border had new surprises. After 1969 a complex system of fences, military controls and roadblocks restricted all traffic in the borderlands, virtually shutting off Sarpi from the rest of Georgia. Since people were only permitted to pass the roadblocks if registered as resident of Sarpi, women who married outside the village, youth studying in Tbilisi and others who had changed place of residence, were not able to easily visit their relatives in Sarpi. The villagers complained about this period saying that it became difficult to find brides who were willing to live in the village. The data partly confirm this by a slight increase in the percentage of intra-village marriages in the 1970s.

While potential spouses were usually reluctant to move to Sarpi, young Sarpianss often decided to leave the village and start a life elsewhere. This was not only caused by the restrictions posed by the border, but also by the fact that the collective farm could not absorb the growing number of inhabitants. The expansion of Batumi as an industrial town created opportunities to start a career in the city, something that attracted many villagers. But for most of these recent émigrés, the links with the village remained very important. They often arranged for one member of their household to stay registered in Sarpi so that they retained access to their private plots. Other émigrés returned during summer vacations and cooperated with relatives from the village to set up trade routes to other parts of the Soviet Union.

END OF RESTRICTIONS

Only after the restrictions on movement were abolished in the early 1990s did intra-village marriages decrease again, in favor of a slightly increasing percentage of marriages with Ajarian Georgians, but especially with Christian Georgians. It is tempting to interpret the increasing preference for Christian marriage partners as a reflection of renewed nationalism in independent Georgia. The Sarpians identified themselves increasingly as Georgians and for several families it was important that their daughters and sons marry either with other Lazi or with ‘real’ Georgians. During earlier periods marriages with Ajarians were considered – if not desired – at least acceptable, because the Ajarian Georgians just like the Lazi had an Islamic background. Nowadays, however, it seems that the role of religion in marriage is precisely the other way around. Meri Memishishi for example was vehemently against a marriage of one of her children with Ajarians who she depicted as being “still uncivilized, in their villages people still wear veils. If my children marry it should be with a Laz or with a Georgian, it is best to stick to your tradition.”

After 1988 no more than two marriages took place between Georgian Lazi and Lazi from Turkey. These two marriages both occurred during the first years after the border-opening and involved girls from Georgian Sarpi. Nowadays these marriages are viewed with mixed feelings in the village. A girl in her twenties said, “I
can’t understand why Manana [one of the girls who married across the border] married this man. Maybe they say that they are also Lazi, but they live just like other Turks. I would never marry one of them!” Manana herself, who now lives in Turkey, told me that before she married “I was planning to convert to Christianity, but here that is not possible, so now I am Muslim.” Even in this case the differences between the Lazi from opposite sides of the border were affirmed — by a girl who found herself partly on the other side of the boundary.

REFLECTIONS

The marriage patterns show clear correlations with the changing nature of the border. Indeed, at one level they may be seen as straightforward responses to physical restraints. This was also the view of elderly male Sarpian when they explained to me why villagers increasingly had married outside their ethnic group. They stressed that their community was forced to find marriage-partners across the ethnic boundary because of the closed border between the USSR and Turkey. There simply were not enough Laz brides and grooms not related by blood in Sarpi to go around. But this observation does not make the marriage patterns less significant as indicators of the changing social orientation of villagers. The data show a general trend towards marrying with Georgians (Ajarians and other Georgians), which became especially clear in the last period, when 57 percent of all the marriages took place with Ajarians and other Georgians. The percentage of marriages with people of non-Islamic background rose to 15 percent over the last ten years. Although this percentage is not very high, it suggests that religious background is no longer an indisputable precondition for choosing a spouse. These statements about religious difference are somewhat problematic though, because many Lazi and Ajarians who in the table are classified as ‘Muslim’ had converted to Christianity during the 1990s. Still, the marriage-patterns illustrate that ethnic boundaries between Lazi, Ajarians and Georgians has gradually loosened.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the marriage data was that after the physical barrier between Georgia and Turkey had become permeable, only two cross-border weddings occurred. This low number is striking because verbal statements abounded that marrying Lazi was still preferred and because such marriages might have been economically interesting. The fact that the marriages both occurred immediately after the border opening suggests that the initial approaching of the two sides was only temporary, and was followed by a new drawing of social boundaries. The ethnic unity with the Lazi on the other side of the border turned out to be a chimera when the border was finally opened.

The changes in social life were paralleled by changes in the definition and outlook of ethnicity. To understand these definitions better, I will focus in the remainder of this chapter on the content of the category ‘Laz’ and try to explain how ‘the cultural stuff’ became such an important element for ethnic identity in Sarpi.
The cultural stuff

‘Culture’ was very much alive in Sarpi. It was celebrated almost aggressively and I was often perplexed by the insistence of villagers in displaying their culture. Whether it was when attending the meetings of the village-choir or during evenings learning to plait baskets or tie fishnets, my hosts always stressed the cultural significance of these events. They would talk extensively about the Laz tradition of nodei (working party), and they stressed that it still existed although ‘unfortunately’ was no longer accompanied by singing contests as it was written in ethnographic texts. Villagers insisted that this was a typical Laz tradition, though some speakers would draw attention to similarities with Georgian traditions. Proof of the Georgian connections were shown by young men, who urged me to visit a decayed storage room in the earth where old wine barrels had once been found. These young men also took me on trips to the old church ruin, where we would sit and imagine what pre-Ottoman Sarpi had looked like. In short, Sarpians were highly articulate about what was and what wasn’t culture. They also had clear ideas about what was authentic and what were corruptions of their culture. In village discourse ‘culture’ and ‘ethnicity’ were objectified, demarcated and endowed with definite meanings.

Initially it annoyed me that informants immediately offered to recite poems or sing ‘traditional’ songs or that they would interrupt interviews when they needed to check the information they provided with books written about the Lazi. But instead of annoying interruptions in my fieldwork I came to understand these reactions as significant indicators for the way Laz identity was negotiated and expressed in the village. They should be understood as the result of “conducting fieldwork in a place obsessed with generating ethnography,” as David Anderson typified his experiences in a far removed setting in Siberia (2000: 135). Sarpians actively preserved, reconstructed and expressed their ‘Laz culture’ and they were highly aware of their involvement and responsibilities in dealing with it. As Verdery argued about ‘identity,’ the kind of self-conscious “person who has an identity is a product of a specific historical process: the process of modern nation-state formation” (1994: 37). The same thing could be said about ‘being’ or ‘having’ a culture. Culture in Sarpi can not be understood as something ‘repressed’ by Soviet rule which is now re-emerging after the socialist ‘freeze.’ Nor should it be understood as something ‘covered’ by layers of Soviet modernization, which can still be detected when you dig deep enough. On the contrary, culture in Sarpi needs to be understood in its relation to Soviet identity politics. As Grant noted, “Soviet symbols and rituals are often dismissed because they were ‘imposed from above.’ Yet after several decades of Soviet rule” it is not clear what tradition and culture are (1995: 8). An exploration of the amalgamation of politics and culture may enhance understandings of how forms

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14 See also Grant (1995). He initially assumed that the Nivkh in Siberia would not care about abstract concepts like ‘culture’ but came to realize that they actually “saw themselves as a culture” (1995:16).
and contents of cultural expressions are rooted in the Soviet past and explain why they are important today.

**SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE**

Soviet national policies were, from the start, imbued with a deep-rooted ambiguity. In theory ‘nationality’ was supposed to wither with the development of Soviet society, but it became clear with time that the government was not looking to erase all ethnic differences. Both official discourses and political practices left much room to the various republics to sustain local nationalism. The make-up of the Soviet Union itself, divided into ‘ethnorepublics,’ created the institutional space to carry out ‘nationalizing’ policies (Smith 1998: 6). For small ethnic groups like the Lazi, who were classified as ‘current ethnic groups’ (Bugai 1991) the situation was more complex because for them sameness and difference were measured at least at two levels, first in relation to the communist ideal of ‘modern man’ or *homo sovieticus* and second in relation to the ‘ethnorepublic’ they were part of.

In the 1920s and 1930s the need to ‘root’ the communist party in local settings, coupled with the Bolshevik fear of being confronted by massive resistance resulted in a relatively strong emphasis on ethnic difference. These policies, referred to as *korenizatsiia*, included preferential access to higher education and jobs in the Soviet administration, increased membership in the local Communist Parties, and the creation of ‘ethnicity-based’ newspapers. As discussed in Part I these privileges were denied to Ajarians because they were considered to be ethnic Georgians. By contrast, the few thousand Lazi living in the Soviet Union were classified a distinct ethnic group and thus had access to the benefits provided by *korenizatsiia*. Villagers were sent to Leningrad to study in the “Institute of Minorities” and for a short period in the 1920s the school curriculum in Sarpi included lessons in Lazuri. During this period, newspapers and schoolbooks appeared in the native language and a Lazuri alphabet was introduced (See also Feurstein 1992).

‘Ethnic difference’ of the Lazi was initially promoted not least because the Soviet authorities saw Sarpi as a bridgehead for their aspirations in Turkey. The Soviet government still had ambitions to re-take the territories it had lost to Turkey and thus it attempted to increase the popularity of the USSR among the Lazi of Turkey through the encouragement of a Laz identity. But although ‘difference’ was to some extent institutionalized it was at the same time also dangerous, as was demonstrated in chapter five. To escape prosecution as well as to advance oneself in Soviet society, religious practices had to be denounced and personal ties with the Lazi in Turkey needed to be kept secret or denied. Though the Lazi were allowed to speak their own language, this language was increasingly purified of Turkish influences. In short, the kind of ‘ethnic difference’ allowed, was de-Ottomanized and ripped of its ‘harmful traditions.’ As noted earlier in this chapter, the need for ethnic purification

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15 *Korenizatsiia* or indigenization refers to measures aimed at increasing the popular basis of the communist party among the nationalities of the Soviet Union.
was also reflected in the replacement of Turkish-sounding personal names with Georgian-sounding ones.

Soviet publications, especially those written since the 1960s, tightly embedded the Lazi in the Georgian nation. These books stressed the similarities between Laz and Georgian culture, for example in dress-codes, ‘traditional’ customs, and language. Most ethnographic works also included extensive lists of Lazuri words with their counterparts in Georgian and Mingrelian languages and offered interpretations of how the languages are related (for example Vanilishi and Tandilava 1969). Emphasis on folklore, language and material culture were very useful to underline the link between Lazi and Georgians. An article written by a scholar from Sarpi – which discusses “the typical Laz-house” – demonstrates some of the ways these links between the Lazi and Georgians were made.

The Lazi population – an ancient Georgian tribe – has, up to now, preserved old economic, domestic and familial traditions. The dialect and folklore are one of the basic sources for the study of the historical and contemporary unity of Georgian national culture, and the Laz house forms an important element in the material culture of Georgia [...] the Laz house and farming buildings have many parallels with building-styles in other parts of Georgia, while at the same time demonstrating local variations (Vanilishi 1978: 130-131.).

The emphasis on material culture and folklore disconnects ethnicity from religion and the recent past. Instead, material culture and folklore are presented as primordial, traits of the pre-Islamic Lazi. Moreover, material culture creates the possibility to reach back to the imagined shared past with ‘Mother-Georgia.’ These and other publications redraw the category ‘Laz’ as being part of the larger Georgian nation and integrate its material culture into the Georgian mosaic where, though each region has its peculiarities, it is the similarities that matter. Far from remaining confined to scholarly domains or official rhetoric, the same ideas also thrived when my informants talked about ethnicity. When they talked about their language, my informants portrayed it as an old Georgian language, one that could be learned by other Georgians ‘within three days.’ Likewise, when elaborating on old ethnic roots, it was specifically the shared past with the Georgians which was noted. The relationship between the Lazi and Georgians was often imagined as symbiotic, in the sense that both groups formed for the other a weaker or stronger ‘brother.’ The idea that the Lazi are an integral component of the ‘Georgian mosaic’ are well observable in the new ‘folk rituals’ advanced by the Soviet leadership. These ‘folk rituals’ poignantly show the relation between Soviet modernization and ethnic objectification.

“COLKHOBA” – AN ANCIENT THOUGH YOUTHFUL CELEBRATION¹⁶

Folk rituals were increasingly considered important during the 1960s and 1970s, when they became central tools in the Soviet struggle against ‘detrimental traditions.’ In her book The Rites of Rulers (1981), Christel Lane provides an impor-

¹⁶ This heading is from a news report on Colkhoba, Sovetskaia Adzharia 03-11-1982.
tant hypothesis concerning the link between the increasing importance of ritual and the formation of new identities. As she sees it, when economic development slowed down in the 1960s the discrepancies between Soviet reality and utopian communism became more apparent, creating a problem of legitimacy for the rulers. Since the coercion and repression of the 1930s were no longer alternatives for maintaining social control and because the economic revolution already had become a distant memory, the leaders began to rely more on cultural management in order to induce people to accept their definition of social reality. Moreover, soviet scholars and ideologists were increasingly aware that *Homo Sovieticus* would not automatically appear and that something had to replace the ‘detrimental old traditions’ as religion was generally called (Lane 1981: 27-29). Thus, old and new secular traditions were invented or given new life by Soviet authorities as a means to lead people away from other, mostly religious, holidays.

The renewed emphasis on the role of secular rituals in the atheist struggle was visible in local newspapers. They showed an increase in the number of articles with titles such as “New traditions are broadly introduced,” “Strengthening the struggle against detrimental traditions” and “New traditions enter the life of workers.”

Certainly, many of the socialist innovations (like socialist weddings and funerals or various political ceremonies) were regretted, opposed or passively accepted by villagers. However certain rituals, especially new holidays and festivals, were effectively transformed in celebrations of culture and nationality. During the 1970s all throughout the Soviet Union new cultural holidays were promoted. In Soviet Georgia cultural festivals like *Shotaoba, Ilioba, Vazhaoba, Jakoboba, Tbilisoba* were initiated, the names of which all refer to heroic stages of the Georgian past. Sarpi had its own festival *Colkhoba*, which was first celebrated on a large scale in 1979. Through this festival Soviet and local ideas of culture and ethnicity both merged and conflicted. Ultimately this festival contributed to further ideas of Laz identity within the overarching Georgian nation. In the September 25th, 1979 edition of the newspaper *Sovetskaia Adzharia* two journalists give their impressions of the festival Colkhoba and quoted elaborately from the various speeches that were given during the celebrations:

Georgia is gifted with beautiful traditions and national holidays, many of which achieved new socialist content in recent years. [For example] the authentic holiday ‘Shuamtoba’ is celebrated yearly in the mountainous villages of Ajaria. It is a holiday of working people, of villagers as well as laborers and intelligentsia. Last Saturday we witnessed the rebirth of yet another ancient holiday of the inhabitants of the Georgian Black Sea region.

The holiday Colkhoba was celebrated in the border village Sarpi.

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17 Taken from issues of *Sovetskaia Adzharia*; respectively 24-11-1978; 27-12-1979; 11-08-1976.
18 *Shotaoba* refers to Shota Rustaveli, writer of the Georgian epic “The tiger in the panter-skin.” *Ilioba, Vazhaoba* and *Iakoboba*, refer successively to Iliia Chavchavadze, Vazha-Pshavela and Iakob Gogebashvili, three revered 19th century nationalist writers.
19 ‘Shuamtoba’ refers to the midpoint of the period people spent with their cattle in the mountains.
This holiday has existed for many centuries. As a true workers' holiday, the local inhabitants usually celebrated it at the end of August — beginning of September, after the harvest was gathered and before the start of the fishing season. In the past it was called 'Day of the Sea.' Presently they gave it the name Colkhoba in honor of the ancient inhabitants of these places — the Colchians. When we entered Sarpi suddenly two Colchians, as if reappearing from foregone centuries, crossed the road with lances. They wished us a pleasant stay and insisted that we first try a national delicacy. Only then the Colchians removed their lances and let us pass. And so from the start we arrived in a world of legends, full of the atmosphere of foregone days. On the rocks near the sea, a fragment of a Colchian settlement was reconstructed, the way we know it to have been. [...] 

At three o clock PM everyone was invited to the village center. The celebrations started. Among the guests were many prominent party functionaries [...] as well as famous writers and academics [...]. R. Bakradze, chairman of the executive committee of Khelvachauri raion and people's deputy, opened the festivities. He told the crowd that it was the first time that Colkhoba had been celebrated on such a large scale with the intent to revive this ancient tradition, to give it a modern socialist direction, and moreover to represent the features of our Soviet way of life. "On such workers' holidays, friends from different corners of the republic will meet and enrich their cultural ties. They will exchange experiences and thus contribute to the preservation of the best of national traditions. The decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 'about the further improvements of ideological and political educational work' [...] stressed the importance of communist education among workers in the struggle for communism. The inculcation of new rituals and traditions, as is well known, is an important step that facilitates the success of these struggles. Therefore, let Colkhoba be a part of our life; let it be a genuine holiday of workers, of friendship and brotherhood."

Then the podium was given to Z. Tandilava, doctoral candidate in philology and head of the folklore and dialectology department of the Batumi research institute of the Georgian academy of Science. He outlined the history of the holiday and its social roots. "It originated, possibly, during paganism, when this holiday existed in different forms among many ethnographic groups inhabiting the coastal region of the Black Sea. The tradition was handed down to the Lazi from the Colchians. Academician N. Marr, who traveled in Turkish Lazistan, wrote that in 1909 this holiday was dying out. And indeed, it was celebrated less and less often, approximately until the 30s and 40s of our century. Komsomol members and young inhabitants of Sarpi recently decided to give the holiday a new life. Today we are witnesses of the fact that their lofty plans have been successful."

After these ceremonies the participant headed to the sea. Here, right on the shore there were scenes from Colchian life. A spectacle was performed

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20 Rezo Bakradze was born in Sarpi. At the time his brother Murman was director of the kolkhoz.
21 Zurabi Tandilava was born in Sarpi and wrote together with Muhammad Vanilishi the historical-ethnographic work Lazeti (1964), which was later translated into Turkish in an edition that caused much controversy in Turkey (for a discussion see Bellér-Hann 1995).
which visualized the history of the region and the fortunate life which the
October revolution had brought to the local inhabitants, as it did to all
people of our country. [...] The central part of the celebrations consisted of
theater, dances and songs portraying the quest of Jason. A play told the story
of the Argonauts who sailed by boat to the coast of the wealthy Kingdom of
Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. The fleece was represented by a
bunch of dyed wool that was being washed in a gold-filled stream. The hero
had to fulfill several almost impossible tasks in order to obtain the Golden
Fleece. He fought an intense fight with a dragon and was helped by the
king’s daughter Medea, who possessed magic powers. Together Medea and
Jason succeeded and managed to escape by ship and returned to Greece. The
spectacle was impressive and so was the play of the amateur artists. The
colorful costumes were carried out with tasteful decoration and the vessels
sailed the dark blue sea as true copies of foregone times.

The kolhoz workers prepared rich meals of traditional food. We
enjoyed the food while the concert started. The extensive program [included
performances of groups from other parts of Ajaria] and was concluded by
the always interesting performance of the singing and dance ensemble
‘Lazeti’ from Sarpi. And of course, what would a holiday be without a wed-
ing. On this day [two villagers] became a happy bride and groom. They say
that a wedding on a holiday brings happiness. Yes, in Sarpi traditions are
honored with love. The customs of their native village are carefully handed
from father to son, from grandfather to grandchild. […]

The article filled an entire page of the eight-page regional newspaper Sovietskaia
Adzharia and Sabchota Ach’ara. In a village that did not exist on geographical maps
and could not be easily visited by outsiders, the festival was bound to have an impact
like “a bomb,” as an informant told me. Suddenly the village was in the news, written
about in newspapers and briefly shown on republican television. To the delight of
some villagers, news about Colkhoba even reached Poland, where a colorfully
illustrated article appeared and was later sent back to the village by the journalist.
Even for the Turks across the border the event was something special, “they became
very nervous, they probably thought we were planning an attack,” a villager joked.

The presented text explicitly displayed the double meaning of the festival.
On one hand the play stressed the ancient roots of the inhabitants of western Georgia
and their common roots in the Kingdom of Colchis. The article wrote that the holiday
“had been given the name Colkhoba to honor the ancient inhabitants of these places,
the Colchians.” In other articles villagers confirmed these historical ties: “village-
elders explain [that] Colkhoba probably originated as early as pagan times, when it
was a cultural holiday celebrated in various forms by the ethnic groups of the Black
Sea coast – Mingrelians, Georgians and Lazi. Among the Lazi this tradition was
probably handed down from the Colchians” (Sovetskaia Adzhariia, 27-10-1987). In
short Colkhoba was to be seen as an authentic holiday that existed for many centu-
ries, but which unfortunately had disappeared until it was given a new life under
Soviet rule.
On the other hand Colkhoba explicitly aimed to represent ‘our Soviet way of life.’ It was described as a holiday of working people, and assigned an important role in the struggle against ‘detrimental traditions and customs.’ The prominence of government officials who inaugurated the holiday with their speeches as well as the positioning of the holiday “after harvest and before the fishing season” emphasized its socialist features. In newspaper articles these ‘socialist’ features were further illustrated by passages (excluded from the above text) about the achievement of the Sarpi kolkhoz.

Thus, Colkhoba referred to the distant past and the unity of ‘Georgian’ people living along the eastern Black Sea coast, while at the same time it was invested with new socialist meaning. The slogan of nationality politics in general, ‘socialist in content, national in form,’ was reflected in Colkhoba. These two-fold meanings of Colkhoba were not fixed and ‘national form’ and ‘socialist content’ were not mutually exclusive. Therefore it will be interesting to look at the various meanings attributed to the festival and to see how this ‘socialist ritual’ was locally transformed into a celebration of ethnic and national identity.

THE PRODUCTION AND ‘CORRUPTIONS’ OF COLKHOBA

The elements for the celebrations of Colkhoba had been present in Soviet Georgia for several decades. In the 1960s and 1970s, Soviet historians had extensively written about the Colchian kingdom as a federation of ‘Georgian’ groups such as the Mingrelians, the Lazi and the Gurians. The regional press published articles about the places “where Medea lived” like Gonio, the neighboring village of Sarpi, where “more than 30 gold items were found during excavations, adding substantial proof to the veracity of the theory of the Golden Fleece” (Sovetskaia Adzharia 11-11-1977). The first page of a book titled Soviet Sarpi (sabch’ota sarpi) written by Rezo Bakradze mentioned the following interesting speculations: “From historical sources we know that Sarpi is derived from Apsari. Sarpi stems from Psarepi, which is the plural ending of Apsari in Lazuri. According to Plavius Arianes, “Apsarosi” is connected to Medea’s brother’s name Apsyrtus” (1971: 7). If nothing more, this wordplay and similar guesses about the past illustrate the imaginary power that ancient history had in Soviet Ajaria.

The initiators of the festival were well acquainted with the imagined ties between the Colchian Kingdom and the village. They were six students who were accepted at Tbilisi University during a campaign to increase the level of education among the Lazi. Inspired by the cultural vibrancy they witnessed in the capital of the Georgian SSR they made their first plans. One of them remembered:

You should understand the atmosphere in Tbilisi at the time. It was buzzing with cultural activity, theater, exhibitions and festivals. So we saw the grand festivals like Tbilisoba and others in which the history of the city was

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22 For example Vanilishi and Tandilava (1964: 5-6); see Broers (2000) and Shnirleman (1998: 54-56) for an overview of how in Soviet literature images of an ethnically homogeneous ‘Georgian’ kingdom of Colchis were popularized.
celebrated. And we were thinking how great it would be if we could organize such an event in Sarpi.

What they had in mind was to organize an event that would make the link between the origins of the Lazi and contemporary Sarpi explicit. At first they played with the idea of calling their event Kvamkhazoba, after the name of a rock called Kvamkhaz from which villagers used to take their yearly last dive in the sea. According to the initiators this was “a kind of holiday that already existed in Sarpi” and was celebrated yearly around August 18. The plays that they prepared took the sea as the central element and were modeled after the Argonautica. “We tried to follow the literal text of the myth, because it best symbolized the deep roots of our people and their relation to the sea.” To make the link between these deep origins and Laz culture even more evident they invited the artist Hasan Helimishi to have an exposition of his paintings, which were all depictions of traditional Laz culture and celebrated the seafaring and fishing qualities of the Lazi, in Sarpi.

The timing of their plans turned out favorable. A former resident of Sarpi and uncle of one of the initiators was secretary of the Khelvachauri raion executive committee (raikom) at the time. With his assistance, and the help of several other influential Lazi, the group managed to get the funding and facilities necessary to prepare the festival in Sarpi in 1977. The official guests clearly liked this first performance and allowed the initiators to organize it a second time. “They suggested that we would redo it on a wider scale, not just for Sarpi, but a performance for Western Georgia. That was why we called it Colkhoba, so that it would be recognizable for whole western Georgia. It was huge – we invited Lazi representatives from Sukhumi (Abkhazia) and many others. People even came from Tbilisi. At that time only Sarpians performed and it was a great success, something new!”

After Colkhoba had become a success, the local raion authorities decided that its importance was too big to have it take place in a small village like Sarpi. Because of the proximity of the border the festival posed problems for the KGB, who had difficulties monitoring so many spectators. “Especially the banquet posed a problem because it was impossible to plan beforehand who would go where.” The KGB demanded a list that showed where every single guest would spend the night. “But it was impossible to do that. People meet each other and they can’t refuse invitations.”

In the 1980s the festival was transferred to the remains of a Roman fort in the neighboring village Gonio. “When the performance moved to Gonio, others took over. We only got a small part, and for the rest functioned as advisors. It was not bad that performance in Gonio, but it wasn’t it.” After that the festival was transferred to Khelvachauri, the raion-center. In the eyes of a Sarpian this shift completely ridiculed the event. “By that time it was already something completely different. There is no water there, so instead they transported a ship to the central square [thus] completely

23 “Very soon ‘Colkhoba’ expanded beyond the confines of a single village, it became a holiday for the entire Khelvachauri raion, even of our entire autonomous republic” (Batumskaia Rabochie 13-10-1988).
destroying the effect we had achieved in Sarpi." Other adjustments were made as well. The festival came to include exhibitions of agricultural successes and staged performances by Ajarian dancing and singing ensembles. Moreover, to stress the socialist nature of the celebrations, the date was shifted from August to late in the fall, “after the collection of harvest” thus further underlining the labor-idea behind the celebrations (Sovetskaia Adzhariia, 27-10-1987).

My informants insisted that these modifications destroyed the connection with the past the event meant to symbolize. According to Anzor, this tragedy befell many Soviet festivals. "They began as spontaneous folk celebrations, but then they began to mix politics and tradition [with the result that] they lost their strength." For my informants the significance of Colkhoba was that it was about history and about the Lazi, and moreover that it had showed the links between the origins of the Lazi and their village. These elements disappeared with the ‘Soviet corruptions.’

The production of Colkhoba exemplified that the two-sided message of socialism – national in form, socialist in content – had been a central element from the start. But over the years the balance between these two sides changed in favor of ‘socialist content,’ causing my informants to speak of ‘corruptions’ of the ‘authentic’ celebration of Colkhoba. About the possible convergence of ‘socialist content’ and ‘nationalist form’ Christel Lane wrote, “many concessions to local traditional culture have been made but such concessions, it must be stressed, have always been on the form and never the content” (1981: 142). However, in local interpretations and memories of the festival the distinction between form and content was not all that clear-cut. To quote Lane once more, “There still remains, however, the danger that the old forms cannot become wedded to the new content and that instead they continue to keep alive old associations of a national kind” (1982:142-3). This is an interesting observation, although instead of keeping alive old associations I would argue that the significance of Colkhoba was that it created associations about old times. In present memories of the celebrations, the overt communist messages that had been present from the start were omitted and instead the ‘original’ Colkhoba was presented as a continuation of local customs. One suspects that the ‘corruptions’ even reinforced the idea of authenticity.

Whereas the communist ‘content’ of Colkhoba is now excluded from memory, the myth of a glorious past is more tightly embraced. It is not surprising then that in a recently written book on Ajarian culture no reference is made on the Soviet origin of the festival, but states simply that the plays are valuable because they “teach our people about the roots of their long and rich history” (Komakhidze 1999: 499-501). People have picked out those elements of the celebrations that suited them best and omitted elements that no longer fit. The ‘invention of tradition’ as expressed in Colkhoba links up with other present-day images of the past. Whereas the dehumanizing of ‘the Turk’ and the negation of the Islamic past create difference with their Turkish Laz neighbors, the notions expressed in Colkhoba stress the Lazi’s shared past with the ‘Georgian’ people, and links them to an ancestral homeland - the
old kingdom of Colchis - to demonstrate unity with the Georgian nation. This deep past moreover provides more legitimacy than the recent history. Both the celebrations of Colkhoba and the dismissal of Islam strengthen cohesion, by defining to what the Georgian part of the village and its inhabitants do and do not belong.

NEW CELEBRATIONS

Colkhoba disappeared in the late 1980s and it took ten years before ideas to re-install it were realized. It might seem that the celebrations described above are now part of rusty nostalgia about Soviet times, fading memories that are increasingly irrelevant to those who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s. Certainly for the older generation Colkhoba spurred memories of a time in which life was still good and in which political leaders enabled them to express their culture (even though they ‘corrupted’ it as well). What struck me though was that young villagers actively discussed their Colchian origins. Moreover, the images of Jason and the Argonauts were appropriated in the café’s and restaurants that were opened along the shore in recent years. They carried names such as ‘The Golden Fleece,’ ‘Argo,’ ‘Colchis,’ and ‘Medea,’ and the interior of one café displayed a map of the Kingdom of Colchis and a painting of Jason’s struggles with the dragon. For the younger generation it was less the references to a ‘good Soviet past’ that mattered as the possibility of expressing their ideas of belonging through the festival. This was especially evident in the comments of the organizers of the new Colkhoba (among who were three men in their thirties). They were cited in a 1998 newspaper article expressing their wish that “in the future ‘Colkhoba’ may return in a less official and more truly folk character.” Contacts were established with the Ajarian authorities and in 2001 financial assistance was promised.

The 2001 version of Colkhoba was held on the newly built soccer field next to the newly renovated village school. The choice for this place (on which the sponsors had insisted) and the spatial organization of the scene were telling of the prominence of the Ajarian political elite in ‘cultural’ events. Spectators watched the celebrations from behind the fences that enclosed the soccer field. Within the fences were the seats for official guests. They were seated behind tables with fruit and drinks and protected from the sun by large parasols. The celebration started several hours later than planned because the guests from Batumi were delayed. These guests included the locally famous novelist and poet Pridon Khalvashi, Ajarian minister of culture Komakhidze and other government officials.

The guests opened the celebrations with elaborate speeches on the importance of keeping traditions alive as well as on the crucial role of the government in financing the initiative. References were made to the construction of the soccer field and the renovation of the school which, it was stressed, were made possible by

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24 Lack of interest in contemporary history and preoccupation with the deep past is a feature found in other postsocialist contexts as well. See Law (1998) for Georgia and Humphrey (1992) for Mongolia.

25 In my discussions with them they also pointed out that through organizing Colkhoba again, they aimed to teach the Lazi in Turkey what Laz culture was actually about.
personal involvement of Aslan Abashidze, leader of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic. An hour and a half later the actual celebration started. From behind the fences the spectacle looked somewhat odd. The dancers and actors played their roles but it almost seemed as if they were doing an act for the ‘jury.’ This ‘jury’ moreover seemed hardly interested and was busy talking and eating. After the performances had ended the guests were led away to a banquet to which the actors were also invited. For the village the celebrations had ended rather disappointingly.

The comments of villagers made it clear that this was not what they had hoped for. “It was embarrassing,” explained one dancer, “it was as if we were auditioning for them.” Anzori, whose critique of Soviet rituals I cited earlier told me: “Festivals during the Soviet period always had an ideological flavor but at least the celebrations were meant for us – now it is only for them.” It thus may be concluded that the intent to organize a new Colkhoba in “a less official and more truly folk” manner, as the initiators had intended, did not come true. On the contrary, this particular celebration rather reinforced the increasingly popular idea that whereas during the Soviet period “the state existed for the people […] now the people exist for the state,” as Aman phrased it. Thus, the new ‘corruptions’ seem to reinforce the idea that the Colkhoba of the 1970s was ‘original’ and ‘authentic;’ a celebration of a close-knit Laz community in more stable times. In other words, the ‘corruptions’ of Colkhoba have entered a new era but do not erase memories of the Colchian past.

**Shifting ethnic boundaries**

The Lazi of Sarpi had, as it were, effectively adapted to the realities of Georgian-Soviet society. They saw themselves as the direct heirs of the inhabitants of Colchis and took pride in this long history. Moreover, they increasingly distanced themselves from their Islamic past. However, this should not lead to the conclusion that the Sarpians lost a sense of ‘being Laz.’ On the contrary, many villagers take tremendous pride in their ethnic affiliation. In the new situation, several of the old identity-markers have been modified to fit within a Georgian frame, or are rejected altogether. The outcome can be understood as both a reaction to the Soviet system and a product of Soviet society. The word ‘Laz’ has acquired new meanings. The concept is disconnected from religious affiliation with Islam and, at present, is in the process of being retied to Christianity which has – thus the adherents stress – even older roots in Lazistan than in Georgia proper. When I asked a villager whether he saw himself as Georgian or as Laz, this idea of belonging to the ‘oldest Christians’ must have been in his mind when replying, “I am both, of course I am Laz, but at the same time I am Georgian – not just a Georgian, a first-class Georgian.”

The limitations of movement in the border zone and the imposition of Soviet rule radically changed the economic and social basis of life. The border did more than disrupt communal and familial ties; it created a division that was not only physical but also increasingly social and cultural. During the first decades of Soviet rule,
villagers initially merely adapted. But trying to survive, they became entwined more and more into the fabric of Soviet Georgian Life. Former barriers to such integration like religion, but also language, were overcome not only by Soviet propaganda and education but also by the need and wish of villagers to advance themselves in the new society. In Georgian Sarpi a peculiar Laz-identity was formed which differed in the most crucial aspects – religion, ethnicity and nationality – from Laz-identity across the border. This small group of Georgian Lazi sometimes even perceives itself as the only remaining Lazi. A frequently employed phrase to stress their own uniqueness is that ‘the Lazi in Turkey don’t even speak their own language anymore, they have already become Turks.’

To return to the story of the border, it would be wrong to speak of a total partition or a completed process of homogenization. However, this process was well on its way to completion. When the border was opened at the end of the 1980s, two different worlds stepped into contact: Georgia was poor and on the edge of civil war, while the neighboring Black Sea provinces in Turkey had just started to become a prosperous region. The information villagers had about their neighbors was rooted foremost in the distorted images provided by the respective states and although the possibilities for contact were greatly enhanced after the border opening, the stereotypes have persisted in a modified shape. The old relatives – in the form of new others – formed a threat to the sense of being that had developed on the Georgian side. State ideologies had created the language in which the stereotypes were communicated, but it seemed mainly the need to dissociate oneself from their neighbors after the Soviet collapse that lead to the final ‘acceptance’ of these Soviet ideologies. The outcome was that ‘the other Lazi’ were increasingly denounced as ‘different,’ no longer real Lazi. Similarly, but pointing in a different direction, the youth of Georgian Sarpi tended to see themselves more as Georgian, and sometimes wanted to rid themselves of any Laz-connection.

A fine contrast arises when comparing the outcome on the Georgian side with what has been written about Laz society on the Turkish side, where ideas of nationality are strongly connected to Islam. The anthropologist Meeker argues against the applicability of western notions of ethnic identity that might easily lead to the conclusion that the categories ‘Laz’ and ‘Turk’ are mutually exclusive (Meeker 1971: 323). In contrast to western notions of ethnic identity, he maintains that ‘ethnic identity’ as it emerges among the Lazi of Turkey refers back to the millet system of the Ottoman Empire, where ‘ethnic’ categories were ascribed on the basis of religion. Meeker maintains that in present-day Turkey “the religious criterion [is often] indispensable for determining who is and who is not a Turk” (ibid, p.322). Other authors have also noted the merging of ethnic and religious identity. Chris Hann cites the German scholar Rosen, who asked some Lazi in 1843, “What religion did you have before you adopted Islam?” they replied, “We have been Turk for a long time.” Hann encountered the same attitude in his own fieldwork when villagers were astonished that he spoke Turkish although he was not a Muslim. Hann argued that
although the Lazi have a language and other local traditions that differentiate them from the Anatolian Turks, this does not undermine their adherence to the Turkish nation-state. Hann concludes, “the Turkish-Islamic synthesis is as applicable here at the periphery as it is in the Anatolian heartland” (Hann 1997: 36).

So how should the situation be placed that emerged just across the border in Georgia? In a way the process is similar, although pointing in a different direction. Laz identity on the Georgian side has merged with a Georgian identity and the meaning of ‘Laz’ is seen as merely a regional category, just like there are Ajarians, Gurians and Kakhetians. However, the basis on which this new identity is built refers no longer to Islam and even the sense of citizenship – after 80 years of Soviet rule – is relatively weak. Rather Laz identity on the Georgian side, points to deep ethnic roots and an imagined ancient community in which Lazi and Georgians were one. Religion plays an important role in this respect but then as being ‘Christian Laz’ who returned to their ‘lost religion.’

Concerning the Turkish side of the border, Bellér-Hann writes about the tight connection between Laz-identity and Islam that the “internalization of merged identities is the result of centuries of Islamization and Turkicization,” and should not be regarded the product of the republican propaganda during the last 70 years. In her view, the attempts of a Laz elite in Istanbul to evoke the greatness of the Lazi in classical times are a “romantic quest for a past that can never be revived because it has no place in the sense of identity of the people concerned” (Bellér-Hann 1995a: 502-504). However, on the Georgian side of the border this greatness of the Lazi in classical times is exactly what Soviet history has evoked. The “romantic quest” for an ancient past has become a living reality for the Lazi of Georgia.