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**MATHIJS  
PELKMAN**

**BAPTIZED  
GEORGIAN:  
RELIGIOUS  
CONVERSION TO  
CHRISTIANITY IN  
AUTONOMOUS  
AJARIA**

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## Baptized Georgian: Religious conversion to Christianity in Autonomous Ajaria<sup>1</sup>

Mathijs Pelkmans<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

In the Caucasus as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, religion gained important momentum in the decade following the demise of communism. But while the renewed importance and visibility of religion is often explained as a return to pre-Soviet religious practice, in Ajaria – Georgia’s southwestern Autonomous Republic – the religious dynamics radically contest this explanation. Whereas before the Soviet era Ajarians adhered to Islam, an accelerating process of conversion to Christianity was observable in the years following the Soviet collapse. This paper looks at inhabitants of ‘Muslim’ Ajaria who have converted to Christianity, arguing that their conversion can be understood as an attempt to realign history and community with a strong sense of national identity. But although the intention of conversion was to restore historical and societal incongruities, the act of baptism was often disruptive in nature. To soften the resulting tensions with neighbors and families, the converts mobilized a host of metaphors that evoked the historical Christian legacy, demonized the ‘other’ embodied in the Turk or the Ottoman epoch, and pointed to the progressive nature of Christianity and its role in alleviating Ajaria’s ‘backwardness’. However, these ideologically informed narratives could only partly resolve the tensions involved in conversion. It was only by mobilizing ancestors as metaphors and symbolic actors in conversion that national discourses could be effectively integrated in social life and that disruptions of genealogy could be partly restored.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on six months of fieldwork in Ajaria in 2000 and 2001. An early version appeared in my Ph.D. dissertation *Uncertain Divides: Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics in the Georgian Borderlands*, University of Amsterdam 2003, and benefited from the input and suggestions made by Henk Driessen, Anton Blok, and Chris Hann. I am also grateful to Lale Yalçın-Heckmann and Data Dea who provided the latest thorough critical reading.

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## Introduction

When in Soviet Georgia the nationalist movement gained influence in the 1980s, one of its major concerns was to defend the interests of the church along the imagined geographical, historic and ethnic lines of the republic (Lilienfeld 1993: 224-226). The confluence of these ‘interests’ indexed the tight connection between national and religious affiliation that has characterized late- and post-Soviet Georgia (see also Dragadze 1993: 154-155). But whereas in most provinces of the Georgian Republic this rhetoric was relatively unproblematic – most Georgians also adhered (at least nominally) to Orthodox Christianity – this was not the case in the Ajarian Autonomous Republic. Though most inhabitants of Ajaria *did* identify with the Georgian ‘nation’, they did so as *Muslim* Georgians. This combination, which contradicted the dominant idea of ‘Christian-Georgian unity’, was not only seen as an oxymoron by Georgian nationalists and Church representatives, it also became increasingly problematic for Ajarians to maintain this stance.

In the late 1980s, when restrictions on religion were lifted, Ajarians seemed to be converting *en masse* to Christianity. A local newspaper of that time reported that 5,000 people had been baptized in Batumi in a single day and that the recently opened churches were unable to seat all the worshipers who had finally been able to “return to their ancestral faith,” Georgian Orthodoxy (*Sovietskaia Adzhariia*, 29 May 1989). Bishop Dimitri recalled those days with delight, remembering that “we baptized from early morning to late at night, one after the other, and still there were people waiting.” These mass baptisms were not only taking place in Lower Ajaria – with its heterogeneous population – but also in Upper Ajaria where the position of Islam was much stronger. In June 1989, patriarch Ilia II paid a visit to the medieval church in Skhalta – a small mountainous village in Upper Ajaria.<sup>3</sup> During his visit the patriarch held a requiem for those who had died during a natural disaster earlier that year. He then delivered a speech in which he expressed gratitude that, after centuries of oppression, it was once again possible to pray at this sanctified place (*Sovietskaia Adzhariia*, 01 June 1989). “He admonished the Ajarians to return to Christianity [and] told them that the catastrophe that had befallen them was obviously the punishment of God for their unfaithfulness to the Savior” (Lilienfeld 1993: 227). Afterwards, the patriarch carried out baptisms near the walls of the old church. The arrival of the patriarch caused a stir among the population. Rumors circulated that every person baptized by him would receive a cross of pure gold. Whether or not for this purpose, during that day no less than 50 villagers were baptized, among which were several village notables like the *kolkhoz* director, the village

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<sup>3</sup> The church in Skhalta dates from the 13th century and is the only medieval church in Ajaria that has survived both the Ottoman and Soviet periods.

council chairman and other state functionaries.<sup>4</sup> However, according to one of the converts from this village, only few of those who were baptized ever attended a service in the years following their baptism. What is more, about ten baptized families started to attend the Friday prayers at the local mosque when it was re-opened a year later in 1990.

Although the church may have interpreted the numerous baptisms (estimates of the actual number vary greatly) as a confirmation of its hope that Ajarians would rapidly ‘return’ to Christianity, it was difficult not to see these baptisms as opportune adaptations to the time or as symbolic gestures towards the nationalist movement. Moreover, economic and political considerations may have influenced people’s decision to be baptized more than religious concerns. That is at least what the stories of gold and the predominance of the village elite among the ‘converts’ suggest.<sup>5</sup> As such, the events offer a glimpse into the unstable political and economic atmosphere in Ajaria at the time. It is unclear, however, how these events relate to religious change, the direction of which was indeed far from obvious in the early 1990s.

Still, what these baptisms point to is the emergence of flexible space for religious renewal after the collapse of state-atheism. Pragmatic and haphazard shifts between religions may have been a characterization of a time of great upheaval, particularly after the crumbling of communist ideology. In subsequent years however, it became clear that there was another current, a slower but more permanent process of conversion to Christianity, which is the focus of this paper.<sup>6</sup> This process of ‘permanent conversion’ proceeded steadily in the lowlands – sometimes including the population of entire villages – but was much slower and less predictable in Upper Ajaria where Islam had retained an important role in social life.

This paper then, aims to illuminate the relation between religious conversion and the changes in social landscape that occurred in Ajaria in the 1990s. To achieve this, I look at the motivations of converts for their adoption of Christianity while simultaneously documenting the impact this conversion had on their lives. In other words, the focus is on the social context of conversion, rather than on the actual beliefs of individuals. In this I follow Hefner’s inclination not to restrict the term conversion to “an exclusivistic change of religious affiliation requiring a repudiation of previously held beliefs.” (Hefner 1993: 4) Instead, we should acknowledge that “conversion assumes a variety of forms because it is influenced by a larger interplay of identity, politics, and morality” (ibid.). Indeed, it is this interplay of

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<sup>4</sup> I based the estimate of 50 converts on the accounts of villagers. It is significantly lower than the estimate of 3,000 mentioned in the local newspaper *Sovietskaia Adzhariia*, 01 June 1989.

<sup>5</sup> What I have in mind is that during the period of social and political turmoil, village notables might have gauged it to be in their interests to adjust to the new political realities by responding to the rhetoric of the first government of independent Georgia that Christianity is an ‘indivisible part of the Georgian nation.’ This does not mean, however, that baptism offered any direct benefits or that conversion was somehow imposed on them.

<sup>6</sup> Obviously, the term ‘permanent conversion’ is relative as it applies only to a period of five to ten years.

religious conversion and the wider social context that should be central in attempts to understand religious change.

In line with these observations, this paper aims to illuminate the process of conversion by focusing on the identity politics that were waged on the frontier between ‘Islam’ and ‘Christianity’ during and after ‘atheist’ Soviet rule. At the same time, one should avoid attributing conversion solely to social pressures, and instead focus on the motivations and actions of converts as intertwined with wider social and political contexts. The converts were seeking new ways to cope with the dilemmas of combining loyalties that had become contradictory. As such, religious conversion in post-Soviet Ajaria demonstrates similarities with conversion in post-colonial settings. As authors writing about post-colonial settings have argued, people’s entrance into the ‘modern world’ has often *not* led to secularization but on the contrary, proved compatible with new and intensified roles of religion (Mintz 1974; van der Veer 1996; Meyer 1999). It is this ‘modernizing’ potential of religion that forms a central element in this paper as well. In post-Soviet Ajaria, which is on the frontier between Islam and Christianity, this ‘modernizing’ potential has several peculiarities. First, the above mentioned amalgamation of religious and ethnic identity – that was paradoxically fostered by an atheist regime and gained new impetus in the post-Soviet era – meant that local ideas about modernity were tightly interwoven with ideas about ethnicity. And second, embracing the ideal of Georgian modernity – as converts to Christianity did – altered their own position in the local community and contributed to the creation of new boundaries on the religious frontier.

### **Short Historical Background**

In a comparative study on Abkhazia and Ajaria, the sociologist Derluguian stated that the “assimilation of Ajaria was, arguably, among the biggest successes of the Georgian national project” (1995: 36). Although the claim of ‘assimilation’ is a gross simplification, Derluguian’s statement is a good starting point for discussing the relations between ‘Christian’ Georgia and ‘Muslim’ Ajaria. What makes the case of Ajaria special is that ‘atheist’ Soviet policies and a national Georgian discourse managed to affect the structure of local communities and of social identities in such a way that the assimilation of Ajarians accelerated after the communist collapse. In order to see how this took place it is useful to

briefly describe the changing relationship between religion, nation and state, thus illuminating the actual processes by which Muslim Ajarians were turned into (Christian) Georgians.<sup>7</sup>

During the 19th century, when Ajaria served as the battleground between the Russian and Ottoman Empires, Islam became increasingly the main reference for identification among Ajarians. Religious identification, to a large degree, explained the fierceness with which Ajarians fought against the Russian – but also Georgian – armies whose aim it was to incorporate the region in the Russian Empire. Religious affiliation was also an important factor in the emigration of Ajarians to the Ottoman Empire which occurred after the incorporation of the region into the Russian Empire. Ajarians certainly did not perceive this incorporation as a “happy reunification of the Georgian historical lands,” as it was at the time seen by the Georgian nationalist movement and later presented in Ajarian historiography. Instead, aside from a small part of the Ajarian elite, the Ajarians continued to identify themselves as ‘Muslim’ and as ‘Ajarian’, and their political orientations remained directed towards the Ottoman Empire. Up to the Soviet conquest, Ajaria continued to be seen as a Muslim stronghold (for discussions, see Kazemzadeh 1951; Meiering Mikadze 1999; Pelkmans 2002).

Soviet rule in Ajaria radically changed the course of history. Through the repression of religious leaders and the closure of mosques and *medreses*, Islam was relegated to the domestic domain. Moreover, the higher echelons of Ajarian society became more and more integrated into Soviet Georgian society which, although atheistic in outlook, retained strong sympathies for Christianity, sympathies that were revived after the collapse of the communist system. During the Soviet period the Muslim Ajarians increasingly started to identify themselves as Georgians, a process that was greatly enhanced by the efforts of the local intelligentsia to rewrite or reinvent Ajaria’s past. In this new historical discourse, Ajaria was perceived as having been oppressed by ‘evil’ Turks for centuries and the Ajarians were portrayed as fierce Georgians, who relentlessly struggled against forced Islamization and Turkification, hoping for better times under a united Georgia. This historical discourse became official history, propagated by the intelligentsia, reproduced by the media and adopted by new Christians.

Although the assimilation of Ajarians was not completed, the mechanisms through which it was advanced severely handicapped post-1990 Islamic revivals. During the Soviet period, nationalist discourse was so effective in Ajaria because Georgian national identity was (at least partly) disconnected from religion. In other words, because religion was banned from the public domain, Ajarians could come to see themselves as Georgians. In a sense, Ajarians

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<sup>7</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this process, see Pelkmans (2002: 249-261).

could be Georgians in public while remaining Muslim at home. This state of affairs changed in the late 1980s when, in the wake of national resurgence, Georgian nationality was closely reconnected to Christianity. In the emerging hegemonic discourse Georgian and Muslim identities became incompatible, creating a dilemma for Ajarians who saw themselves as both. This effectively muted Muslim voices and curtailed a Muslim revival. Moreover, because integration into Soviet Georgian society had been especially strong among the middle and higher echelons, Islam increasingly became a religion of the 'powerless', of *kolkhozniki* and low-educated workers. This division isolated Muslim groups, who lacked strategic links with the economic, political and intellectual elite of Ajaria and consequently resulted in a further marginalization of Islam. It is within this context that the adoption of Christianity is to be seen.

In this paper, I take a closer look at the occurrence of religious conversion to Christianity in the town of Khulo, the administrative center of Upper Ajaria. The town is an 80 kilometer or three-hour drive eastwards from Batumi and is located at an altitude of 1,000 meters. The center of town seemed a bit out of place in this predominantly rural region. Run-down apartment buildings, the large but empty post-office and cinema, the shops that closed their doors and the rusty workshops of the textile factory were conspicuous reminders of more prosperous times. The town of Khulo once epitomized Soviet modernization in the region, but ten years after the Soviet collapse it represented just as forcefully the demise of an economic and ideological system. Although the heyday of Khulo was past, the town retained much of its importance as the economic center and transportation and communication hub for the region. Because of its proximity to the international border (approximately ten kilometers), the state security agency and other governmental bodies continued to be well represented in town.

Moreover, Khulo was an important symbolic center for both, Muslims as well as Christians. The town had important functions for the Muslims in the region as it hosted one of the largest mosques in Ajaria and because both the deputy *mufti* and several influential families of Muslim teachers lived in the town. At the same time, Khulo also functioned as a bridgehead for Christian missionary work. In the 1990s the Orthodox Church regarded Khulo as a prime location for their missionary activity in Upper Ajaria. Concerning the extent of conversion, it formed a sort of middle ground. While in the provincial capital and many coastal towns and villages a large portion of the population had converted to Orthodox Christianity during the 1990s, the occurrence of conversion was an exception in the villages in Upper Ajaria. However, in the second half of the 1990s the Orthodox Church was gaining influence in Upper Ajaria as well, especially in the district centers. Nevertheless, in 2000 and 2001 the



Christian community in Khulo was still only a fraction of the town's total population. The church had approximately 300 members or five percent of the population.

### **Talking about Conversion**

Insight into the complex motivations and effects of conversion can be gained by looking at the way new Christians talk about their conversion. As we will see, the converts pursued a restoration of perceived Christian-Georgian historical unity, which at the same time held promises for a 'modern' future. The role of religious conversion in pursuits of modernity reflected Werth's important observation that, "rather than coding religion as indisputably traditional and construing modernity in terms of religion's demise and transcendence (...) religion, especially in a colonial context, can serve as a vehicle for inducting subjects into modernity" (Werth 2000: 514). But in Upper Ajaria, although conversion was motivated by notions of modernity and had an emancipating effect in 'Georgian' contexts, it also complicated their position in their 'Muslim' community and as such spurred new attempts to demarcate spheres of belonging.

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

#### *Tamaz*

Tamaz has been teaching at the Christian lyceum since 1991 and he was the only one within his family who opted for Christianity. His quest for a satisfactory worldview, which eventually led him away from Islam and towards Christianity, had been long and, in view of his continued ambivalence about his decision, difficult. Now 42 years old, Tamaz grew up in what he called a "true atheistic period," although he mentioned that his parents continued to observe Muslim rites even then. Tamaz himself however refused to participate in these

practices and, as a result, his parents sometimes half-jokingly called him “our little heathen.” After Tamaz completed high school, he entered the pedagogical institute in Batumi. He did not see this period as having influenced his later conversion, because “at the institute we didn’t even talk about religion: it was severely forbidden. And besides, it was not interesting to me.” After four years, Tamaz returned to Khulo and married a girl from a neighboring village.

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

Upon their return to Khulo, his sudden interest in Christianity slackened unavoidably. In 1991 however, the local boarding school was converted into the *Spiritual Lyceum of the Apostle Andrew* by a personal decree of then president Gamsakhurdia. Tamaz found employment in the lyceum as a teacher of Russian. Although it was never required of teachers to adopt Christianity, working at the lyceum, of course, involved being exposed to Christianity.

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

### *Badri*

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

“This crib is made in the traditional style which allowed it to be picked up and carried away whenever there was a threat of danger. Another custom was to hide a large knife under the mattress, so that the women could defend themselves against the Turks. You

see, the Turks could have attacked at any moment and people had to be constantly prepared. Our people struggled for centuries to defend not only their families, but also their faith. As you see, although my neighbors are Muslim, they still hate the Turks and have preserved our Christian traditions.”

Through this story of the crib, Badri revealed his convictions about religion as well as some of his reasons for adopting Christianity even before I had a chance to ask him about his conversion. Later that evening, Badri and I eventually got around to discussing his conversion. He spoke about the time (early 1980s) when he was a student of veterinary medicine in Tbilisi:

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

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

“You know, I didn’t get baptized earlier because of my neighbors. They don’t even comprehend such a move; it is not part of their understanding. From their perspective, Islam is the proper [*sobstvennaia*] religion. I felt that they were giving me strange looks. Don’t think that it was an easy decision; there were unpleasant responses from neighbors who told me that I had made a big mistake. But I always replied that I had made the right decision, that I had chosen the path of our forefathers. My father had no problem with it, he was and still is a staunch communist, and although his parents were Muslim, he himself is practically an atheist.”<sup>8</sup>

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

On subsequent occasions Badri often complained about his illiterate neighbors who did not understand historical truth. “They can’t see,” he explained to me, “that Islam is only here because the Turks imposed it on us.” In a way Badri wanted to rid himself of this Muslim

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that Badri’s grandparents and several of his uncles fell victim to the purges of the 1930s. They were sent to jail and possibly deported, but nothing further is known about their fate.

past, and his baptism can be seen as an act of ritual cleansing of what he sees as foreign, inauthentic influences. Convinced that Ajaria's future would be Christian, he enrolled his two children in the Christian Lyceum and later decided to have them baptized, without consulting his relatives. Not everyone was completely happy with his actions, but Badri easily dismissed the differing views. Concerning his wife's reaction, he told me that she "started to cry when she heard that I had Giorgi and Nino [their children] baptized. She was upset because she feared that no one would want to marry our children. As if I would accept a son-in-law who is Muslim. It actually made the whole issue easier; this way only good marriage candidates will come forward to marry them."

### *Ketevan*

Ketevan was still very young when her father died. She was raised by her mother and grandmother. She was about eleven years old when a neighbor (of Georgian-Christian origin) told Ketevan and her mother that she wanted to baptize Ketevan. Although the request was declined and although Ketevan was too young to grasp the meaning of her neighbor's wishes, she said it was a turning point in her life and stressed that after this incident she became very interested in Christianity. When she was in the eleventh grade she wanted to be baptized. However, her grandmother was against it and there was no way Ketevan could make such a decision without her grandmother's consent. Nevertheless, during those years she began to weigh both religions against one another: "Although I was more inclined towards Christianity, something kept me away from it. It probably had to do with my upbringing and of course my grandmother played a role in this, but it was only recently that I came to understand that it was my past that was sitting in my heart, keeping me away from my religion."<sup>9</sup>

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

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

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<sup>9</sup> Note that in this sentence two perspectives on history come together: the family history as symbolized in the grandmother and a more abstract perspective on history symbolized in 'my religion'.

Her grandmother, however, was against Ketevan's plan from the first moment. "Although she didn't threaten me with reprimands, she never gave her approval. But she has come to accept it, and now she merely says that I shouldn't forget about our religion," which for Ketevan's grandmother is obviously Islam.

"Of course there are things I can't say at home. My grandmother is very pious: she observes *Ramadan* and she prays. For her it is too difficult to abandon Islam. I respect her, and therefore I hide my icons. In my bedroom I have a corner with religious items, but I only pray there when grandmother is not at home or late at night when they are asleep. My mother is not baptized, but when she sees how I pray from the heart, she sometimes wishes that she too would be Christian. Maybe when grandmother is gone she too will be baptized."

### *Marina*

Marina explained to me that she had gone through a difficult period in her life. Since her conversion in 1998 she has lived separated from her husband, but, she pointed out, they were planning to get back together. These last few years had been very hard for her and she stressed that this, to a large extent, should be blamed on the Muslim clergy:

"They have tried everything to get us divorced, simply because they fear that [if we stayed married] it would speed up the decline of Islam; they are afraid to lose their control over the community.<sup>10</sup> But you know what is so interesting? My husband is now himself preparing to be baptized. He tells me that he is ready for it now."

Marina was one of the first people in Khulo who converted. This, in addition to the difficulties she experienced following her conversion, made her a kind of heroine for other converts – adding to the heroism of becoming a Christian. During a two-hour session we spoke about her experiences, but when we got to the point of her own decision, she seemed a bit nervous, as though afraid that I would not understand it right.

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

Marina hesitated for a second before she told me about what she presented as the crucial moment for making a difficult decision. She told me that at the time – in 1993 – she joined the

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<sup>10</sup> What I think she was referring to was that individual conversions of marginalized (divorced) individuals would be less threatening to the Muslim community than accepted conversions within families.

priests from Khulo every two weeks on their trip to the church in Skhalta, where sermons were being held. During one of those trips, after the sermon had ended, she continued:

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

### **Narratives of Conversion: Continuity, enemies and progress**

These conversion stories do not necessarily reflect the original motives that led Tamaz, Badri, Ketevan and Marina to adopt Christianity, but they do tell us something of how new Christians explain and defend their decision to be baptized. Put differently, the language of the stories and the recurring signs and symbols in them suggest how conversions are imbedded in wider discourses. The goal in this section is not only to show *that* the conversion stories are related to wider discourses – which is more than obvious – but also to try and find out *how* they are related. Therefore, I focus on those recurring themes in the stories that are important for understanding what conversion entails in relation to national and private arenas.

#### *Continuity*

Although non-Christians in Ajaria frequently employ the word ‘conversion’ (*perekhodit*) to describe the actions of new Christians, many converts (I will continue to employ the term) did not use the word because of the unwanted connotation of change.<sup>11</sup> What they had experienced in their spiritual life was not to be understood as a personal change or disruption, but rather as a regaining of the true self in Christianity. Instead of a change, the ritual act of baptism was presented as a purification, as an expulsion of inauthentic influences. This was for example evident in Tamaz’ statement that “I managed to rid myself of the Muslim rites and customs that were in my skin and in my flesh.” In other words, while ridding the new

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<sup>11</sup> New Christians did not like the term conversion because of its connotation of change and rather talked about ‘being baptized’. The Muslim clergy also did not use ‘conversion’ because they did not believe that such a change was possible. Instead they denoted new Christians as misled people or as apostates. Assuming that the term conversion does not have negative connotations for the reader, I will continue to use conversion as a relatively neutral term (more so than ‘return to Christianity’ or ‘apostasy’) to describe personal religious change as a process that does not start nor end with the ritual act of baptism.

Christians of inauthentic influences the conversion at the same time enabled a return to – not a change towards – Christianity. A young woman in Khulo expressed this notion directly, saying: “I don’t have the feeling that I am switching from one to another religion. No! I have *returned* to my native religion.”

What did this ‘return’ to Christianity imply? In many stories it quite bluntly pointed to primordial notions of national, ethnic and religious identity. Tamaz, for example, stressed that Ajaria was historically Christian and that Christianity was the religion to which his forefathers adhered. He portrayed his conversion not as a change to something new, but as an interrupted continuation of Christianity that had remained part of his, Georgian, culture. This notion of interrupted continuation was made meaningful by referring to the distant past, a past in which the local Ajarian population was Christian.

History clearly provided an important source of approval for the new Christians, who presented their conversion as a continuation of the original faith of their predecessors. This aspect of continuity was true not only for the accounts presented above, but also recurred in fleeting comments made on the subject. During one short interaction a new Christian said about his conversion: “It’s simple: if you read history then you start to understand that our religion is Christianity. Everything of value in Ajaria, the bridges, castles, churches, they were all built in the 12th century. And by whom were they built? By us – Georgians!” References to the heyday of the Bagratid kingdom (12th and 13th centuries AD) were made frequently. The relation between this distant past and the present was portrayed as self-evident. Verbally connecting the 12th and the 21st centuries by placing them next to each other in one sentence was generally enough to get the message across. In many accounts, it seemed as if the 12th century happened only yesterday. How the eight centuries in between were explained away was not a matter of great interest, although some referred implicitly to the issue. For Vakhtangi for example, the historical realities continued in a straight line up to the present: “It is the Georgian soul that pulls us to Christianity. Of course, most people say that they are Muslim but that is just a cover. By way of their lifestyle and customs they are drawn towards Christianity. If you would be able to have a look in their soul you would find out that they truly are Christians.” In other words, this Christian-Georgian ‘reality’ could never be erased, even though it had been repressed for centuries.

The idea that Islam had only had a superficial impact on the local population was also voiced by Badri when, in the story presented previously, he pointed out to me all the signs of Christianity that had survived centuries of Ottoman rule and the ‘superficial’ Islamization of the area. That the narrative of an ineradicable Christian past resonated very well with the ideas of the converts is obvious, as it provided affirmation for their decision to adopt

Christianity. By implication this meant an adoption of national rhetoric as revealed in scholarly works about the history of the region. As a female convert commented, “I have read those books, I have read them all, and I discovered that our ancestors were Christians. A thinking person cannot ignore that.”

The basic idea behind the numerous statements on historic truth then was that the composite of Georgian culture and Christianity had been obscured – but not essentially changed – by Ottoman rule. By the same standards, new Christians argued that in the ‘post-atheist’ context, the available historical knowledge made it possible to ‘uncover’ this ‘covered reality’, a reality that according to new Christians had been hiding behind the superfluous image of Islam. But whereas this historical narrative was unproblematic in the larger part of Georgia, which is often presented as a Christian island surrounded by Islam, Ajaria had been incorporated in the Muslim realm for several centuries. This difference made the historic narrative sketched above simultaneously more problematic and more crucial for the involved people. Indeed, I propose that Ajaria’s location on the frontier of the Muslim and Christian realms is an important factor in understanding why new Christians so zealously embraced nationalist historic rhetoric.

### *Enemies*

When new Christians talked about history or culture, it was often in opposition to the ‘other’. This ‘other’ manifested itself in speech as ‘the Turk’, ‘the Ottoman’, or more broadly as ‘Muslims’ and was presented as radically different from the ‘self’. The ‘other’ was simultaneously a religious and a cultural ‘other’. This was well captured in a statement of a young woman who had been baptized several years earlier: “When I read the Koran I do not recognize anything: it is not about our people, not about Georgians. In contrast, when I started to read the Bible I recognized everything, everything struck me as familiar. The bible is about people like me.” In this short comment, Islam and Christianity were neatly opposed. The bible was presented as a book about Georgians. It was contrasted with the Koran whose messages were portrayed as alien.

Significantly, the comments were not only about difference, but also about danger. Muslims were thought of as having done a great injustice to the Georgians generally and to the inhabitants of Ajaria specifically, as the next comment shows: “I used to have nothing to do with religion; I was a simple farmer, although once in a while I went to the old church out of curiosity. (...) But I did read a lot, for example that the Turks had cut off 300 heads and thrown them into the Chorokhi [River] and then sent a message to Skhalta that the same thing would happen there if people didn’t submit to Islam.” Similar stories about the cruelties of the



Turks or the Ottoman Empire were repeated over and over again. They were exchanged during dinners and discussed over wine.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the historical injustice that the ‘other’ had inflicted, the ‘other’ was also perceived as a threat to present-day realities, judging from stories that discussed the danger of renewed influence of ‘the Turk’. “[One day] a whole group arrived from Turkey; they called themselves *hodjas*, but in fact they were secret agents. They studied the situation here, about how people related to religion and the state. Of course the Muslims here are interested in religion in Turkey, but it turned out that the [*hodjas*] were agents; they wanted to restart the process that took place here 400 years ago.”<sup>13</sup> Although this particular story was known by many, the numerous references that were made to publications and scholarly works on the subject point to the active role of Soviet ideology in the creation of an enemy. Whereas part of this Soviet ideology was denounced as propaganda, the rhetoric on the ‘cruel Muslim past’ had remained an active and important part of collective memory.

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

Further insights might be gained if we examine how the ‘other’ was related to conversion. Another look at the story of Badri might justify the hypothesis that the act of being baptized was a form of ritual cleansing from “a past contaminated by Turks.” He stressed that even his Muslim neighbors acted in a Christian way and hated the Turks just as much as he did. As he saw it, their mistake was that they failed to reject Islam as a religion of disliked foreigners, the Turks. In other words, the statements suggested that the ‘other’ was very near and, in fact, resided in one’s own household, family or street. Doubts about who the ‘other’ was might also be found in the following statement from Marina, “The most important thing is that we never married Turks. It tells a lot about how people here related to the Turks, about the fact that we were always one indivisible nation.” She was referring here to the 19th century and Soviet publications about that period. Although probably correct in that the local community did on

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<sup>12</sup> I heard the story about the Turks cutting off heads of those unwilling to adopt Islam from at least five respondents. The names of the rivers or villages were adjusted to local circumstances, while some added that the rivers had been red with blood for days on end.

<sup>13</sup> The person who was the likely original source of this story claimed to know that the *hodjas* were secret agents because he had seen them spend the night in the mosque, which in his view was against Muslim law.

the whole not marry with Turks (who were not living in the area anyway), what was left out and needed to be left out is that ‘we’ – our parents and grandparents – were Muslims. It omitted that the inhabitants of Ajaria had largely abandoned the Georgian language in favor of Turkish at the end of the 19th century and that they had fought with great fervor against the ‘heathen’ Christians.

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

### *Progress*

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

New Christians, but also people without clear religious predilections, worried about the possible strength of Islam. One person told me: “There simply can’t [shouldn’t] be a future for Islam. It is a dark, dark religion. It turns people into slaves of Allah.” An acquainted lecturer from the university of Batumi similarly invoked the idea of Islam’s backwardness. After we had an (unsuccessful) encounter with an imam, he expressed his worries about the activities of Muslim leaders, “You know what would happen if they were in control? They would send us straight back to Arabia of the seventh century, to Muhammad and his camels.” The alleged regressive characteristics of Islam were placed in unambiguous contrast to the

achievements of Christianity. Once, when visiting one of the medieval bridges across the river Ach'aristsqali, a Christian acquaintance told me the following: "Can you imagine, they [the Ottomans] ruled here for four centuries and during that period not a single bridge or monument was constructed, whereas these ingenious bridges were already built in the 12th century when Ajaria was Christian. Architects would not be able to construct them even today." The medieval monuments and bridges were symbols of a desirable and unambiguous connection with the rest of Georgia. What the new Christians aimed for was to be part of 'civilized' Georgian society. As such, the 'return' to a Christian past contained promises for the future.

The new Christians clearly saw themselves as forerunners of an unavoidable process that over time would encompass all Ajarians. As Inga, a young woman, 25 years old, commented: "For me Christianity started as a kind of hobby, but now I want to make it official. That is just natural; I think that in a few years everyone will be Christian and it is better that way." For Inga, Christianity was natural and better, and better not only because Christianity was indivisible from the Georgian character, but also because of the civilizing role it supposedly had played. For many converts, the return to Christianity was vital for alleviating the backward position of the region.

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

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

Father Miriani's statement illustrated a tension between the clergy, who stressed the authentic roots of their faith, and the new converts who stressed the modern and civilizing role of the Church.<sup>14</sup> However, for most new Christians this tension did not exist, they simply adopted a Christianity that was an embodiment of modernity.

My colleague Teimuri also witnessed the 'modernizing' force of Christianity in aspects of daily life, like the way people dressed. Not long after we first arrived in Khulo we were walking through the center when Teimuri remarked: "Wow, it is just like Paris here,"

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<sup>14</sup> In at least one case this tension led to a conflict between Father Miriani and a convert who demanded that the church take more action in alleviating the 'backwardness' of Ajaria, preferably through forced conversions.

referring to a pretty girl whose shirt accentuated her breasts. Jokingly he added, “no wonder people are converting to Christianity, if you compare this to the dark cloths that they have to wear in the [Muslim] villages.” Whether it was his imagination or not, the idea that Christianity enabled the wearing of ‘modern’ clothes and the adoption of a ‘modern’ lifestyle was an idea that several new Christians held. This was obvious in the warnings people gave me when I went on a fieldtrip to a village higher in the mountains. There, several people in Khulo told me, life was backward. When I returned many people (especially women) wanted to know whether the women in the mountains really wore veils and whether or not these women really did not speak to men outside their families. “Well, at least here we have some civilization,” Ketevan mentioned once when I returned to Khulo. “For you it may not seem much, but for me [it is different]. I am really glad that here at least I can talk with whom I want and dress the way I like.”

The modernizing force of conversion and the important role of education were clearly related in this line of argumentation. Most converts would mention that they were from educated families and stressed that they had read not only works of history, but also the Russian and German classics. The argument of how education and Christianity were linked worked in two ways. On the one hand, education was supposed to raise the awareness that Christianity was the true religion (for Georgians) and to help Ajarians discover that they had been living with a false consciousness.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, education was meant to provide people with freedom and to allow children to make choices for themselves.

The theme of progress was also evoked when Christians stressed that better education would automatically precipitate conversion: “If a person is educated and so is his family, then they shouldn’t have a problem to arrive at certain conclusions from reviewing our history. And if they are educated and understanding, then they shouldn’t forbid their children to become Christian.” Likewise converts said that although they had met resistance, it was “the educated people” who had supported them. According to the converts, educated people recognized the importance of Christianity in this project of modernization. The importance of the idea of progress, of catching up with the rest of Georgia, the stress on education and ‘modern’ lifestyles did not find resonance with everyone. Rather, it was a specific group for whom these topics were of particular relevance.

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<sup>15</sup> Bishop Dmitri, for example, explained to me: “People have been living in ignorance for centuries; they were suppressed by the Turks and later by the communists. Now they are free to learn about their true selves.”

## Baptisms and Biography

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

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

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

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

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

social position of converts influenced how they talked about their conversion, then the reason for explicit appropriation of nationalist discourses and the obsession with continuity could well be located in the life trajectories of early converts in Upper Ajaria.<sup>16</sup> By exploring how the themes of ‘return to the original faith’, ‘demonizing the other’ and the stress on the ‘progressive nature of Christianity’ are related to personal lives, we might find more clues to why specific people made the decision to be baptized.

### *The New Christians in Khulo*

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

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

The means of livelihood in Daba Khulo, Dekanashvilebi and Kedlebi were also different from the other neighborhoods. Although there used to be *kolkhozes* in the latter two neighborhoods, most people were employed elsewhere, either in the two clothing factories, the service sector or in the town administration.<sup>17</sup> This pattern was even more evident when reviewing the social backgrounds of new Christians. Among the 64 new adult Christians

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<sup>16</sup> When I write ‘early convert’ I have in mind practically all converts in Khulo, precisely because they form a minority. The exceptions are children whose parents had already converted.

<sup>17</sup> In the other neighborhoods, the majority of the population was employed in the *kolkhozes*.

about whom I collected sufficient information, there were 22 teachers, six civil servants working at the town or the district (*raion*) administration, five nurses, four physicians and other medical specialists, while the remaining 27 people had professions such as housewife, athlete or bookkeeper, or had formerly held a position (mostly middle management) at one of the clothing factories in town. What is interesting about these figures is that they are almost exclusively representatives of the educated ‘middle class’, while farmers and technicians (former *kolkhozniki*) were virtually absent among the new Christians.

The middle class families in general attributed much value to education and sent their children to Batumi, Tbilisi or other cities to attend university. Members from these families took up positions in state structures and often lived part of their lives outside Khulo, mostly in urban areas in Georgia. Moreover, they all saw their social and economic positions deteriorate in the last ten years. The factories closed their doors not long after the Soviet collapse. And although a large percentage managed to retain their position in the administration or in the medical and educational institutes, their wages decreased so dramatically that they necessarily fell back on income generating strategies which combined official positions and other activities such as local petty-trading.<sup>18</sup>

In short, the new Christians were often people who moved ‘in’ and ‘up’ during the Soviet period. They were, in a sense, the embodiment of the new ‘modern’ life that started in the Soviet period and obtained explicit Christian characteristics in the wake of Soviet disintegration. But this ‘modern’ life had become problematic for the involved families, since many, after moving ‘in’ and ‘up’ during Soviet times had subsequently fallen ‘down’ when the Soviet state collapsed. Seen from this perspective, their conversion may be partly understood as attempts to retain or regain their middle-class position, even if conversion entailed few material rewards.

### *Life Courses*

One more look at the conversion stories of Tamaz, Badri and Ketevan may help us further understand the patterns sketched above. In the stories, the decision to adopt Christianity was presented as a turning point in their individual lives, as the moment when people saw the light that brought them on the righteous path. But what is more relevant for our purpose here is to note that the conversions coincided with, or were preceded by, other crucial episodes in the biographies of those involved. Tamaz, Badri and Ketevan had each lived for considerable time outside their own community, whether it was Tbilisi or Batumi. During those periods

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<sup>18</sup> The decline in living standards have been more abrupt for this group than for most former *kolkhozniki* (especially in the less densely populated neighborhoods) who were able to reclaim their grandparents’ land and manage to sustain a modest livelihood.

they were initiated into a different social environment. Although Tamaz rightfully observed that when he lived in Batumi an atheist atmosphere predominated, his stay in the city nevertheless implied a way of life that was radically different from that in the small community in which he was raised.

Whereas perhaps only for Ketevan the period outside Khulo meant a factual encounter with Christianity, all three were exposed to city life that embodied Georgian culture and that later was closely reconnected to Christianity, a life of which they wanted to be a part. Negative attitudes held by other Georgians concerning Ajaria and Ajarians sometimes also played an important role as revealed by the following remark of an Ajarian man who had studied in Tbilisi in the 1980s.

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

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

There were a few other characteristics in these genealogies that at first sight did not seem to relate to one another. It turned out that in several cases the families with baptized members had also been victims of the purges of the Stalin period and in a significant number of cases one or more parents of the new Christians had died prematurely. Ketevan had grown up in a family without a father and a grandfather, whereas Badri’s grandfather and uncles were arrested in the 1930s, never to return home. That deportations and arrests might have had some influence on later religious change was also suggested by the data on the social background of the converts. Of 36 converts about whom I had extensive biographical information, ten turned out to be members of ‘repressed’ families.



This finding was in itself not that surprising since it was especially the middle class that fell victim to the repression in the 1930s and 1950s. But apart from the overlap between repressed families and middle class families – who were more exposed to national rhetoric – there are several other possibilities how ‘repression’ might have influenced later conversion. Akaki, a 60 year-old history teacher who converted several years ago mentioned: “My grandfather, father and three uncles were imprisoned in 1937. My grandfather was killed there, while my uncles and father returned home. (...) Father was always scared. He knew Turkish and Arabic, but he never prayed, he didn’t carry out any rituals, he wanted to make sure that nothing would inhibit his children from having a prosperous life.” In this account, but also in the case of Badri, who described his father as a staunch Stalinist, this fear about possible imprisonment resulted in a strict atheist atmosphere at home and explicit adoption of Soviet lifestyles. What it suggests as well is that education and repression both caused the family to be only partly integrated into the local community. Whether the convert’s parents had been victims of repression or whether the convert had spent several years away from the nuclear family to study, it meant that the family members were partly outsiders in their community and family and thus had a relatively large social and conceptual ‘freedom’ to explore alternative paths. Or, arguing from the opposite point of view, they experienced less pressure to comply with local values and norms. As for repressed families, they were often stigmatized by co-villagers long after their rehabilitation. This, and perhaps also the feeling among the repressed that the local community had betrayed them, in a way pushed them out of the local moral community.<sup>19</sup>

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

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<sup>19</sup> One family confirmed this hypothesis too well to pass unmentioned. In this family, three out of five daughters had married priests. The family stood not only ‘outside’ the community but was also disrespected because the mother divorced two husbands and was said (by other Christians) to have been highly promiscuous.

### **Baptized Georgian: Mobilizing ancestors and other kin**

In the previous section I elaborated on how national discourses and personal lives converged. There is one theme, however, that recurred in almost every single narrative, but upon which I have not commented yet: ancestors. They mattered so much because they enabled new Christians to link the national discourses with their personal lives in a very poignant way. Perhaps the most striking example was in the story of Marina, who decided to be baptized after she received a message from her ancestor that the time had come for her to make a decision about her faith. Although this was a particularly striking incident, it was not the only case in which ancestors literally showed the way to Christianity. Otari, a Christian with rather radical ideas about the need for forced proselytism, had similar experiences with his great-grandmother. He told me that in his youth she would often talk about the time when his forefathers moved from a Christian Georgian region to Khulo. Then, “on June 9, 1984, she appeared to me in a dream and in that dream she asked me: ‘What are you waiting for? Go to Tsioni’ [the central Cathedral in Tbilisi]. The next day I went there and was baptized.” Whereas in Marina’s story the forefather was a priest, in Otari’s account the grandmother talked about their roots in Christian Georgia, thus connecting the family to a Christian tradition. Yet another respondent, Vakhtangi, made a similar claim stating “from childhood onwards I was oriented towards Christianity because of my grandmother, who had told me that we had Christian predecessors.”

What was it that made ancestors such important metaphors for, and symbolic actors in, shifts of religious affiliation? Given the emphasis on history and the negative experiences with the local community, it was not hard to start seeing why ancestors were so important. On one level, ancestors proved that Christianity was not something new, but actually something that had always existed. This was not only important for the converts themselves, but also for the church which had to counter local accusations that they manipulated the youth and talked them into converting. It is thus not accidental that the clergy often prided themselves on having been able to convert the elderly. Bishop Dimitri told me: “Every day we have new baptisms, sometimes even people aged 70 or 80 rediscover their true (*istinnaia*) religion.” Later I was shown the video of the ritual act to which he referred, which showed the baptism of an 80 year old man from Khulo. The video showed how the old man received the sacrament of baptism. Then he was interviewed saying: “I am very happy that I was baptized today, the way that my ancestors were also baptized. I have dreamt about being baptized Georgian for a long time and when I die, I will die as the Georgians used to die, as a Christian.” His words were quite similar to what others might have said, although his

statement of being ‘baptized Georgian’ was a very explicit example of the connection between national and religious sentiment. For the clergy, however, the power of this fragment – the reason that they recorded and proudly showed it – was the man’s age, which reduced the gap between the past and the present.

Grandparents were also useful in reassuring converts that their decision was correct. When I joined Nugzar – a befriended professor of ethnology – on a visit to the bishop a conversation unfolded between them in which Nugzar told the bishop of the fact that his grandfather had been *hodja* and had been shot by the communists. Hereupon the bishop replied: “I am sure that your decision [to baptize] would have made your grandfather very happy. He himself didn’t have that opportunity at the time, you know.” Investing old people, and more distantly ancestors, with the wish to have been able to carry out their true Christian nature reduces historical religious disruption. Ancestors thus very powerfully convey the message of continuity of the Christian faith, and they link the issue of faith to that of nationality. Ancestors root people in particular soils and give a moral and historical weight to nationalist and religious claims. In essence, they make nationalist – and religious – claims more tangible and concrete by linking family relations to national ideals.<sup>20</sup> They personalize a nationalist narrative of history. By stating that it was *our* family that was Christian, *our* family that was forced to become Muslim and by referring to grandmothers who reminisced about the family being Christian, the martyrdom of the Georgian nation was re-conceptualized on the level of kinship.

For the new Christians, ancestors also had more concrete roles to play. For one, they provided a legitimization of their choice to be baptized. Teimuri rightly observed that historical knowledge did not suffice to effect religious conversion. But when ‘historical knowledge’ was framed in a narrative of family and tradition, the converts’ decision at least started to become meaningful. Ancestors were indeed not only important as *historical* figures, but also as *familial* figures that bound family and community together. They, in essence, gave weight to the claim that converts were reincorporated into the original communities rather than being renegades. The ancestor in a way accomplished what ideology cannot accomplish, that is, to root people in time and restore interrupted genealogies.

The ancestor is thus the ideal figure to repair disruptions in locality. They are not alone in this task, but often assisted by other kin (especially older ones such as parents and grandparents) who are similarly employed to soften the disruptions caused by the act of baptism. One girl told me, “Mother would also have adopted Christianity but she is afraid that

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<sup>20</sup> This line of reasoning is taken from Verdery (1999: 41) who argues that ancestors are vital to national ideology. Similarly, Gingrich (1998) discusses the predominance of ancestors in frontier myths of Orientalism on the Balkans.

for her, things will end if she does. But at the same time she has icons hanging in her room and she has a picture in which she stands in the middle of her icons. She reads Arabic and has read Muslim books, but she is more inclined towards Christianity.” Like in this example, stories about individual baptisms were often accompanied by statements about relatives and friends that indicated that the convert did not stand alone in his actions or ideas concerning religion. The importance of this theme was also obvious in the stories presented earlier. Ketevan for example mentioned that her mother “sometimes wished to be Christian,” while one of the first things that Marina told me was that her husband was now “ready to be baptized.” Similarly, Badri stressed that his neighbors, despite being Muslim, really hated the Turks. Whether these statements really matched the intentions or attitudes of the family members cannot be answered, but they illustrated the importance of finding a place – a new place – in a community that had disapproved of one’s decision to convert, preferably through changing that community.

## **Conclusion**

As the stories presented in this paper demonstrated, conversion to Christianity was, in part, motivated by promises of a ‘modern’ future. On the face of it, then, the paper seemed to validate van der Veer’s sweeping statement that “conversion to forms of Christianity in the modern period is not only a conversion to modern forms of these religions, but also to religious forms of modernity” (1996: back cover). Van der Veer backs this claim by pointing to a commonality between conversion and modernity, namely that “they both view change positively” (1996: 18). This argument seems to have particular value for conversions to Protestant Christianity, which tend to emphasize a renunciation of one’s sinful past and underline personal change through spiritual rebirth, as the contributions to van der Veer’s edited volume indicate.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, the conversions to Orthodox Christianity in Ajaria were discursively embedded in a valorization of the distant past and in a rejection of the idea that converts had ‘changed’. New Christians interpreted their baptism as a ‘return to their native religion’ as well as a regaining of ‘one’s true self’. This discursive rejection of ‘change’ was not only a reaction to the communal disruptions that their conversions had produced, but also linked with the myth of Christian-Georgian historical continuity. As such, the negative ideas about ‘change’ signal a more complex relation between conversion and ‘modernity’ than suggested by van der Veer.

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<sup>21</sup> Likewise, my own work on conversion to Evangelical Christianity in Kyrgyzstan shows the valorization of change and a deep ambiguity about (or even rejection of) the past (Pelkmans 2005).

To recollect, the advancement of Christianity in post-Soviet Ajaria had been facilitated by the societal changes that occurred during Soviet rule. The exclusion of religion from the public sphere and the dissemination of ideas of Soviet-Georgian modernity played a crucial role in this outcome, as they contributed to increasing identification with the Georgian 'nation' among Muslim Ajarians. The fact that regional elites either had been Christians all along or relatively quickly converted to Christianity further contributed to the 'Christianization' of the public sphere. Both Orthodox Christianity and Georgian nationality had very 'modern' connotations for people who, as I described it, moved 'in' and 'up' during the Soviet Union, but saw their 'middle-class' status undermined after the Soviet collapse. To them, Orthodox Christianity signified urban life and the grandeur of the Georgian capital, and moreover embodied the hope that Ajaria would shed its 'backward status'. But these 'modern' qualities of Orthodox Christianity were only accessible through an excision of the recent Soviet and Islamic past which enabled reconnection to an earlier Christian past.

In short, conversion to Christianity was motivated by the lure of 'the modern', but could only be reached by way of a conceptual return to the deep ('pre-modern') past. This detour resembles what Verdery calls the "orgy of historical revisionism" observed throughout the postsocialist world (1999: 112). She notes that new elites, in attempting to legitimate their rule and to design new trajectories for their respective societies first had to obliterate and even expunge the socialist past. In other words, they first had to move backwards to a (imagined) pre-socialist reality in order to *return* to the progressive road to capitalism (Verdery 1996: 204-205). Similarly, to make conversion to Christianity thinkable and imaginable, it was of crucial importance to re-imagine the region as a Christian province and its inhabitants as returning to Christianity.

The conversions were thus part of the reconfiguration of space and place in the Georgian borderlands and illustrated some of the paradoxes connected to the return of religion to the public sphere. The new role of religion urged inhabitants of Ajaria to search for new truths, while vacillating between the contradicting narratives of the Georgian nation and those dominant in their local community. Though the act of baptism was geared towards the future (and linked to ideas of modernity associated with Georgianness) the past proved crucial to repair the communal disruptions produced by conversion. To soften the tension with their social surroundings, the new Christians mobilized a host of metaphors that evoked the historical Christian past. Thus, whereas conversion entailed a search for 'the modern', this was entwined in paradigms geared towards the past. In employing these paradigms, the converts did not only establish their Christian identity in a Muslim context but also further

ingrained essentialist notions of culture and religion, thus contributing to the setting of new boundaries on the frontier between the Muslim and Christian realms.

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