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Pelkmans, M.

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Shifting Frontiers

Islam and Christianity

in Post-Soviet Ajaria

MATHIJS PELKMANS

Before the Soviet period, Ajarians adhered to Sunni Islam and were described in Russian administrative documents and travel reports as devout Muslim believers and staunch opponents to Christian forces attempting to occupy the region. During the Soviet period, state policies weakened Muslim religious institutions and largely relegated Islam to the domestic domain. Nevertheless, with time it became clear that Islam retained importance as a space of personal refuge. Despite this 'persistence' of Islam in Soviet years, an accelerating process of conversion to Christianity took place immediately after the Soviet collapse. This process was paralleled by the establishment of new churches and spiritual schools, both of which were part of the Georgian Orthodox Church's stated intent to Christianize the region. To understand the current decline of Islam and rise of Christianity, the process needs to be interpreted in light of the structural position of Ajaria within (Soviet) Georgian administrative and ideological frames. The particularities of Ajaria's position resulted in in-

In the Caucasus as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, religion gained important momentum after the abolishment of state-atheism and the demise of communism. The renewed importance and visibility of religion in this region is often explained as a return to, or revival of, pre-Soviet religious practices and beliefs. However, the religious dynamics in Georgia's southwestern autonomous region Ajaria radically contest such explanations. Here, the borders between Islam and Christianity are shifting in favour of the latter following increased confrontations with post-Soviet Georgian nationalism.

tempts to disseminate Georgian nationality among the inhabitants of Ajaria go back to the late nineteenth century when political control over the region shifted from the Ottoman to the Tsarist Empire. These early attempts were largely unsuccessful and up to the Soviet era inhabitants of Ajaria primarily defined themselves in terms of religion and locality.

Soviet attempts to curtail the influence of Islam had more lasting results. Starting in the late 1920s, Soviet authorities arrested and deported numerous religious leaders and they closed or destroyed virtually all mosques and madrasas in Ajaria. Such measures were similar to atheist policies in other parts of the Soviet Union, but the conditions in which they occurred were unusual. The Soviet regime had granted Ajaria autonomous status but not, as usual, on the basis of 'nationality' or 'ethnicity'. Rather it was granted with regards to religious affiliation. This meant that Ajarians were unable to further their interests in the name of the 'development of nations', since in official classifications of their group Ajarians were Georgians and only differed in their religious background. Moreover, for a long time the political élite of Ajaria consisted predominantly of non-Muslim Georgians who held strong anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic sentiments, and eagerly adopted Soviet policies aimed at curtailing the influence of Islam. These and other factors caused severe problems for the organizational structure of Islam – problems that were very difficult to overcome even after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During the Soviet period the Muslim Ajarians increasingly started to identify themselves as Georgians. An important reason why national discourse became effective in Ajaria was that expressions of Georgian national identity were then – at least partly – disconnected from religion. In other words, because religion was banned from the public domain, Ajarians could come to see themselves as Georgians. This state of affairs changed in the late 1980s when, in the wake of national resurgence, Georgian nationality was tightly reconnected to Christianity. In the emerging hegemonic discourse Georgian and Muslim identities became incompatible, creating a dilemma for Ajarians who saw themselves as both.

Incompatibilities

State-atheism and a dominant national Georgian discourse provided the basis for accelerated Christianization of the region after the communist collapse. This can be further illustrated by looking at the way religious and national identities have been negotiated in everyday life on the frontier. In the post-Soviet era, increased expectations of what it entails to be Muslim ran counter to increased demands for displaying loyalty to the Georgian nation. This forced inhabitants of Ajaria to articulate their social identities in new ways. During my research in Ajaria it was fairly uncommon for Ajarians to present themselves as different from Georgians, and instead most people made it clear that they considered themselves to be Georgians, sometimes specifying that they were Muslim Georgians. They stressed that 'religion' and 'nationality' were different categories, but distinguishing between the two often proved difficult. For example, young Muslims spoke frequently of painful encounters with Christian Georgians in which their religious affiliation was challenged or ridiculed, or in which



PHOTO: MATHIJS PELKMANS, 2000

Celebrating Georgia in the Ajarian highlands

compatibilities of national and religious identities as played out in the politics of everyday life. As religious and national identities are tightly interwoven in Ajaria, changes in the nature of the 'state' have had discernable effects on the rigidity and shape of a new religious frontier.

Dis/continuities

The political leadership of Ajaria and the local intelligentsia express clear-cut views on Islam. They typically present Islam as an undesired residue of the Ottoman past and stress that it is only a matter of time before Ajaria will be fully Christianized. Conversions to Christianity are presented as a return to Ajarians' 'native' Georgian faith and as the completion of a process of Ajarian 're-unification' with the Georgian nation. At-

they were derogatorily called 'Tatars' or 'Turks'. Difficulties of reconciling Muslim and Georgian identities were further strengthened by the new educational system and the regional and national media which put great emphasis on the Georgian Christian tradition and Christian elements in Georgian language, culture, and history.

The difficulty of restoring or maintaining Islamic lifestyles was also evident in many aspects of everyday life. For most Muslim Ajarians, 'new' demands of Islam ran counter to the ways they had led their lives until recently. Of course non-observance of religious demands was also considered sinful during the Soviet period, but recently the issues gained significance. Informants explained that during Soviet times it was completely normal to combine Muslim identity with a lifestyle that violated Islamic codes of behaviour. For anyone employed in a public function, continued observance of religious demands was not a possibility and this was accepted even by Muslim leaders. As one informant put it: 'We didn't think badly of anyone who drank at work or offered wine to guests; those things were simply unavoidable.' But whereas then it was accepted behaviour for Muslim men to drink alcohol, to eat pork, or to withdraw from the Ramadan, today it is more complicated to abstain from religious demands and still maintain Muslim identity. The new possibilities for religious proliferation after socialism changed the expectations of how Muslims should behave, expectations that have been hard to live up to. Informants frequently mentioned that Georgian customs of hospitality and sociability necessitated violation of religious rules. To quote one informant: 'We have a long tradition of wine drinking. You have to serve wine and drink together. People would think badly of you if you said that alcohol was prohibited in your house. It would be the same as saying that you are not a Georgian.' The case is insightful because in Georgia the extensive rituals of drinking are an integral part of everyday politics, of defining who is who, and of expressing gratitude and respect. In Ajaria, moreover, drinking has become a very powerful symbol of Georgianness. Abstaining from it has not only made one's social position difficult but has also been interpreted as a rejection of the Georgian nation.

Similar dilemmas were voiced when Muslim Ajarians talked about their aspirations. Many young Muslims had the feeling that Islam pulled them backwards instead of bringing them forwards. They worried about how the insistence of Muslim leaders to teach children Arabic influenced kids' performances at school and how a Muslim life might handicap their future. These young Muslims were often oriented towards city life, which had in recent years become more explicitly associated with Christianity. These dilemmas demonstrated the incompatibility of certain versions of Islam with the demands of the larger national society. In part this was a legacy of the Soviet period. During that period representations of culture and ethnicity were stripped of all Islamic connotations. This meant that the lifestyles of Muslims could not be legitimized by the language of ethnicity and culture, but were instead seen as village traditions or as leftovers of a 'backward' past. This continued to incapacitate the appropriation of Islam in 'cultural' and 'ethnic' presentations of 'self', at least among those who had embraced the national Georgian ideal. But these difficulties also hint at possible breaches in the frontier. Over the last ten years, new versions of Islam have been introduced and the relevance of the state in the lives of individuals has changed.

Frontiers of identity

Inhabitants of Ajaria have responded differently to the dilemmas outlined above. A brief summary of the material gathered in the district centre of Khulo – a town of 6,000 inhabitants located in the Ajarian highlands – offers further insight into the patterns of religious change.

Families in which one or several members converted to Christianity in recent years had typically belonged to the Soviet middle class. They attributed much value to education and sent their children to Georgian cities to attend university. Members from these families used to have positions in the state structure and often had lived part of their lives in urban areas in Georgia. They were less inclined to comply with local customs and traditions and more apt to conform to what was seen as 'modern' or 'civilized' Georgian society. Civil servants, teachers, and higher administrative personnel dominate the ranks of new Christians. This educated class actively contributes to the furthering of Christian expansion because it strengthens the prevailing nationalist Christian discourse in Ajaria among their students, in the press, and simply because of their social position as brokers between the political élite and the local population. What is more, the fact that the middle class increasingly turns to Christianity contributes to the further isolation of Muslim voices.

Families that at least nominally adhered to Islam tended to have occupations related to agriculture and technique; they predominantly acquired only primary education and usually married within the region. They defended their religious affiliation in terms of familial and communal identity and stressed that they remained true to the beliefs and values of their parents and grandparents. While upholding the value of Islamic traditions they also by and large accepted the messages of Georgian nationalism. This ambiguous stance did not solve the incompatibility of Muslim obligations with expectations of 'Georgian' behaviour in daily life, resulting in dilemmas that over time often led to withdrawal from direct involvement in religion. In other words, these Muslims acted in an environment in which identification with Islam was contradicted by the demands of a state within which they imagined their lives.



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However, among the younger generation there are those who found new ways of integrating competing discourses in their personal lives. New contacts across the formerly impermeable border with Turkey offered new visions of Islam that seem more compatible with the aspirations Ajarians hold for the future. Young men who had studied in Turkey brought back a 'purified' version of Islam that served as an alternative to the 'village Islam' to which they objected. Moreover they used the example of Turkey to prove that 'modernization' and 'Islam' were not mutually exclusive. Interestingly, among those who were the least bothered by national discourse and its negative portrayal of Islam were entrepreneurs who engaged in transnational trading activities. For them, it seemed, Islam served as a space of refuge that eased the uncertainties of the post-socialist era and was valued as a source of common identity in establishing contacts during their travels to Turkey, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. These examples suggest that in some ways the state may lose its centrality in how people imagine and construe their lives. The opening of the border with Turkey in the 1990s and the diminished capacity of the state in providing for the necessities of life may cause people to structure their lives increasingly around other points of reference, be they transnational trading networks or religious centres in the Muslim world.

In Ajaria the frontier between Islam and Christianity is changing. Besides a shift of the frontier in favour of Christianity, the nature of that frontier has changed as well. The 'new' demands of religion and nationality have become increasingly difficult to combine, and the resulting contradictions necessitate that Ajarians find new ways to reconcile religious and national identities. The constant confrontation with the opposing tendencies of Islamic and Georgian-national discourses has often forced them to take sides. The result is the emergence of new religious boundaries on the frontier of the Muslim and Christian realms. But as the nature of the state is changing it is uncertain how stable these new boundaries will prove in the future. As people's lives are increasingly detached from the structures of the state, loyalties and frames of references may shift and new borders of identity on the religious frontier may consequently be drawn.

Pilgrimage to Didachara, a Muslim village where supposedly the first Georgian church was built in the first century AD.

Mathijs Pelkmans is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His dissertation examines religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Georgian borderlands. He is currently at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany, where he is preparing a new research project on religious conversion in Kyrgyzstan. E-mail: pelkmans@eth.mpg.de