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

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Citation for published version (APA):

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“On August 31, 1988, perestroika finally arrived in Sarpi,” thus starts a Russian journalist’s account of the border opening. The article continues with a blunt metaphorical depiction: “After three days of subtropical rain, the sky cleared and when the border was finally opened the sun began to shine. For the first time since 1937 villagers were allowed to meet their relatives. They embraced each other, recognized each other’s old surnames, and exchanged the family-news of so many years” (Mdivani 1992: 13-14). The opening of the long closed Georgian – Turkish border was a momentous occasion for the villagers of Georgian Sarpi. It was a surprising one as well. Soviet and Turkish authorities had been planning to open the border for more than ten years, but for unknown reasons delayed the event time and again. On the morning of August 31 the villagers knew nothing about what would happen that day. State representatives arrived in Sarpi and announced that the long awaited day had finally arrived. As a villager recalled, “one of the officials asked how many years it had been since we had seen our relatives. Then he told us, ‘only two more hours, then we will open the border.’ The news spread like a fire through the village. Loud voices filled the valley and within an hour the field in the center was swarming with people.” Once the border was opened “the masses could no longer be controlled, and villagers ran to the other side to meet their relatives” (Sovietskaia Adzharia 01-09-1988). One informant remembered: “the plan was that only government officials would cross the border, but from the Turkish side everyone started to cross. Sarpi was completely filled with Turks who were looking for relatives, asking for this or that person. There were so many people you couldn’t even walk.”

During the years following 1988 villagers from both sides took the chance to visit their relatives and to explore (hesitantly) the nearby but unknown countries. Siblings who had been out of contact for many years reminisced about old times. Especially elderly inhabitants of Sarpi cherished the momentous event. For them the possibility of visiting their relatives was the fulfillment of a long held dream. “It was a heavenly period,” remembered Kakè, a lady in her eighties who had crossed the border six times after 1988 to visit her brother and his family in Turkish Sarp. During her last visit, her brother’s son proposed that she came to live with them, but she considered herself too old for such a change. She was very positive about her visits and the Turkish way of life. “They have all kinds of kitchen tools,” she told me, “and they don’t take anything from the field, they just buy everything in the shops.” Several times she remarked that her relatives in Turkey lived “very civilized.”

Kakè displayed positive sentiments concerning the border opening, but this attitude was not widely shared. Almost immediately after Kakè had spoken, her
daughter and my research assistant Nino commented that I should not take the words of the old lady seriously. According to them, if life on the other side of the border was really so ‘civilized,’ then it should be noted that this was only a recent development and one that was restricted to material life. In their view this ‘civilized life’ should be understood as the result of recent economic gain connected to the border opening and of labor migration patterns between the region and Germany. According to Nino these factors had allowed them to acquire some, but only the most superficial, characteristics of ‘European civilization.’ In most interviews the higher living standards across the border were downplayed or trivialized by stressing the perceived backwardness, lack of culture and poor education of Turkish citizens.

Villagers had expected that the border opening would enable them to re-establish kinship ties, but as it turned out their long awaited relatives had become strangers. Not only did they dress and act differently, their moral worlds had different reference points and their common past was no longer shared. As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, many of these differences could be understood in relation to the economic, social and cultural integration of villagers in Soviet Georgian society. Moreover, due to the rigid nature of the border, these differences only became visible once the border was opened in 1988. But although differences between both sides were obvious, this by itself did not explain why relations between villagers on the two sides have become strained.

In his article *The Narcissism of Minor Differences* Anton Blok challenges the received wisdom which holds that “the larger the (economic, social, cultural) differences, the greater the chance of violent confrontations” (2001: 115). Based on empirical data and the works of prominent scholars he argues that it might be the exact opposite. In his words, “the fiercest struggles often take place between individuals, groups and communities that differ very little – or between which the differences have greatly diminished” (2001: 115). The value of this provocative argument is, I think, that it reminds us of the need to look critically at the way difference is managed in social relations. In this chapter I will explore why differences between relatives across the border turned out to be unbridgeable. Moreover I will analyze how the perceived differences are employed in the creation of new patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Blok illustrates the importance of minor differences by invoking the idea “that identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted, reinforced and defended against what is closest and represents the greatest threat.” (2001: 123). In other words, differences matter most when they are perceived as threats to identity and when they involve people with whom one identifies.

These insights are important to understand the strained relations across the border in Sarpi. However, it is impossible for me to define whether the involved differences were ‘major’ or ‘minor’ differences. The differences that seem ‘minor’ to the outsider may be very central, indeed ‘major,’ to the people involved, and vice versa. What I will do is to explore how perceived differences (major or minor) relate to expectations and social distance. I will show that the disappointments concerning
the renewed contacts were so immediate because difference was unexpected. Furthermore I will argue that the nearness between both halves of the village – in terms of social relations, geography, shared history and ethnicity – increased the immediacy of reinforcing social and cultural boundaries. In this context differences were magnified and essentialized and consequently resulted in new patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Although the opening of the border at first seemed to undo the political division of Sarpi, it now seems that this division is being deeper imprinted in the social and moral world of its inhabitants.

Renewed and aborted contacts

Stories are told and shared. They are grounded in experience, addressed at particular audiences and intended to carry across specific messages. The stories with which I will start this chapter had the specific purpose of conveying the reasons why the narrators no longer cared about the border opening, and why they were disillusioned about the contacts with their relatives across the border. The text that I will present was recorded during an evening in which Otari, Zurabi and Nino told stories about their village and their experiences with the border opening. It is important to note that Otari and Zurabi had frequently traveled to Turkey between 1990 and 1995. But neither they, nor Nino, held an international passport at present. Otari was in his early forties and had made many trading trips to Turkey in the early 1990s but now earned his living as a cabdriver. Zurabi was in his late fifties and director of the village school. He had been involved in a number of cultural exchanges with Turkey after the border opening but had not crossed the border during the previous three years. Nino, twenty-eight at the time, had visited relatives in Turkey with her parents on a few occasions. At the moment she was unemployed and disillusioned not only with the cross-border contacts but more generally with the possibilities that life in Sarpi could offer her.

Otari, a gifted speaker in informal gatherings decorated with wine and food, started telling about the first time he met some of his relatives.

I have this aunt, who, together with her son, stayed in my house for three weeks. I had not known her before but I considered [her stay] to be a normal thing. I mean, she was a close relative. A few months later I happened to travel to Turkey for business when a neighbor asked me to deliver a message to someone. Of course I agreed. Anyway, going to Turkey was still like being on a tourist trip, and for me it was interesting to visit peoples’ homes. It happened that the house [to which the message needed be delivered] was located not far from my relatives’ house, those who had visited

1 After initial visits to relatives most villagers have continued to cross the border only for business and even that is happening less frequently. Diminished cross-border movement is caused foremost by dwindling trade opportunities (see chapter eight for an elaborate discussion), but is locally also explained by pointing to negative experiences with relatives in Turkey.

2 The term used was deida (mother’s sister). Here it referred to a younger cousin of Otari’s mother.
me here. I was thinking by myself, what [bad things] will they think if I would just pass their house without visiting? What will they think of me when they find out? So I decided to pass by. My cousin opened the door, and he just stared at me: ‘You?’, he said, ‘How come, what are you doing here?’ When I entered the house I saw my aunt doing some ironing. She raised her head, only to lower it immediately after’ (laughter). So there I was, standing.... My cousin didn't even have the guts to tell me that he was busy and wasn't able to receive guests that moment. He didn't even apologize. So I just left by myself.

The episode was briefly discussed among the three. Zurabi remarked:

For us those things are difficult to understand, because here relatives should come first. And there is another thing. You know how much hospitality means to us in Georgia. We have our tradition of eating and drinking. When they visit us, we know how to treat them, how to receive them well. Even if a person has nothing in his home and is in a bad economic situation, he will tell his kids, sorry, you will have to go early to bed tonight, we don't have food for you, but we have guests tonight. And the children won’t even complain, because they know how important it is to have guests, as we say – guests are a gift from God.... But over there it is not like that. They are a bit like Germans, economically that is. A little bit, a little bit of everything [implied is probably food, alcohol and time]. Even in psychology they are not the same. Seventy years may be very little for history, but it did a lot to them, they are not like we are. For us relatives are the most valuable persons, while for them kinship is obviously not that important. For them, a relative is just a person.

Nino nodded and told me: “You see, they may be Lazi but anyway they are Turks. They still know our language a little bit, but they adopted a Turkish life style. They don’t care about their relatives the way we do. Perhaps they cannot help it; they lived under the Turkish regime for so many years.” Otari picked up on the issue of the state. He asked Zurabi and Nino whether he should tell me about his neighbor Zviadi. They pressed him to go on. Zurabi refilled the glasses.

Not long after the border opening Zviadi [Vanilishi] was visited by one of his cousins from Turkey. [After several days] Zviadi started to feel uncomfortable, fearing that his cousin might become bored with staying in his house all the time. So he arranged a tour through Georgia to show some beautiful parts of our country. You must know that at the time, people here in Sarpi had money at their disposal, but still Zviadi made quite an [financial] offer. He arranged for transport, he paid the hotels, the food. They traveled to Kutaisi and Tbilisi and who knows where else, so you will understand.

Right before he returned to Turkey his cousin offered [Zviadi] a nice deal of selling kalashnikov bullets in Turkey. According to [his cousin], people would pay up to two dollars a piece. ‘That could be very interesting’ Zviadi thought. 'Why carry those heavy loads, when you can simply carry a dozen of boxes and make a few thousand dollars that way' He knew of course about the risks involved – trading in bullets is forbidden. But his cousin reassured him that no one would check at the border and that they
would sell [the bullets] under the counter in his own store, so that no one would find out about their business. In the end Zviadi decided to give it a try. Still somewhat unsure he decided that for his first [trading] trip he would only take one box of bullets along with other stuff [merchandise], which he planned to sell in Turkey in the meantime. He hid the bullets in his jacket and crossed the border without difficulties. But when he met his cousin, I think it was in Hopa, [his cousin] proposed to trade right there on the street, and to exhibit all the goods on the car. Well, Zviadi had some doubts about what was happening, but he had never expected that when his relative reappeared he would bring four, five policemen. They first checked the merchandise on his car. Obviously they didn't find what they were looking for. Zviadi however, became nervous as soon as he noticed the police. Luckily, before they approached closer he managed to throw [the box] behind his back in the river down the road. After that the police asked him, 'alright, where did you hide the bullets?!' Zviadi, who felt relieved now that he had gotten rid of the bullets, asked them what they were talking about. Of course the police didn't believe him. They searched everywhere in his car, even checked the tires. Finally they had to admit that there were no bullets. They apologized and left. Zviadi then turned to his cousin who had betrayed him, saying: 'God helped me to stay out of the Turkish prison, and you are going to help me to stay out of the Georgian prison.' His cousin's face showed his non-understanding, so Teimur went on: 'you will help me by never setting a single step on Georgian territory, because if you do, I will cut your throat, and a non-human as you is not worth spending years in jail for.' That was the end of the story. You know, for Turks, God and the state are on the same level, and this way [Zviadi's] cousin wanted to show the secret services that, though he had relatives in Georgia, he was willing to sacrifice them for God, for the state that is.

These intensely negative stories conveyed the opinion of many Georgian Lazi that despite common genealogical descent, their cross-border relatives were strangers and moreover, that they needed to stay strangers. The narrators intended to underline the points of divergence between the Lazi in Georgia and those in Turkey and chose stories that best exemplified that message. That Otari selected the story of his neighbor was no accident, on the contrary, he was encouraged to do so by Nino and Zurabi, probably because this story better than any other conveyed why they had no further interest in cross-border contacts. The story of 'how Zviadi was betrayed by his cousin' pointed to absolute rejection of cross-border relatives. But 'betrayal' is only possible between people who share something. Thus the story suggests that initially the differences between cross-border neighbors were not perceived as unbridgeable. It is thus necessary to explore how the initial hopes of renewed contact were shattered and why ideas of unbridgeable difference came to be widely shared in Sarpi.3

3 An obvious handicap in my analysis is that I started doing research at a moment that cross-border contact between relatives had already become very infrequent. Except for some brief encounters between villagers of Georgian Sarpi and Lazi from Turkey, which I happened to observe, my material consists only of the verbal statements of villagers living in Georgian Sarpi.
Managing difference

The negative accounts may be seen as the product of encounters between different category systems. The accounts implicitly reveal the expectations people had about their relatives across the border. They also tell about the villagers’ disappointments with these new contacts and moreover the stories explain and structure these disappointments. It is important to note that often the stories did not focus on ‘expected’ differences like those between Islam and Christianity, between socialism and capitalism, or opposing nationalisms. Instead discontent focused on trust and hospitality – on the improper and treacherous behavior of relatives. The stories were so negative precisely because they involved unexpected difference, unexpected because of the close proximity between the two sides. Discontent was addressed at aspects of life that were expected to be least affected by the different states they lived in, and at those people that were connected closest by ties of blood.

EXPECTATIONS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

Hospitality and reciprocity – or lack thereof – were central elements in most accounts of cross-border contact. As Sarpian tell it, they gathered as many presents as they could and bestowed them upon their long awaited relatives when they were first able to visit each other. And, so they say, they prepared a warm welcome, including large banquets, plentiful of wine and lots of gifts for their guests from the Turkish side. The stress on hospitality was evident in the stories told by Otari about himself and his neighbor Zviadi, in which they did everything possible to be good hosts to their relatives. I will give some other examples from my interview material.

When my relatives came here for the first time they arrived with an empty minivan. We were so glad that they had been able to come. Together with [neighbors] I spent two whole days preparing dishes and [my daughter and husband] went to Batumi three times to buy them appropriate gifts. Oioioi, you should have seen how we received them. When they returned to Turkey their van was bursting with all kinds of presents.

We prepared a rich table, invited neighbors and relatives so that [the guests from Turkey] would feel how much we appreciated their visit. The whole guestroom was packed with people. We drank wine, we ate, we danced. They must have thought, goodness, what an expenses they incurred. Of course, at that time everything was cheap here and we had plenty of money but even so we did what we could for them.

Whatever was true of these accounts, the stories about presents and food, of arranging tourist trips and providing accommodation clearly referred to the importance of displaying hospitality in Georgian Sarpi. In Sarpi extensive networks of reciprocity existed and informal visits between neighbors and relatives played a crucial part of social life. Although I cannot discuss it in detail here, it is important to mention that these informal exchanges and reciprocal arrangements were crucial in dealing with
the rigidities of the Soviet system. Indeed, living in a ‘shortage economy’ demanded that services, goods and positions were obtained through informal networks. Kinship and friendship formed the backbone of these informal networks and exchanges of hospitality were a crucial ingredient for maintaining and extending one’s network and thus one’s position in Soviet society (see also Mars and Altman 1984; Dragadze 1988). In Sarpi, formal work obligations came often second to social obligations. The value of hospitality was locally displayed by recurring comments about Georgians (and also the Lazi) being the most hospitable nation in the world, by the saying that ‘guests are sent by God’ and by insisting that festive dinners (like those for guests) were the Georgian equivalent of ‘academy,’ the place where valuable information was exchanged and the participants learned from each others speeches.

My own experience with locally displayed hospitality is not without significance. During my stay in Sarpi I always needed to be prepared to be a guest. At least once a week I spent long evenings drinking and eating in the company of people I barely knew, and I frequently spent the night at unforeseen addresses. As a guest I had to obey the rules and accept their displays of hospitality – and as an anthropologist I was willing to do so because of the information such events produced. My position as an outsider was a relatively easy one: initially I was allowed to be ignorant of the rules of hospitality and was not expected to return their favors in a balanced way.

Pitt-Rivers pointed out in his essay on ‘the law of hospitality’ (1977), that the position of the anthropologist (my position) resembles that of the ‘barbarian’ more than that of the ‘stranger.’ In his elaboration there is significant difference between these two categories. The ‘barbarian’ is expected to remain an outsider to the local community and therefore his behavior is relatively unimportant to the host. The ‘stranger’ on the other hand poses a greater risk to the host. He is potentially dangerous and his worth needs to be tested to determine his position. On the basis of this he may be accepted or rejected (Pitt-Rivers 1977: 94-112). The relatives from Turkey were in first instance neither ‘barbarians’ nor ‘strangers.’ They were relatives, but not ‘normal’ ones given the long break in relationships. Still, as relatives they were expected to become part of social relations. They were expected to fit within patterns of hospitality and reciprocity and to respond properly to the displays of hospitality.

All three demands of reciprocity – the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to give back – turned out to be problematic with regards to their cross-border relatives. “To refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to receive, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality” (Mauss 1990: 13). This statement seems to bear close similarities to the deteriorating relations between cross-border relatives. The ‘declarations of war’ so to speak, were often made unwittingly. They were the result of people trying to extend bonds of alliance on terms that were mutually incomprehensible or offensive.
The following example was taken from an interview with Reshid, an elderly villager, and shows that the displays of hospitality were not always appropriately accepted:

When you serve them food they always first ask what kind of meat it is. But even when you say it is beef, they still won’t eat it. Last year I had canned beef from China, good stuff, and I left fifteen cans with them. It was beef, but after three months they gave it back, they didn’t eat it. I reassured them it was beef and even showed the picture of a cow [which was visible] on the can. But they said, ‘no, no, it is pork’.

Reshid told the incident as a joke and ridiculed his relatives’ non-understanding, and in doing so he also revealed a less outspoken message. The festive dinners prepared for guests from Turkey may have included pork dishes (they often did when I was a guest) and certainly included vodka and wine, which may have been interpreted by their guests as improper or even offensive. Understandably, Sarpians only rarely mentioned that their displays of hospitality may have been inappropriate or even offensive to their visitors. Rather they focused on their relatives’ shortcomings in reciprocating their hospitality. Zurabi at one occasion remarked: “When they were our guests we did not give in order to receive back the same, but you expect at least something in return. But one of the first questions they asked us when we arrived at their house was, ‘how long are you going to stay?’” Another villager told me the following about these ‘insensitive’ inquiries: “When you visit a relative he asks you, ‘why did you come, how long will you stay, and when will you go?’ I say, I don’t ever want to deal with you again. I’d rather sleep in a hotel. They lived at a very low level. It may have changed now that they opened the border but before that they were really ‘wild’ [dikij – a word usually reserved for animals].”

To most inhabitants of Georgian Sarpi it was clear that hospitality was poorly developed on the Turkish side and that kinship mattered very little to their cross-border relatives. Informants mentioned that they felt unwelcome or that they had been given improper treatment, for example that “they only offered me tea, cup after cup.” Women mentioned that they felt unfree because they had been forced to spend entire days with women with whom they shared nothing in common - who “only spoke Turkish.” Several young women told me that they felt looked down upon. “They look at you as if you are a prostitute – only because we don’t dress as grandmothers.”

Besides being disappointed with their relatives’ behavior Sarpians were also astonished by what they saw as lack of knowledge. One man expressed his surprise that his relatives in Turkey did not know their shared genealogy. “They knew that we were relatives, but not what the connections were.” This comment also tied in to the idea that people in Turkey had forgotten ‘who they were’ and moreover, that they had become Turks. People would say with contempt that their relatives ate Turkish dishes, that they gave their children Turkish names and that they had forgotten their own language.
Disillusionment was greatest in the stories that described betrayal by relatives in Turkey. This was obvious in the story told about Zviadi, in which a relative betrayed him to the police. A similar account was told me by Teimur Bekirishi. According to the story, he and a group of Sarpians had been in Arhavi to participate in a cultural festival and during their stay they visited a restaurant. “We were sitting in this restaurant and I noticed the waiter trying to eavesdrop on our conversation. I took a closer look, thought I recognized him, so I asked, ‘aren’t you the son of….’ He immediately became red in his face. It turned out that he was my relative. Later other people confirmed that this guy worked for the secret service.” Teimur then concluded “For them the state is like God, they even consider it normal to betray relatives to advance their own position.”

I have to admit that the status of this last story is difficult to ascertain, particularly because of the similarities with the one presented earlier in this chapter. Were the stories so vividly remembered because betrayal by relatives is unforgivable? Or were they invoked (perhaps invented?) because they provided a legitimate reason to “reject bonds of alliance and commonality.” In either case, such stories could only be told and shared once the relatives across the border were not considered relatives anymore. The stories concerning betrayal, like the narrations of less dramatic experiences, were combined with national rhetoric to reinforce and substantiate more encompassing social and cultural boundaries. Indeed, through these stories people found confirmation in the ideological dimensions of the Cold War divide. By narrating these stories the Iron Curtain, as a mental construct and a barrier for social relations, was partly rebuilt.

EXPLANATIONS AND CATEGORIZATION

The inhabitants of Georgian Sarpi commented elaborately on what they thought had changed their relatives. The earlier discussed conversation between Otari, Ninou and Zurabi provided already clear indications. They pointed out that their neighbors across the border had changed because they had “lived under the Turkish regime for so many years.” Ninou’s aunt Lena proffered similar views about why the Lazi in Turkey had changed the way they did:

They were very afraid to speak Lazuri, even at home. Here in Georgia there was only one Laz village, but they still let us speak our language. In the Soviet Union there were so many minorities […], and they all had to learn their own language and Russian, that’s the way it should be. But in Turkey, you are only allowed to speak Turkish. Even in their passports they could only write ‘Turk.’

The influences of ‘Turkish nationalism’ and the ‘repressive state’ (quite cynical observations for someone raised during the Stalin era) were frequently employed in explaining why the Lazi in Turkey had ‘forgotten who they were.’ Indeed, these factors were generally adopted to explain the lack of ‘ethnic awareness’ among their cross-border neighbors. To explain other changes, like the lack of hospitality, there were other explanations available.
We discovered that hospitality is not well developed among them. It is of course because they hardly had anything. Even fifteen years ago they lived under really poor conditions. Now they may be living well, but they still behave as if they have to save every lira. The times have changed. Now we are the ones’ that are poor, but, as you have seen, we still do everything to treat our guests well.

Another alleged cause of why the Lazi in Turkey had changed was that they had lived in a capitalist system. The former director of the collective farm, still a devoted communist, was reaffirmed in his views of capitalism after he visited relatives in Turkey.

You know what really surprised me in Turkey? [That] when a brother gives something to his sibling, he should ask money for it. Once I visited an acquaintance in Hopa. We drove in his car and saw his brother standing besides the road. We stopped and the brother entered [the car]. When he left the car again after a few kilometers he handed money to his brother. I asked [my acquaintance] why this was happening. You know what he said: ‘the car is mine and driving costs money, therefore he pays.’ They have such a custom that you need to pay for everything. And they don’t care about other people. Those who have enough money live very well of course. My cousin for example is rich, while his neighbor has nothing at all. […] It was exactly what I had learned from our classes in communist ideology. The capitalist always wants to make himself richer, he only cares about himself.

Among the Sarpians there is strong agreement about the stereotypes that apply to the Lazi in Turkey including their relatives. People commented that ‘those people’ were no longer Lazi; they had forgotten their language, their history and even their personalities had changed. The Turkish Lazi purportedly had become more orthodox in their religious beliefs than the Lazi had traditionally been. A conclusion of many villagers is that in Turkey the Laz do no longer exist. A girl remarked, “Pff, they have just become Turks, only the language remains, and even that is disappearing.”

To an outsider it may seem clear that inhabitants of both sides of the border changed and that this happened in markedly different ways. But this is not how inhabitants of Georgian Sarpi perceive things. They see the other Lazi as the ones that changed while they believe themselves to have remained faithful to the true path. Of course they were very much aware of the impact of the state on their own life, but, as they explain it, the state’s influence has meant that they became ‘more like themselves.’ They have not forgotten that they changed their names into Georgian one’s, or that many of their ‘traditions’ were recent innovations or adaptations. However, they maintain that these changes did not implicate that they involved abandoning their true selves. A short discussion between two villagers – the second of which was of Russian descent – was revealing on this point.

- They [the Lazi in Turkey] even say that they are Turks. That is already visible in their passports. It only mentions ‘Turk’, not a word about who they really are.

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4 One informant told me about this divergence of religious affiliations: “Of course they changed. They adopted Islam. We were also Muslims, but not like they are right now.”
You say that about them, but what about yourself? Your passport only mentions that you are Georgian.

That is different, because Georgians and Lazi have always been like siblings. They have defended and assisted each other when one of them was weak. In the fourth century this region was called Lazica and probably the Georgians were then called Lazi. Now it is the other way around, we are only with a few. Thus we write in our passports that we are Georgian. You see, we are both Lazi and Georgian.

The disillusioning experiences with the Lazi in Turkey have been instrumental in creating unambiguous cultural boundaries. These boundaries mark differences between the self-styled ‘remaining Lazi’ or ‘first-class Georgians’ of Georgian Sarpi and denoted the Lazi across the border as ‘Turkified Lazi’ or simply ‘Turks.’ The obvious message of the passage above was that because Lazi and Georgians were related through history it was to be considered only logical and natural that they had things in common. In a similar vein, when social or cultural changes in their own village were discussed, these were depicted in positive terms as a ‘quest for ethnic roots,’ stressing continuity which reaches back to a ‘shared’ Georgian past. The perceived differences with the Turkish side are often explained by referring - with a strong negative connotation - to ‘the force of Islam’ and ‘Turkish nationalism,’ as well as to previous poverty and, with more ambiguity, to capitalism. In short, while the two sides were physically drawn closer in the years after 1988, this softening of the physical border was accompanied by a hardening of moral boundaries. The characteristics of these boundaries had clear similarities with the ideological connotations of the Iron Curtain.

Grounding difference

The negative impressions of cross-border contact were most unambiguous among middle-aged men and women, in essence, among those who had grown up with high expectations concerning their cross-border relatives and those whose lives had been most tightly entwined in Soviet Georgian society. The youth of Sarpi was less insistent in explicating their views about their relatives on the other side of the border. Their stories were usually negative but sometimes they were simply indifferent. For them the renewed contacts had not been all that important, these youths looked to Georgian cities or to Europe for their aspirations and hardly cared about their (somewhat distant) relatives on the other side of the border. Stories of people above sixty showed less uniformity; very positive accounts were alternated with extremely negative ones. Again, social distance seems to be what matters the most. Like Kakè, the older lady who had positive memories about her visits to Turkish Sarp, many elderly villagers were still in contact with their relatives on the other side. But although sometimes these connections meant that elderly people had ambiguous,
at times even positive feelings about life in Turkey, the connections also meant that experienced difference were potentially threatening for social identity.

**BACK TO ‘NORMAL’**

On the afternoon of 22 February 2000, my host mother Meri started to prepare for the funeral of her aunt (father’s sister). She spent two hours down-stairs in the bathroom and when she came up again she was dressed in black, had fixed her hair and was ready to go. The funeral was to start at four o’clock in the afternoon so half an hour earlier Meri walked to the backyard of her neighbors, from which she had an excellent view of the scene. In the distance across the border, some three hundred meters away, the open space in front of a white house was just filling up with people. It was too far to see much else. Around four o’clock the corpse was carried out of the house. After some time had passed a group of people moved away from the house and disappeared in the distance when the road curved around a hill. Meri then returned to her house, changed her clothes again and started preparations for dinner. She explained that she had considered going there, but her passport had expired and it was too expensive to buy a new one. Then she said; “anyway, I don’t know how I would have felt there, they do things so differently.” Later, her daughter Nino told me, “I had a strange feeling when she made all these preparations and went to [neighbor] Mamuka’s terrace to watch. It reminded me of the past. I remember her standing there, looking at the houses of her relatives as if she could see what they were doing.” For Nino the behavior of her mother during the funeral was a reminder of the closed border. As such it was an indication that despite the opening of the border, the distance between both village-halves had anything but diminished. This became even more apparent in what other people told me about the events.

The funeral that was observed by Meri was the one of her aunt Aise, who died in Turkish Sarp at the age of eighty-six. Aise’s family biography was typical of many of the families that were divided by the borderline. Born on the Georgian side of the village, Aise married across the border before its closure in 1937 and was prohibited from contact with her relatives until the 1980s. Besides many nieces and nephews, two of her younger siblings were still alive and living in the Georgian part of the village. After 1988 Aise visited her brothers in Georgian Sarpi several times until she became too ill to leave the house.

Some fifteen villagers from the Georgian part attended her funeral – including Aise’s two brothers – and accompanied her on her route to the graveyard. The funeral did not, in many respects, live up to the brothers’ expectations. When I spoke with them a few days after the funeral they were still upset about the whole event and the way they had been treated. Muhammad, one of the brothers, had only barely made it to the funeral. His financial situation had been difficult for years and therefore he had not been able to renew his international passport. Still wishing to visit his sister, he subtly asked his nephews living on the Turkish side of the village to present him with a new passport. He was sure they would do so because they had repeatedly
invited him. Moreover, from Muhammad’s perspective, money seemed not to be a problem for his nephews as they spent large amounts of it on ‘fun-trips’ to Batumi. Whatever the reason might be, the nephews never fulfilled their uncle’s sincere wish. Thus, when his sister died, he didn’t have a passport. Only after the intervention of relatives on the Georgian side did he manage to get across the border - without a passport - for the duration of a single hour.

The other brother, Reshid, was possibly even more disappointed with the events. He spent two whole days on the other side. Being used to the large funerals in Georgia which involve a lot of eating, drinking and toasting, Reshid’s experience during his visit was disillusioning. He agitatedly told me that he was only given ‘Turkish soup’ and was not even invited into the house of his sister. He added that after the commemoration of his sister on the 52d day following her death, he would never set foot on Turkish soil again.

As I was repeatedly told after the funeral, the death of Aise was a tragic moment not only because of the grief of her close relatives, but also because her death disrupted the last nuclear family bond between the two villages and therefore marked the end of a significant episode of village history. The funeral completed the tragedy of the unhappily divided village. Although the Georgian Sarpians would not say so, the accounts also demonstrated another tragedy – the fact that communication, even between relatives, was severely strained. The practices of the Turkish Lazi strike relatives across the border as strange, uncivilized and even offensive. In the case of the funeral the conflicting values were especially apparent in the way the funeral was organized. In Georgian Sarpi funerals are large events with extensive meals in which hundreds of people participate. The sober funerals in Turkish Sarp struck the Georgian Lazi as showing a lack of respect for the deceased and inconsiderate of the grief of relatives. The brothers returned home with the conviction that they had been denied proper treatment as their sister’s closest relatives.

It was not only the negative content of the stories that was striking, the way the stories spread was also telling of the moral divide. Sarpians were usually very careful to uphold a good image of their village and the wrongdoings of co-villagers were usually kept well hidden, especially to outsiders like me. This time however, I did not encounter any difficulty in eliciting stories. People readily told their stories and judgments of the event. Moreover, a strong consensus existed among the villagers in their negative judgment of the funeral and in their condemnation of the nephews’ behavior. This made it indirectly clear that despite the village ‘discourse’ of “one village unhappily divided,” in fact people accepted that the two villages were.

5 Before these events Reshid had told me often about his visits to Turkey, and although he made many jokes about their ‘strange customs,’ he had always appreciated being with his relatives. But this opinion too changed after this particular funeral.

6 Young Sarpians told me that they could not understand that after funerals ‘those Turks’ continue their lives as if nothing had happened. One girl exclaimed, “They do not even mourn!” and continued, “after a few days the women wear their regular clothes instead of black. Maybe over here women wear mourning dresses too long [often more than a year], but at least we pay respect to the dead.”
not only separated but also parts of two different worlds. The inhabitants of the other Sarpi are no longer part of their own group. They have become outsiders and needed to stay on the other side of the border.

**REDRAWING BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES**

In one of our conversations Meri told me, “It used to be that everyone wanted the border to be open, but [my husband] Anzor always said: ‘If they do that then the whole village will be spoiled, then you won’t recognize Sarpi any longer because there will be more strangers than Sarpians.’ And look what has happened to our village. First the Ajarians came, then they opened the border and nothing has remained of the old village, it is as if you live in a new place.” Her daughter Nino added, “It is anarchy now.” Nino probably implied more than just disruptions of ‘ethnic homogeneity.’ Judging from other instances in which she had used the word anarchy, the phrase could also refer to the economic and political instability of life after socialism. Within this context of instability and disorder, there are pressing needs to re-establish order. In Sarpi there were clear attempts to fight at least the ‘cultural anarchy.’ Although the physical obstructions that regulated traffic and communication have become porous, perhaps because of this change, inhabitants of Sarpi have fortified their social and cultural boundaries.

As was illustrated throughout this chapter, symbolic discourse forms an important aspect of constructing boundaries. But the creation of boundaries in Sarpi was not limited to the discursive level. In this concluding paragraph I wish to discuss some other ways in which ideas about cultural difference were simultaneously translated to, and inscribed in, the territory of Sarpi, and thus result in spatial and symbolic reorganizations of the village. The clearest example of this is the commotion in the village about the mosques on the Turkish side and the possible construction of a church on the Georgian side. The issue has become important during the last five or so years, during which the majority of the Sarpi youth has converted to Christianity. The rate of conversion is much slower among the older generations, who are reluctant in differentiating themselves from the Turkish Laz in terms of religion.

“They are screaming as black crows again,” commented Nino one morning when the minaret was calling for prayer. “They start so early in the morning. It is like an alarm-clock, you don’t need one over here;” she mocked. The mosques in Turkish Sarpi annoyed and disturbed many young Sarpians, especially the mosque that was built on the seashore in the early 1990s. One informant told me, “You know why they built that mosque over there? [They built it] simply because everyone would see it. They clearly didn’t build it for the villagers because they already had one. And according to Islam mosques should be in the middle of a community, but that is not what they did. They placed it right there on that rock, just to provoke us.” Whatever the intent was behind its construction, it is true that this mosque is difficult to miss. When traveling from Batumi to Sarpi the one building that sticks out is the mosque,
built on the coastline right at the other side of the state border. Rezo, a well-off Sarpian aged thirty-two said:

Visitors often make jokes about it. They say that Sarpi is already in Turkey. Therefore we want to build a church right here on the coastline, which will be visible for everyone. But unfortunately we don’t have enough money. You see, the church needs to be at least as big as the mosque, otherwise.... Well, you understand, if we build only a small chapel [...] there would be no balance. We had a group here [five names of men in their thirties and forties are mentioned]. Together we met with the bishop and discussed our plans. The bishop was very pleased with our plans but they also lack finances. They [the eparchy] devote their attention first to those places where it is most needed, and Sarpi is only a small community.

It is difficult to judge how serious the plans actually were, but the amount of discussion in Sarpi suggested at least that the issue was considered important. Besides financial difficulties finding a good spot also seemed problematic. Miriani, who was one of the five men mentioned by the previous speaker, explained that they had considered various options. Preferably the church would have been built near the border along the coast. But it turned out that the customs claimed part of that land. Another potential location was a rock that stuck out in the sea, “visible from a large distance, just like their mosque.” Miriani told me that this rock was not stable enough and will eventually be washed away by the sea.

Now we think that the best place is actually the old men’s house, and when we are old we want to give that place up for a church. Some people thought about constructing it in Kalendera [neighborhood across the hill], but that doesn't have the same result. First of all, it isn't visible from the other side of the border, and second, only the real-believers will go there, it won't have any impact on those who are in the middle.

The difficulties suggest that it might actually be a long time before a church will be built. Moreover, religious differences between the Turkish and Georgian side were perhaps less pronounced than the young generation would like it to be. Some middle-aged villagers pointed out that they were unsure whether the village was ‘ready for it.’ Zurabi stated, “I think that at this moment all the youth and some fifty percent of our generation is ready. But you also have to respect the wishes of the old people.”

My host father Anzor, always rather ambivalent about religion, made interesting remarks in this respect. He was skeptical about the plans to build a church and expressed his thought that no one would go there anyway. “Here Christianity is often only a symbol. I think it is unwise to force religion on people. Of course, Sarpi will be Christian, but according to me time should bring that about, not people. [...] Let me tell you an anecdote. Once these young men [refers to the group of Miriani] told me that they would never allow the building of a mosque in Sarpi. You know how I replied? I said ‘There already is a mosque in Sarpi, there are even two mosques.’”

Anzor was referring to the two mosques in Turkish Sarp, and although I do not know whether he himself considers the Turkish side to be part of the village, his
joke pointed at the differences in perception between the different generations. Elderly inhabitants may still talk about Sarpi as two parts that (once) made up one whole, but the younger generation will never think of Turkish Sarp when they talk about their village. In line with this is the observation that while for the younger generation Islam is an anomaly, for the older generation it is to some extent (still) a tradition. Villagers of Georgian Sarpi are actively shaping their environment in attempts to define where they belong and in response to the threats to their identity. New boundaries are in the make in Sarpi, although their shape and nature still remain uncertain.

Conclusion

The opening of the border enabled villagers to renew contacts with their long awaited relatives in Turkey. These contacts clearly did not live up to their expectations. In the perception of the Lazi living on the Georgian side, their relatives across the border not only had different lifestyles, but they also held radically different ideas about friendship, hospitality, kinship, ethnicity and trade. The most difficult message in this meeting was perhaps that the people involved were not simply ‘others’ but that they were related to them. These ‘related others’ moreover, were not emigrants who returned from far-away countries, instead they were co-villagers who had always been visible in the distance. Whereas one expects, and sometimes accepts, deviant behavior and ideas from outsiders, it is more difficult to accept deviancy from close relatives. It is difficult to define whether the differences about which the villagers of Sarpi spoke were ‘major’ or ‘minor’ and thus whether we can speak of ‘The narcissism of minor differences’ (Blokh 2001). But it is clear that the differences mattered most when (a) they were expected the least, (b) social distances were shortest, and (c) when they endangered local ways of life. A process was started whereby ‘minor’ differences were enlarged and ‘large’ differences were essentialized. This is not always what is expected.

Anthropological border studies have devoted much attention to the ambiguities that lie beneath the borderline, and to the imperfections of international divides. Baud and van Schendel, for example, write that “despite attempts by central states to control their borderlanders and to impose a ‘national’ culture on them, a fascinating aspect of many borderlands is the development of a ‘creole’ or ‘syncretic’ border culture” (1997: 234). In the preceding chapters about Sarpi I have addressed ambiguous loyalties and identities. These ambiguities were not even extinguished by seventy years of Soviet rule or by the physical and ideological enforcements of the border. At least part of the population had maintained a distinctive identity and cherished relations across the border. However, the interesting aspect of identity construction in Sarpi is that the imposed ideas and ideologies became crucial ingredients in creating
boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’ once the imposed physical and ideological demarcations had lost their rigidity.

The new rigidity of cultural boundaries needs to be understood in terms of the short social and physical distances between the two sides of the border. Houses were located exactly on the borderline; the physical distance between Turkish and Soviet citizens was often not more than a stone’s throw away. In chapter Five I showed how this proximity between the two sides, and the resulting relations between village and state caused further enforcements of the physical divide. When the Iron Curtain opened, the mechanisms that upheld the physical distance broke down, which made the cultural differences suddenly visible and threatening. This outcome points to another – underrepresented – feature of borders, namely that it may be precisely at “these ‘marked boundaries’ at the ‘periphery’ and not at the center or ‘core’ that cultural identity is frequently most emphasized,” as Kavenagh remarked in his study about the Spanish-Portuguese border (1994: 75). The emphasis on cultural identity on the international border has in this particular context inhibited the creation of a ‘syncretic border culture’ and in fact created new rigidities.

During the Soviet period it was extremely difficult and often impossible to maintain contact across the border. After the border was closed in 1937 many inhabitants did not live to see their siblings, parents or children ever again. They had been lost to the other side. But in many ways it is only recently that they have truly lost their relatives, separated by seemingly unbridgeable differences.