Religious and National Aspects of Georgian Muslim Women's Identity

in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara

by

Inga Popovaite

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the religious and national aspects of Georgian Muslim women's identity. It is based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara. I argue that Georgian Muslim women experience a discrepancy between the Georgian and Muslim aspects of their identity, and this discrepancy can be partially explained by their perceived role as protectors of social group boundaries, as well as being the ones responsible for biological and cultural reproduction of a social group. Also, instead of leaving the inferior religious minority status, the respondents tend to employ an accommodation strategy and preserve their shared group values and strengthen group boundaries. This can also be partially explained by the above mentioned perception of a women's role. The interview analysis as well as data from participant observation supports these arguments.

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Introduction

> People ask me everyday: why are you Muslim? You are a teacher, you know many things about history of Georgia, how we lost our religion – Christianity – here in Adjara, you know many things about Christianity, so why are you still Muslim? But my answer is that : I know a lot about Georgian history but my grandmother and grandfather, my parents are all Muslims. This religion is in my heart and in my soul and I can not change it. (INT10)

As Georgia is a predominantly Christian country and Georgian Orthodox Christianity is an integral part of the Georgian national narrative,[1] Muslim Georgians are partially excluded from the nation, as they do not share the same religion with the majority of the population. Here it should be noted that the case of Adjarians[2] is not unique: Bosniaks in Bosnia and Hercegovina,[3] as well as Pomaks in Bulgaria,[4] have to redefine their national identity against the surrounding Christian society as well.

To this day, the questions encompassing ethnic Georgian Muslim identity both in international and in local scholarly literature, have been discussed mostly from a masculine perspective: even the most detailed account of Georgian Muslims' identity by Pelkmans, is written from a male's point of view.[5] A few articles that are about Georgian Muslim women identity either do not concentrate on

1 Lilienfeld, "Reflections on the Current State of the Georgian Church and Nation"; Jones, "The Georgian Orthodox Church"; Khalvashi and Batiashvili, "Georgian National Identity: Elite Ideology and State Narratives vs. Narrative Selves of Muslim Georgians"; Pelkmans, "Religion, Nation and State in Georgia"; Chedia, "Georgian Nationalism Today: Facing the Challenges of the New Millennium."

2 Here and later this term used to indicate Georgian Muslims from Adjara; it is used interchangeably with term Georgian Muslim

3 Dimitrova, "Bosniak or Muslim? Dilemma of One Nation with Two Names."

4 Brunnbauer, "Histories and Identities: Nation-State and Minority Discourses. The Case of the Bulgarian Pomaks."

5 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*; George Sanikidze, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia"; Balci and Motika, "Islam in Post-Soviet Georgia1"; Baramidze, "Islam in Adjara - Comparative Analysis of Two Communities in Adjara"; Chikovani, "Christianity and Islam in Modern Georgia: The Experience, Challenges and Search for Responses"; Liles, *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara*.

Georgian Muslims from Adjara,[6] or focus on Georgian Muslim women from a historical perspective.[7] Therefore, I intend to fill in this literature gap by analyzing how Georgian Muslim women in Adjara perform their perceived duty of group boundary protectors when they negotiate their Georgian and Muslim self-identification and when they resist converting to Georgian Orthodox Christianity.

In my thesis, I argue that the perceived role of women as preservers of social group boundaries, and as the ones responsible for its biological and cultural continuation, can partially explain existing discrepancies between Georgian and Muslim aspects of the Georgian Muslim woman identity. The same reason underlines their decision to refrain from converting to Georgian Orthodox Christianity, despite discomfort which they experience as a result in everyday life situations.

Historically, Adjara[8] used to belong to the Ottoman Empire, hence, the percentage of the Muslim population here is higher than in the rest of Georgia. However, it is hard to estimate how many Muslims actually live in the country. The last official census in Georgia was conducted in 2002, although its reliability is dubious considering the state of disorder that Georgia was in at the time.[9] However, it did show that 9.9 percent out of total 4.4 million population (South Ossetia and Abkhazia excluded) considered themselves Muslims and 83.9 considered themselves Georgian Orthodox Christians.[10] In Adjara, the percentage of Muslims was higher: out of total 376 thousand people, 115 thousand people (30.6 percent) regarded themselves as Sunni Muslim. At the same time, the percentage of the followers of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Adjara was 63.9 percent.[11] Thus, even if these numbers should be taken with a grain of salt, they nevertheless illustrate the difference in the religious composition between Adjara and Georgia overall.

6 Badashvili, "Muslim Women's Identity Issues in Post-Soviet Georgia."
7 Gelovani, "Women in Georgia: Trace of Islam."
8 The autonomous republic of Adjara is in western Georgia on the border with Turkey. The capital city of Adjara is Batumi.
9 George Sanikidze, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia."
10 *Saqartvelos mosakhleobis 2002 ts'lis p'irveli erovnuli saq'oveltan aghts'eris shedegebi (The Results of the 2002 first official national census of Georgia)*, 132.
11 Ibid., 133.

The empirical part of the thesis is based on the analysis of sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted with women of various ages and occupations in Batumi and in the district of Khulo in the mountainous part of Adjara, including data that was gathered during my stay in the district of Khulo with a family of one of the religious leaders of the Muslim community. The interviews were recorded in three languages (Georgian with translation to Russian or English), transcribed in English and later coded and categorized with the qualitative research software RQDA.

The locations of interviews were not selected by chance. According to Baramidze, the highland and lowland Muslim communities in Adjara differ in religiosity: the highlanders tend to be more religious, they participate more actively in religious life and view religious education in a more positive way than lowlanders, who are influenced by the less religious, and more career-oriented, strong urban culture of Batumi.[12] Therefore my research on Georgian Muslim women identity was conducted both in Batumi and in the district of Khulo in upper Adjara in order to capture a more comprehensive picture of Georgian Muslim women identity issues. However, it must be noted that this research is not a comparative case study between lower and upper Adjara, as I was looking into the similar patterns that emerged in interviews and not the differences between them.

I start my thesis by discussing the terms that will be used throughout the thesis and provide a theoretical background of my thesis in the first chapter. In the second chapter, I show how the position of Georgian Muslims versus Georgian Christians changed from the late 19th century up until now. In a nutshell, I argue that the birth of Georgian nationalism in the 19th century, the forced secularism in the Soviet union, and later the revival of Georgian nationalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, led to more salient intergroup boundaries, and positioned Georgian Muslims between the Christian Georgians and the constructed Muslim Others. As women are perceived as boundary preservers, this position between two groups leads to the constant renegotiation of their self-dentification as Georgians and

12 Ruslan Baramidze, "Islam in Adjara -- Comparative Analysis of Two Communities in Adjara."

Muslims, and of their perceived belonging to both respective groups. In the third chapter, I concentrate on the Georgian Orthodox Church's position in Adjara and its expansion in the former Islamic region through physical, educational and legislative support from the state. This chapter is meant to illustrate that remaining Muslim is not necessarily the default option nowadays, as Georgian Orthodox Christians have a more privileged position in the state.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss the methodology of the conducted research in more detail and provide a description of all the interviewees. In the following fifth chapter, I present and discuss the findings from the interviews, as well as the participant observation in the district of Khulo. The analysis of three broad themes encountered in the interviews provides evidence and support for my hypotheses that 1) Georgian Muslim women in Adjara experience a discrepancy between their Muslim and Georgian aspects of their identity and that 2) the perceived role of women as social boundary protectors can partially account for the discrepancy they experience between the Muslim and Georgian aspects of their identity. In the sixth chapter, I discuss the findings from the interviews as well as from the participant observation further to support my hypotheses that 3) the perceived role of women as the main keepers of the groups boundaries keeps them from converting from Islam and 4) that the perceived role of women as protectors of the social group values keeps them from converting to Christianity as well. In the last chapter I provide the conclusion and questions for possible further researches.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Background

1.1 Definition of Terms

What is identity? As the definition by Tajfel goes, social identity is a part of an individual's self perception that derives from their belonging to a social group.[13] Brubaker and Cooper contribute to this definition by distinguishing different aspects of identity. They suggest that such terms as communality, connectedness and groupness are more accurate to use instead of a broad term identity when discussing "emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference or even antipathy to specified outsiders".[14] Brubaker and Cooper put another component of Tajfel's definition ("self-perception") into a separate category called self-identification.[15] My research proved that this distinction is crucial as in many situations Georgian Muslim women are not perceived as part of Georgian nation despite their self-identification with it. Hence when I discuss Georgian national identity in general, I mean both the self-identification as Georgian and a perception of groupness – or, paraphrasing Anderson, a sense of belonging to an imagined community.[16] However, in the more in-depth discussion, I will employ terms suggested by Brubaker and Cooper.

However, the modernist school of nationalism that Anderson belongs to, with its main ideas that the traditions are invented[17], nations are products of modernity[18], and the community is imagined, does not provide the right tools to analyze the complex relations between nationalism and religion as well as the impact of the latter on the collective mind of the nation. This could be achieved by employing

13 Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, chap. 12.
14 Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, 46.
15 Ibid., 41.
16 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
17 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.
18 Gellner, *Nationalism*.

Smith's ethnosymbolic approach which does not reject modernistic ideas per se (despite all the criticism) but rather builds upon them. The main claims of ethnosymbolism are that common ethnic myths, symbols, memories and traditions, and the ways they are constructed and interpreted by modern nationalistic elites, provide a basis for national solidarity and inclusiveness.[19] Following Smith, a self-identified Georgian belongs to a "population sharing an historic territory, *common myths and historical memories*, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members"[20](emphasis added)

Following the same line of thought, the Muslim identity entails that a person self-identifies as a Muslim, and at the same time feels that she belongs to the wider Muslim community. Here I need to stress that I am following Durkheim's approach to religion and concentrate on the social function that religion performs, rather then putting the emphasis on the content of it. Durkheim defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices which relates to sacred things and unites individuals into one single moral community called a Church.[21] This definition directly corresponds to a more modern concept of the common shared social group beliefs, as Bar-Tal puts it. These shared social group beliefs unify the group, because belonging to the same congregation functions as an important indicator of group membership; it gives a frame of reference to the specific group as the personal beliefs and group beliefs are in accordance with each other; the differences between a given religious community and the religious beliefs of the others not only defines and strengthens the group boundaries, it also determines the outgroup attitudes and behavior towards a given religious group.[22] Therefore, for the discussion and argumentation that follows, the content of Islamic canons is not so important by itself, but the importance of it lies in the group boundaries that it forms.

When I talk about group boundaries I follow what Lamont and Molnár call "symbolic

19 Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, chap. Introduction.
20 Smith, *National Identity*, 14.
21 Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 46.
22 Bar-Tal, "Group Beliefs as an Expression of Social Identity."

boundaries": conceptual distinctions which help individuals to put objects, people, practice, even time and space in categories. Symbolic boundaries create groups and foster feelings of similarity and membership among individuals belonging to one group; these boundaries serve as tools which allow individuals and groups to define reality. If there is a general agreement on symbolic boundaries, they could turn into social boundaries – into clear patterns of class and racial segregation or social exclusion. Although symbolic boundaries do not instantly take on restrictive and shaping character of social interaction, they are as real as social boundaries and exist at the intersubjective level.[23]

Another term that needs clarification is "culture". Without engaging into extensive debates on the different approaches and various contradicting definitions of this term, for my thesis I adapt the definition proposed by Swidler. According to her, culture consists "of symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life". Through the means of these symbolic vehicles the social processes of sharing behavior or outlook are taking part in a community.[24]

After defining the terms of national and religious identity, there is a third dimension that needs to be discussed – gender. A vast majority of the mainstream literature on nationality and religion have no reflections on gender,[25] however, my thesis will support the arguments of the opposing school which argues that female and male experiences in a nation or in a religious denomination differ. Gender differences are embedded in common imagination and the common myths of the nation, in cultural reproduction and boundary maintenance, in biological reproduction of the nation.[26]

The same applies to religion. As argued by Azzam, following a Foucaldian line of thought, religion has been a significant legitimatizing force for gender roles throughout history, as well as a

23 Lamont and Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," 168–169.
24 Swidler, "Culture in Action," 273.
25 Mayer, *Gender Ironies of Nationalism*; Sheila Allen, "Identity: Feminist Perspectives on 'Race', Ethnicity and Nationality"; Woodhead, "Gender Differences in Religious Practices and Significance"; Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*.
26 Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*.

vehicle for socialization or enculturation processes through which a person learns the shared beliefs, values and practices of their native society or culture from the representatives of a given religion.[27] A variety of studies on gender and religion relations, overviewed by Woodhead [28] also supports the line of argumentation that gender-neutral approach is capturing mainly mens experiences and perspectives. Hence the experiences of women and men of their national identity will be different even if they belong to the same nation or the same religion.

The role of women in biological reproduction of a collectivity could almost be considered self-explanatory as the most common way for individual to join a nation is to be born in it.[29] Even if in a case of religion there are different regulations in different denominations, when it comes to Islam the children are born into Muslim society if their father is Muslim despite the religion of the mother. Thus, only the women's role in cultural reproduction and boundary maintenance will be explained in more detail below.

According to Yuval-Davis, women "are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honor, both personally and collectively".[30]An example – Mother Georgia (Kartlis Deda), a huge statue overlooking Tbilisi from the top of a hill and holding a sword in one hand to protect from enemies and a goblet of wine in another hand to greet guests, hence embodying the very essence of the accepted national image (fierce to their enemies and hospitable to their guests).[31] Yuval-Davis points out that women symbolize collectivity in other ways as well: they are tied to children in the collective imagination, thus representing the future of the family and of the collective as well.[32] The construction of women as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's honor can be illustrated by the extreme case of honor killings, but even in more common everyday life situations "proper" behavior, "proper" clothing

27 Azzam, *Gender and Religion*, xxi.
28 Woodhead, "Gender Differences in Religious Practices and Significance."
29 Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 26.
30 Ibid., 45.
31 Piltz, Madlen, "«Мужчина И Женщина, Защитник И Мать»."
32 Yuval -- Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 45.

for women "embody the line which signifies the collectivity's boundaries".[33]

Hence despite the "[p]erception <...>that women are defined in relation to men <...> while men are taken to be representative of a non-gendered subjectivity, of non-gendered human beings",[34] in the mainstream field of social studies in nationalism and identity, my thesis will support the gender-specific approach by shedding light on the different experiences of both women and men as Georgian Muslims.

1.2 Religious and National Identity of Georgian Muslim Women

As Khalvashi and Batiashvili argues, the two following aspects are emphasized in the national Georgian narrative: Georgian language and Orthodox Christianity are corner stones of Georgian culture, and despite repeated invasions of external enemies, the Georgians succeeded in preserving this language and religion, thus preserving their distinct national identity.[35] These aspects suggest that Muslim Georgians are at least partially excluded from the Georgian nation as the religious pillar of the idea of national identity is missing from this group. Moreover, external enemies are often associated with Islam,[36] thus classifying the Muslim Georgians from Adjara as the Other.

Indeed, as Pelkmans research on Georgian Muslim identity showed, the main difficulties in maintaining both – Muslim and Georgian – identities among Georgian Muslim men in Adjara are connected to the tensions in performing social roles, especially when it is connected with performing the role of a host or a guest in a *supra*[37] and consuming alcohol and pork, to being forced to chose identity positions when the outsiders are discussing Georgian Christian and Muslim relations, and to the ideas of the future as some of the Georgian Muslims themselves see Islam as a more backwards

33 Ibid., 46.
34 Sheila Allen, "Identity: Feminist Perspectives on 'Race', Ethnicity and Nationality," 55.
35 Khalvashi and Batiashvili, "Georgian National Identity: Elite Ideology and State Narratives vs. Narrative Selves of Muslim Georgians."
36 Balci and Motika, "Islam in Post -- Soviet Georgia," 336–337.
37 A Georgian feast that involves traditional cuisine and is led by a toastmaster. Supra and the tradition of toasting is an inherent part of a Georgian social culture.

religion than Georgian Orthodoxy.[38] But he argues that in the national imagery of Georgians. "Ajarian Muslims were not complete 'others' but were rather 'incomplete selves'; they were simultaneously brother and potential enemy".[39]

According to Badashvili, Muslim women in Georgia perceive Islam as their cultural and ethnic identity, and not just as an abstract ideology. She argues that although during the Soviet era, the women, and not the men, were the main keepers of Islamic community culture and boundaries, due to established gender roles in religious and traditional practice, women seem to be less visible in public life and less empowered than men.[40]

In addition, Gelovani argues that Georgian Muslim women played an important role in group value preservation. Her ethnographic research claims that Muslim women were the main protectors and preservers of Georgian traditions, Georgian language, Georgian culture and even what she calls "ethnic self -- awareness" when Adjara was a part of the Ottoman empire.[41]

Merging together Gelovani's, Badashvili's, Khalvashi's and Batiashvili's arguments, we could argue that both, the Georgianness and the Muslimness, in itself contain religious and cultural layers: the idea of Georgian national identity is closely intertwined with belonging to the Georgian Orthodox Church, and at the same time, Islam is perceived not only as a definition of religious identity, but as cultural and even ethnic as well. And women, not men, are perceived as the main keepers of these religious and cultural social group values. Hence I hypothesize that:

1. Georgian Muslim women in Adjara experience a discrepancy between Muslim and Georgian aspects of their identity;
2. The perceived role of women as social boundary protectors can partially account for the discrepancy they experience between Muslim and Georgian aspects of their identity.

38 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 125–133.
39 Ibid., 140.
40 Badashvili, "Muslim Women's Identity Issues in Post-Soviet Georgia."
41 Gelovani, "Women in Georgia: Trace of Islam," 319.

In addition to verify these hypotheses, I intend to show how Georgian Muslim women renegotiate their position back to the respective social groups.

1.3 Keeping Islamic Faith Instead of Conversion

There is a consensus in academic debates that an accelerated process of Christianization is taking place in Adjara.[42] However, there are no official numbers to prove this, as the next national census will be held in 2014. Sanikidze and Walter argue that, nowadays, most Adjarian Muslims respect Christianity and Christians because "Ajarians afford their ancestors a great respect, and many of those ancestors were Christians".[43]This narrative of going back to one's original roots is also apparent in Pelkmans' conclusion after his interviews with former Muslims who converted to the Orthodox Christianity.[44] In addition to that, conversion to Christianity is also connected to more "earthly" reasons such as low religious affiliation with Islam or peer pressure in Church-run or Church-affiliated educational institutions.[45]

Following Tajfel, a minority group, (such as Georgian Muslims) has only a limited number of possible psychological solutions to the problems that minority groups encounter that depend on the social environment of this group. However, all the solutions available could be put on a continuum between the acceptance of the inferior position prescribed by the majority in society and the rejection of this inferior position and describing themselves in their own terms. The inferior position is accepted when there is a perceived legitimacy of the existing status quo and there are no conceivable possibilities of change in this inferiority.[46]

It can be argued that in Georgia the status of the majority religion group is perceived as legally

42 George Sanikidze, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia," 12; Liles, *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara*, 8; Pelkmans, "Religion, Nation and State in Georgia"; Balci and Motika, "Islam in Post -- Soviet Georgia."
43 George Sanikidze, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia," 12.
44 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 89–169.
45 Liles, *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara*.
46 Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 317–318.

superior to that of the minority religion status, as the Georgian Orthodox Church is not only historically closely connected to the nation-state idea and the identity of the majority ethnic group,[47] but also enjoys special status under the 2002 Constitutional Agreement between the Georgian state and the Orthodox Church of Georgia. In Chapter 3, I will go into greater details to show how the State gives preferential treatment to the Georgian Orthodox Church. In other words, the existing legislative base gives pretext and support for the Georgian Orthodox Church to strengthen its positions in Islamic Adjara. Hence, it can be stated, following the Tajfelian line of thought, that the Georgian Muslim religious minority could be accepting their social position as legitimate but also inferior.

As the assimilation of some of the former minority group members to the majority religious group does not affect the position of the minority religious group in society, and at the same time this minority religious group tries to maintain its separate religious (and cultural) norms, Tajfel and Turner suggest that such minority groups employ an "accommodation" strategy and try to pursue respect in the general society and retain their own identity and differences.[48]

As I have discussed in the previous sub-chapter, women are seen as the main protectors of social group boundaries as well cultural and biological reproducers of a given social group. Hence my hypotheses are the following:

1. The perception of being the main protectors of the Georgian Muslim social group boundaries prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity.
2. The perception of being the main cultural and biological reproducers of Georgian Muslim social group prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity.

47 Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 1994.
48 Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 355.

Chapter 2. The Christian Georgian and the Muslim Other

This chapter will explain in detail why Orthodox Christianity is one of the corner stones of Georgian national identity, how Adjarians switched from religion to nationality as their main point of reference during Soviet times, and what the current position of the Georgian Muslims in the Georgian national narrative is. I argue that the birth of Georgian nationalism in the 19th century, the forced secularism in the Soviet union, and later, the revival of Georgian nationalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, led to more salient intergroup boundaries. Moreover, it positioned Georgian Muslims between the Christian Georgians and the Muslim Others. This chapter is concentrated on illustrating the evolution of group boundaries between the Christian Georgians and the Muslim Others, as it enable us to situate Georgian Muslims in relation to these respective groups. As women are perceived as main protectors of group boundaries, hence the position of Georgian Muslims in between the Christian Georgians and the Muslim Others leads to continuous negotiation of their self-identification as Georgians and Muslims, as well as their perceived belonging to both respective groups.

As mentioned earlier, Georgian language and Orthodox Christianity are cornerstones of Georgian culture, and despite repeated invasions of external enemies, Georgians succeeded to preserve this language and religion, thus preserving their distinct national identity.[49] This implies that Muslim Georgians are at least partially excluded from the Georgian nation since the religious pillar of the idea of national identity is missing from this group. Moreover, external enemies are often associated with Islam,[50] thus classifying the Muslim Georgians, if not as the Other, then as "'incomplete selves'; they were simultaneously brother and potential enemy".[51] I will start by mapping the place of Orthodox

49 Tamta Khalvashi and Nutsa Batiashvili, "Georgian National Identity: Elite Ideology and State Narratives vs. Narrative Selves of Muslim Georgians" (presented at the International Conference on Central Eurasian Studies: Past, Present and Future, Maltepe University, 2009), http://goo.gl/OHXKVQ.

50 Bayram Balci and Raoul Motika, "Islam in Post -- Soviet Georgia," *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 336–337.

51 Ibid., 140.

Christianity in the national narrative of Georgia, then continue by discussing shifts of main identity indicator in Adjara and I will conclude by showing that strong national boundaries as well as strong religious boundaries put Georgian Muslims in a place of constant negotiation of their social identity.

2.1 Orthodox Christianity in the National Narrative of Georgia

Christianity in Georgia dates back to the 4th century. According to legend, St. Nino managed to convert the king of Iberia (now eastern Georgia) to Christianity in the beginning of 4th century.[52] The apogee of the autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church was during the Middle ages: a great number of churches and monasteries were built during these times in previously pagan places, and the Church had a large influence on medieval Georgian literature. As Suny describes, at that time there was no clear cutting line between high and popular Georgian culture, as they coexisted together just as Christianity coexisted with the old pagan rituals. Furthermore, he argues, whilst the most famous Georgian writer, Shota Rustaveli, standardized the spoken language, the Church and Christianity highly influenced the formation of a unified ideology: the rulers of the country fought against the threat of Islam and Georgians identified themselves with Christian Byzantium instead of neighboring Muslim Iran.[53]

Chikovani adds that, although during the Golden Age Georgian identity was more inclusive and more flexible than in the era of nationalism in the 19th century, the religious and ethnic identities were closely intertwined, and "who adopted Islam was no longer considered a Georgian."[54] To sum up, in the Golden Age, the Georgian Orthodox Church was almost inseparable from secular daily life.

In addition to this, Georgian Orthodoxy also served as a Georgian *ethnie*[55] identity builder and preserver: St. George's cross was used in the flag of King Vakhtang Gorgansali (white flag with a

52 Joselian, *A Short History of the Georgian Church*, 24.
53 Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 1994, 39.
54 Chikovani, "Christianity and Islam in Modern Georgia: The Experience, Challenges and Search for Responses," 105.
55 Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*.

single red cross on it) as early as the 5th century, and it was used by other monarchs of the Georgian kingdom, including the Queen Tamar[56]. Later four more Jerusalem crosses were added[57] which symbolize "the Christian symbol of Our Savior and the four evangelists".[58] Here it should be noted that after the Rose Revolution in 2003, this so-called "Queen Tamar's" flag became the official Georgian state flag, thus implying a present continuation of the Golden age with a referral to Queen Tamar and the Georgian Orthodox Church as well. Hence, it is not surprising that in the national myth of Georgia, the Georgian Orthodox Church occupies a central role.

During the Soviet times, the Georgian Church was seen as a symbolic preserver of the national culture and the language.[59] In the Soviet Union, Johnston argues, the Georgian Orthodox Church went through extreme oppression under the Stalinism. On the other hand, he states that religious nationalism in Georgia was perhaps stronger than in any other Soviet republic. He also speculates that in the minds of majority of population, the Georgian Orthodox Church was separated from the corruption of society, and considered as a starting point for change.

Jones argues, in addition, that the Georgian Orthodox Church's isolation under communism resulted in a narrow nationalism which promoted the hegemony of Georgians against other ethnic groups living in Georgia.[60] In the late 1980s, during a lighter regime led by Gorbachev, the Georgian Orthodox Church took a conservative path, rejecting communism and atheism, veneration of the past and preservation of past culture. The Church celebrated the heroes of the Golden Age of Georgia and assigned themselves the role of preservers of the national culture.[61]

In short, in Georgian historiography the notion of the Georgian Orthodox Church is closely

56 Queen Tamar is regarded as one of the most important historical figures in Georgia. Her reign in the end of the 12th – beginning of the 13th century is considered to be the Golden Age of Georgia. Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*, chap. 3; Dowling, *Sketches of Georgian Church History*, chap. 14.
57 Dowling, *Sketches of Georgian Church History*.
58 "The Administration of the President of Georgia."
59 Johnston, "Religio -- Nationalist Subcultures under the Communists," September 21, 1993, 249.
60 Jones, "The Georgian Orthodox Church," 115.
61 Ibid., 113.

connected to nationhood. As the symbols of the Church are used for the secular state (the new Georgian flag), the Church is seen as the preserver of Georgian culture and as the Georgian national narrative is closely intertwined with Church history, it could be stated that Georgian Orthodoxy is an integral part of the Georgian national identity. In the words of Sanikidze, "Christianity plays a particularly important part in the Georgian national narrative and Georgian national consciousness as suggested by the slogan of the nineteenth century Georgian national movement, "language, homeland, faith (Christianity)."[62]

Here, it is useful to look at it through a prism of Smith's ethnosymbolism. As common ethnic myths, symbols, memories and traditions, and the ways they are constructed and interpreted by modern nationalistic elites, provide a basis for national solidarity and inclusiveness,[63] I argue that Georgian Orthodoxy is not only integral part of Georgian national narrative and national consciousness, but also that religion is a basis for national solidarity and inclusiveness, which leaves Georgian Muslims outside of Georgian national realm.

2.2 Identity Shifts in Adjara

2.2.1 Islam as the Main Identity Reference

The spread of Islam in this region began in the 16th century when it fell under rule of the Ottoman Empire. It was a long process that started from the conversions amongst nobility. It continued from the 16th to the 18th[64] or the beginning of the 19th century[65] (others mention the 15th to the 17th century[66]). Together with Islam, there was a spread of the Turkish language as well: in the 19th century, the Turkish language managed to push Georgian language out of the public to the private domain and

62 George Sanikidze, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia," 5.
63 Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2000), chap. Introduction.
64 Baramidze, "Islam in Adjara - Comparative Analysis of Two Communities in Adjara," 98.
65 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 96.
66 Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, 163.

by the end of the century Turkish became both the literary and the public language of Adjara.[67]

In 1878, after the Russian-Turkish war, Adjara was incorporated into the Russian Empire. The Tsarist ruling elites tried to establish control over the Muslims in Caucasus as well as gain their loyalty. In 1872, the Tsar approved legislation which foresaw the creation of two institutions for managing Muslim affairs and building more mosques in the villages with more than 200 Muslims. In addition to this, in the late 19th century, Muslim personnel were trained by the state, and at the same time, restrictions for traveling abroad in order to receive religious education or to obtain a religious title were introduced.[68] These measures strengthened this restricted institutional framework of Islam in Adjara, and made them more dependable to the Tsarist authorities than on the neighboring Ottoman Empire.

At the same time, in order to secure its borderlands, Tsarist Russia used Christians, living in Adjara, in numerous battles with Muslim communities.[69] No doubt these two policies, one of which strengthened loyal, closely supervised institutional Islam amongst Adjarians, and the other of which juxtaposed Christians and Muslims, did not contribute to Adjarians perceiving themselves as part of the Christian Georgian community.

Nevertheless, in the eyes of the 19th century nationalists Adjara was seen as "a lost region which ought to be brought back into the orbit of the Georgian nation"[70]. But this idea was not welcomed in Adjara – Pelkmans overviews that in 1878-1880 a lot of Georgian Muslims left Adjara for the Ottoman Empire. He argues that religious factors were not the only ones in the decision of migrants to leave Adjara, and that economic and political factors should be taken into account as well, but the rejection of Georgian national rhetoric is evident in individual accounts of the emigrants.[71] This exodus resulted in Georgian nationalists downplaying the religious difference between Christian

67 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 96.
68 Baramidze, "Islam in Adjara - Comparative Analysis of Two Communities in Adjara," 99.
69 Khalvashi and Batiashvili, "Georgian National Identity: Elite Ideology and State Narratives vs. Narrative Selves of Muslim Georgians."
70 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 97.
71 Ibid., 98.

Georgians and Muslim Adjarians and stressing the importance of mutual historic narrative.[72] As they tried to stop the mass emigration of Georgian Muslims from Adjara to the Ottoman empire, the Georgian nationalists, led by Ilia Chavchavadze, not only changed their rhetoric but also started pressuring the Russian authorities to take up measures against this exodus. The Tsarist authorities issued a decree in 1880 which guaranteed the inviolability of Islam, and allowed Muslim courts to continue using Sharia law when dealing with family and heritage disputes. In addition, the document ensured that there would be no change in the tax system, that the population of Adjara would be exempt from military service, and also ensured eligibility of Adjarians to hold higher administrative positions. These measures led to a majority of the emigrants returning to Adjara in the following two years.[73]

However, relations between Adjarians and Georgians remained tense, especially during the chaotic period of 1917 -- 1921[74]: the Muslims of Adjara assisted Turkish armies, fought against both Russians and Georgians,[75] and in an 1918 referendum, the majority of Adjarians voted in favor of closer ties with Turkey, and not Georgia.[76]

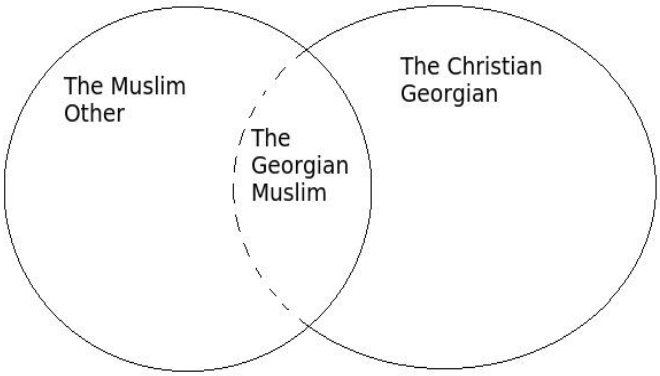
Thus it could be stated that prior to the Soviet era, Adjarians did not identify with the Georgian nation, and the core of their identification was Islam instead.[77] The millet system of the Ottoman empire, followed by the above mentioned Tsarist policy that strengthened institutionalized Islam, as well as the nationalistic rhetoric of the 19th century Georgian intelligentsia, contributed to religion, and not national belonging, as being the main determinant of identity in Adjara. The Adjarians tended to associate more with the neighboring Muslim Turks than with their Georgian ethnic kin.[78] As Khalvashi and Batiashvili put it: ”The name used for all Christian communities by Muslims, and in this case, by

72 Ibid., 99.
73 Ibid.
74 The end of the WW1, creation of the first Republic of Georgia, fights between Georgian Mensheviks and Russian Bolsheviks etc.
75 Derluguian, “The Myth of ‘Ethnic Conflict,’” 276.
76 Hille, *State Building and Conflict Resolution in the Caucasus*, 106.
77 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 99.
78 Derluguian, “The Myth of ‘Ethnic Conflict,’” 276; Hille, *State Building and Conflict Resolution in the Caucasus*, 106.

Adjarians, was *giauri* meaning non-Muslim and this category was ascribed to Georgians living under Russian rule and estranged them from their perception of 'Gurjiness'"[79]

The social group boundaries between the Christian Georgians and the Muslim Others and the Georgian Muslim placed in between them prior to the Soviet Union are illustrated below. Note the punctuated line – it indicates that the boundary between the Muslim Others (in this case Turks) and the Georgian Muslims is weaker than the boundary between the Georgian Muslims and the Christian Georgians, as the religion was in the core of the Georgian Muslim identity.

Figure 1. Georgian Muslims prior to the Soviet Union



2.2.2 Shift from Religious to National Self -- Identification

In 1921, the peace treaty of Kars between Turkey and Russia, as the latter represented Georgia in the international arena under Soviet rule, was signed. Under this treaty, Batumi and borders north of the Turkish-Georgian border remained under control of Georgian SSR, but at the same time it was concluded that Adjara would have a large measure of autonomy under the Georgian protectorate and Turkey would have a right to free transit in the port of Batumi.[80] As a result, Adjara became one of the

79 Khalvashi and Batiashvili, "Georgian National Identity: Elite Ideology and State Narratives vs. Narrative Selves of Muslim Georgians."

80 Hille, *State Building and Conflict Resolution in the Caucasus*, 102.

two autonomous units in the Soviet Union created on religious, and not on ethnic grounds (the other was the Jewish Autonomous Oblast).

Although at the moment of the creation of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara the main factor which described the different group identification of the Adjarians was religion, it gradually lost its significance during the years of the Soviets rule. The separate entity for Adjarians in the Soviet census was used only once, in 1926. Later the Adjarians were simply listed as Georgians because no official USSR census asked the respondents about their religion.[81]

Derluguian argues that prior to WWI, according to popular knowledge, there were just three indigenous ethnic entities in the South Caucasus: Armenians, Georgians and Muslims; and the latter later became Azerbaijanis in their passports regardless of their ethnicity. As if that was not enough, the new "Azerbaijanis" in Adjara, because of the national homogenization policies, had to choose between becoming simply Georgians or alien Meskhetian Turks who were physically removed from Georgia in 1944 to Central Asia. At the same time, secular Georgians from the eastern part of the country were moving to Adjara. All of this contributed to Adjarians choosing to identify as Georgians despite their cultural differences. However, it must be noted, that intergroup marriages stayed rare and Adjarians continued to preserve many aspects of traditional, pre-Turkish and pre-Soviet culture.[82]

It is ought to be noted that the disappearance of the Adjarian group from the ethnic map of the Soviet Union is not a unique case – from 1924 to late 1930s almost a hundred ethnic groups "disappeared" in the Soviet Union because they were reclassified to fit the ethnoterritorial design of the USSR.[83] More importantly, Adjara as a territorial unit continued to exist, despite the lack of a titular nationality in it. As Adjarians did not exist as a separate ethnic group, it is obvious that they could not benefit from preferential treatments for members of titular nationalities of a given territorial unit.[84]

81 Derluguian, "The Myth of 'Ethnic Conflict,'" 227.
82 Zürcher, *The Post -- Soviet Wars*, 201.
83 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 105.
84 More on ethnic policies in the Soviet Union see for example Roeder, "Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization."

In addition, prior to the Soviet Union, the education in Adjara was mainly conducted in Turkish and in Arabic; Georgian was pushed away, into the domestic sphere. Consequently, Adjarians were in a disadvantaged position when it came to local institutional and intellectual elite formation. The political elites mostly consisted of non-Muslim Georgians who, as mentioned earlier, had moved to Adjara from other parts of the country. For example, the first secretary of the Communist party of Adjara until the 1950s was never Adjarian, and Adjarians properly entered political elite of this ASSR only in the 1960s. By then, those who worked their way up the party, were employing the strategies of stressing their identification with Georgia.[85]

Therefore, as the majority of the local communist elite were non-Muslim Georgians, who came from a background of strong anti-Islamic and anti-Turkish sentiments[86], the anti-Islamic policies in Adjara were eagerly implemented.[87] As Sanikidze writes, from 158 mosques in Adjara in early 1920s, by 1936, only two registered mosques remained.[88] In addition to this, the socialist authorities implemented a harsh atheistic propaganda by using mass media, by creating a "Union of Atheists", and by forcing the Muslim clergy to support the Soviet authorities during their religious sermons.[89]

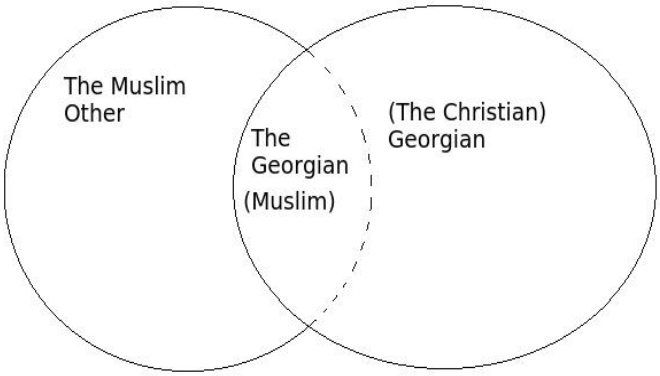
The resistance to these measures was weak. According to Pelkmans, it can be attributed to several reasons. First of all, the closing of the border between the Soviet Union and Turkey left the Adjarians cut off from their former religious and cultural centers. Second, Adjarian Muslims fell under the leadership of a newly created Muslim spiritual directorate in Baku, which was predominantly Shiite, as opposed to Sunni as the Adjarians are. Third, contrary to North Caucasus, where Islam was based on Muslim brotherhoods which were able to go underground easily, Islam in Adjara was based

85 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 105.
86 Ibid., 106.
87 *More on anti -- religious policies applied against Georgian Orthodox Church and its position during the Soviet times see: The Making of the Georgian Nation*; Jones, "Soviet Religious Policy and the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church"; Dragadze, "The Domestication of Religion under Soviet Communism"; Johnston, "Religio -- Nationalist Subcultures under the Communists."
88 George Sanikidze, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia," 13.
89 Ibid.

on open public institutions which were easy for Soviet authorities to control.[90]

To sum up, the anti-religious measures drove Islam further into the domestic sphere even in remote villages, and turned it into a very localized religion.[91] As the Autonomous Republic of Adjara was created on religious grounds, it gave Bolsheviks an excuse to apply harsher policies and classify them as struggling against relics of the dark past and not against nationalities or separate groups per se. In addition, the Soviet-Turkish border was closed and Georgian Muslims were completely cut off from their former religious and cultural centers. This led to a shift in the identity of Adjarians. The religious factor declined as both Islam and Georgian Orthodox Christianity moved from the public, into domestic sphere, and the national factor grew stronger. Pelkmans notes that "the ban on religion in the public sphere led to at least partial disconnection between Georgian Orthodoxy and Georgian national identity and allowed Adjarians to see themselves as Georgians."[92] This is shown in the Figure 2 below. The punctuated line indicates weaker group boundaries, and religion in brackets shows that Adjarians started identify themselves with a corresponding nation and not religion.

Figure 2. Georgian Muslims during the Soviet Union



90 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 107.
91 Ibid., 108.
92 Pelkmans, *Baptized Georgian*, 5.

2.2.3 Return of religions and the Muslim Other

Both Islam and Georgian Christianity experienced a revival in the 1980s during the Gorbachev era. However, as it was demonstrated in the beginning of this chapter, Georgian Orthodoxy is closely intertwined with the Georgian national narrative, hence it is no surprise that Georgian nationalists from the late 1980s and early 1990s employed the rhetoric used by the 19th century nationalists which had the notion of religion as integral part of it. Zviad Gamsakhurdia and other leaders of Georgian nationalist movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s considered themselves followers of the 19th century writer and public activist Ilia Chavchavadze who put forward the three main components of the Georgian nationalism – language, motherland and religion.[93] Reborn Islam faced opposition again. But this time the anti-Muslim discourse did not stem from atheist ideology but from Georgian nationalists who saw the rebirth of Islam as "an attack on the Georgian nation and as a denial of Ajaria's position within Georgia."[94] Khalvashi and Batiashvili also argue that nationalistic rhetoric of Georgian intelligentsia viewed Georgianness and Muslimness as two incompatible categories.[95]

Paradoxically enough, the Soviet historiography contributed to this *othering* of the Muslims in the independent Georgia. Pelkmans writes that during the Soviet era, historians reinterpreted the history of Adjara in order to strongly connect it to Georgian history, and to remove it from Ottoman history. He observes that the general view held by the Soviet historians was that Islam was spread in Adjara by plain force and violence, and not by persuasion or economic pressures. He continues that Islam in Soviet historiography was closely intertwined with the Ottoman Empire, the part of history that had to be denounced. This new historiography was of course framed in Soviet ideology, however, "this denouncing of the 'evil Turk' and Islam has fit in perfectly with the contemporary nationalist discourse

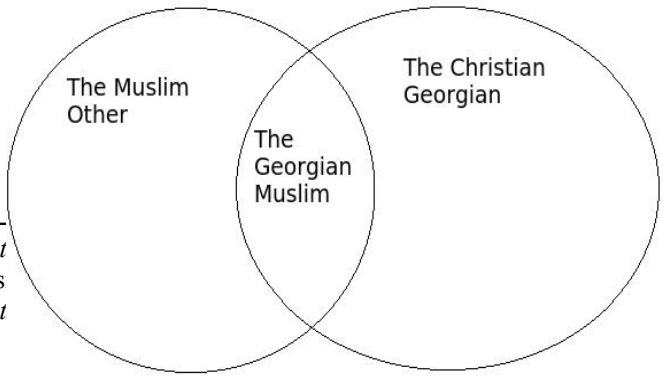
93 Chedia, "Georgian Nationalism Today: Facing the Challenges of the New Millennium."
94 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 109.
95 Khalvashi and Batiashvili, "Georgian National Identity: Elite Ideology and State Narratives vs. Narrative Selves of Muslim Georgians."

that presents Georgia as a Christian island surrounded by threatening Islamic powers."[96]

In the 1990s, Georgia, as other post-soviet countries, did not escape the revisionism of history,[97]however, as Pelkmans points out, it affected not only the Communist past, but also additional three centuries of Adjara's past prior to 1878. And this omission of the Ottoman past of Adjara should be viewed as a continuation of the above mentioned Soviet historiography but through the prism of Orthodox Christianity.[98] As Pelkmans continues, the myth, propagated by the Georgian Orthodox clergy as well as the Georgian intelligentsia since the 1980s, is based on the undisrupted Christian-Georgian continuity. According to the myth, Adjarians have always, even if only subconsciously, perceived themselves as Georgians, thus, as Christians as well, and have never really been Muslim.[99] However, as it was written above, this view is problematic because Adjarians did not identify themselves as Georgians (let alone as Christians) prior to the Soviet Union.

In conclusion, the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Georgian nationalism strengthened the national group boundaries between Georgians and Turks as the Georgian national narrative demonized Turks as the Muslim Others. In addition to that, the anti-Islamic sentiments in the same nationalistic rhetoric prevented Georgian Muslims from being an integral part of the Georgian national narrative. The following Figure 3 illustrates this with two solid lines depicting religious and national boundaries.

Figure 3. Georgian Muslims after the Soviet Union



96 Pelkmans, *Defending t* *f Dead Bodies*.
97 More on the revisionis
98 Pelkmans, *Defending t*
99 Ibid.

To sum up, Adjarians have experienced the decline of importance of Islam as the main identity reference and the increase of importance of Georgian identity. But this national identity is not secular as it is closely intertwined with Georgian Orthodoxy in the national imagery. This position of Georgian Muslims between complete membership in the Georgian nation and the complete alienation as the Others undoubtedly leads to a constant negotiation of distinct identifications. Pelkmans argues that the main difficulties in combining both – Muslim and Georgian – affiliations among Georgian Muslim men in Adjara, are connected to the tensions in performing social roles, especially when it is connected with performing the role of a host or a guest in a *supra*[100] and consuming alcohol and pork, to being forced to chose identity positions when the outsiders are discussing Georgian Christian and Muslim relations, and to the ideas of the future as some of the Georgian Muslims see Islam as more backwards religion than Georgian Orthodoxy.[101]

However, as my research showed, Georgian Muslim women face different challenges which are more directly connected to group boundary maintenance and preservation: they have to defend their religion against the dominant Georgian Orthodox historical narrative, they have to defend their nationality when they were a hijab, and they act as biological and cultural reproducers, as Islam only allows them to marry Muslims.

100 A Georgian feast that involves traditional cuisine and is led by a toastmaster. Supra and the tradition of toasting is an inherent part of a Georgian social culture.
101 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 125–133.

Chapter 3. Georgian Orthodox Church in Adjara

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the reasons that led to the privileged position of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Adjara, and present institutional framework that legitimizes this privileged position and enables the Church to expand its influence in Adjara and at the same time weakens the presence of Islam in this region. This chapter is meant to serve as a background to my second set of hypotheses that 1) the perception of being the main protectors of the Georgian Muslim social group boundaries prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity; and 2) the perception of being the main cultural and biological reproducers of Georgian Muslim social group prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity.

In a nutshell, I argue that the expansion of Orthodox Christianity is executed through new churches which are being built, through Christian educational institutions, and through the history curriculum in public schools. The Georgian Orthodox Church also has stronger positions than Islam due to existing national legislation which gives it preferential treatment compared to minority religions. This ongoing expansion of the Georgian Orthodox Church, together with the positioning of the followers of Islam outside of the national imaginary of the Georgians, as shown in the chapter before, puts pressure on minority Muslims to assimilate.

3.1 Religious Revival in Georgia and Adjara

During the soviet times, both Georgian Orthodoxy and Islam experienced a shift from the public into the private sphere.[102] However, they performed different roles, as only the Georgian Church was seen as a symbolic preserver of the national culture and the language.[103] Hence, in the late 1980s,

102 Dragadze, "The Domestication of Religion under Soviet Communism," 141.
103 Johnston, "Religio -- Nationalist Subcultures under the Communists," September 21, 1993, 249.

the Georgian Orthodox Church took a conservative path with rejection of communism and atheism, veneration of the past, preservation of past culture, and an anti-Western stance. The Church celebrated the heroes of the Golden Age[104] of Georgia, and assigned themselves a role of preservers of the national culture.[105] Moreover, one of the main concerns at the time of the nationalist movement in the 1980s, was to defend the Georgian Orthodox Church interests along the "geographic, historic and ethnic lines" of Georgia[106].

Islam experienced a notable revival which started in the Gorbachev era as well. Places of worship and religious educational institutions were rehabilitated or newly constructed, and numbers of followers of Islam and religiously educated people increased.[107] However, as the nationalist movement which started in the late 1980s regarded Georgian nationality as inseparable from Georgian Orthodoxy, the Georgian Orthodox Church received more institutional power in the public sphere. This close connection between religion and other aspects of social identity meant that even individuals who were not deeply religious had to start taking sides.[108] Pelkmans argues that the Islamic revival of the 1980s gradually grew weaker in Adjara throughout the 1990s as the Georgian Orthodox Church increased its scope of activity by opening churches, first in the regional capital Batumi and other coastal towns, and later spreading further and further into the highlands. Nowadays, the border between Islamic and Christian zones of influence more or less correspond to the geographical borders of urban Lower and rural Upper Adjara.[109]

Actually, differences between religiosity in Lower and Upper Adjara date to the Soviet era. In Lower Adjara, the Adjarians became tightly integrated into the Georgian society due to geographic proximity to urban centers, as well as to their educational and occupational patterns. Other

104 Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 1988, 38–39.
105 Jones, "The Georgian Orthodox Church," 113.
106 Lilienfeld, "Reflections on the Current State of the Georgian Church and Nation," 226.
107 Baramidze, "Islam in Adjara - Comparative Analysis of Two Communities in Adjara," 102.
108 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 53.
109 Ibid., 55; Liles, *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara*, 1.

demographic processes, such as intermarriage with non-muslim Georgians, as well as immigration of people from other parts of Georgia "added to a gradual adoption of Soviet-Georgian life-styles, which, although atheistic in outlook, later came to be identified with Christianity".[110]

Simultaneously, Islam continued to be an important part of domestic life in Upper Adjara during the Soviet times, despite being banned from the public domain. Hence, in the 1980s, and with Gorbachev's softer rhetoric on religion, allowed local networks to reactivate Islam. But this revival "was severely handicapped because it lacked financial resources and an educated clergy. Moreover, it also lacked links to the economic and political power holders of Ajaria who could have supported its growth".[111]

3.2 Local and State Authorities and Religion in 1990s

The interplay between local (Adjarian) and Georgian authorities and both religions in the first years of independent Georgia could at least partially account for the rise of Orthodox Christianity and it's influence in Adjara. The first president of independent Georgia, nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia, used a theocratic rhetoric, and imagined the future of Georgia as ethnically pure, with close links to Orthodox Christianity.[112] Although his party won the elections in Georgia, his rhetoric "Georgia for Georgians", which could be translated into "Georgia for Christian Georgians" was not well supported in Adjara. In November 1990, Gamsakhurdia's *Round Table-Free Georgia* coalition won the majority in the elections in Georgia proper, but not in Adjara – here the communists prevailed.[113] By voting for the Communist party, the Adjarians reasserted their differences from Georgians, and protested the chauvinist and ultra-nationalist turn in Georgia.[114] However, this rejection of what could be called

110 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 113.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid., 53.
113 Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence*, 110.
114 Zürcher, *The Post -- Soviet Wars*, 202.

Georgian Orthodox Christian nationalism in Adjara, did not lead to preferential treatment of Islam by local authorities. Aslan Abashidze, who ruled Adjara from 1992-2004, came to power with the support of local rural Muslims during their protests against Gamsakhurdia's intention to revoke the autonomic status of Adjara.[115] However, Abashidze was proclaiming both identities, Georgian and Adjarian, at the same time, and was not revealing his own religious affiliation at all,[116] as he relied on support not only from local Muslims, but also of Georgians not from Adjara, who were major supporters of the Georgian Orthodox Church.[117] In fact, it seems that the regime of Abashidze, who himself was a descendant from a noble and influential Adjarian Muslim family,[118] tended to favor Christian Orthodoxy, as local media, closely affiliated with the regime, gave considerably more coverage on the affairs of the Church than on Islamic community affairs.[119]

To sum up, this favoritism of the Georgian Orthodox Church by both state and local authorities undoubtedly contributed to an unequal distribution of power and influence between Christianity and Islam in Adjara.

3.3 Existing Legal Framework

The Constitution of Georgia, adopted in 1995, states that "[t]he state shall declare complete freedom of belief and religion, as well as shall recognize the special role of the Apostle Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the state".[120]

In 2002, an additional constitutional agreement between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the State was signed. This agreement, called the *Concordat*, recognized the special role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the history of Georgia; exempted the Church officials from certain taxes and from

115 Derluguian, "The Myth of 'Ethnic Conflict,'" 282.
116 Ibid., 280.
117 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 54.
118 Marten, *Warlords*, 70.
119 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 54.
120 *The Constitution of Georgia*, para. 9.

serving in the military, and promised compensation for the losses of property during the Soviet era. Moreover, the Concordat provided grounds for the Church -- State cooperation regarding the public school curriculum.[121]

The Muslim community of Georgia on the highest level is represented by the Administration of Georgian Muslims (AGM) that was created with assistance of the state in May 2011. Before that, the Muslims of Georgia were subordinate to the Caucasus Board of Muslims based in Baku.[122] In the same year, another important legal development took place: the change of legal status of the AGM and other minority religious groups. In 2011 the parliament of Georgia, despite objections from the Georgian Orthodox Church, adopted amendments to the Civil Code, according to which religious groups and denominations that have "close historical ties with Georgia, or are defined as a religion by laws in Council of Europe member states", can register as legal entities of public law – that is, the same legal status as the GOC.[123] Until 2011, all religious minority institutions could only register as unions or foundations – noncommercial legal entities of private law.

The creation of the AGM, and the 2011 amendments to the Civil Code, resulted in an equal legal status of the organizations of the Georgian Orthodox and Islam: both of them functioning as public law entities on the state level. However, the Constitution and the Constitutional Agreement, as well as other legal practices, ensured the privileged position of the Georgian Church. In the tables below, adapted[124] from a report on Azerbaijani Muslim community in Georgia by *Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic Minorities*[125], a brief overview of the institutional inequalities between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Muslim community is given.

121 "Sakartvelos Sap'at'riarkos Opicialuri Veb-Gverdi (Official Web-Page of the Patriarchate of Georgia)."
122 Liles, *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara*, 20.
123 "Georgia Adopts a New Law on the Status of Religious Organizations."
124 *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012*.
125 *A Report on the State of the Azerbaijani Muslim Community in Georgia*.

Table 1. Non-material institutional inequalities

Non-material inequalities	
Georgian Orthodox Church	Georgian Muslims
The Concordate defines relations between the state and the Church	There is no such document signed between the state and the Georgian Muslim Administration
The state ensures legal immunity for the Patriarch	There is no legal immunity for the leaders of the Georgian Muslim Administration
The Church has a consultative role in government, especially in the educational issues	Muslims do not have any consultative role in government
The state recognizes marriages conducted by the Church	The state does not recognize Muslim wedding ceremony as official marriage
Ecclesiastics are exempted from the military service	Muslim clerics are not exempted from the military service
The state ensures that a religious unit is established in military units and prisons	The state does not regulate establishments of Islamic religious units in military units and prisons
The state and the Church mutually recognize documents confirming education issued by relevant institutions of education	There is no standardized institutional recognition of Muslim religious education

As can be seen from Table 1, there exists an unequal treatment of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Muslims by the state. The Concordat between the state and the Georgian Orthodox Church defines the relationship between these institutions, however there is no document which would define the relationship between the state and the religious minorities, such as Georgian Muslims. The state guarantees legal immunity to the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, but not to the leaders of Georgian Muslim Administration. Only the Georgian Orthodox Church has the right to consult the government, especially on educational issues. Moreover, the state and the Georgian Orthodox Church mutually recognize documents confirming education issued by secular or Christian institutions of education. The state recognizes only the wedding ceremonies that were conducted by the

Georgian Orthodox Church. In addition to that, ecclesiastics are exempted from military service and the state ensures that there is a Georgian Orthodox religious unit established in military units and in prisons.

Table 2. Material institutional inequalities

Material inequalities	
The state supports religious educational institutions ran by the Church	There is no assistance from the state to the Muslim institutions for religious minorities education
The Church has a separate line item in the state budget	Georgian Muslim Association does not have a separate line in the state budget
The Church is exempted from all taxes	Georgian Muslim Association is partially excluded from taxes: they pay profit tax on the sale of religious products, VAT on the provision or importation of religious products, and taxes on all activities related to the construction, restoration, and painting of religious buildings.
The state protects the Church buildings and repository as well as their historical ruins inside Georgia. It commits itself to negotiating of protection of the Church buildings, ruins and artifacts that are in foreign states, with the authorities of these states	The Muslim buildings and repository are protected on a regular basis
The state recognizes the material losses of the Church during the Soviet Union and commits to the partial compensations	The state does not commit to compensate the material losses of the Muslim religious community under the Soviet rule

Table 2 illustrates the material inequalities in the treatment of religious groups in Georgia. The state funds educational institutions which are founded and run by the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Church has a separate line in the state budget and is exempted from all taxes. In addition, the state is

committed to protect the buildings and the repository of the Church not only in Georgia, but also in foreign countries. Also the state recognizes the material losses of the Church during soviet times and has committed to partial compensation for it.

To put it in a nutshell, in contemporary Georgia, the Georgian Orthodox Church enjoys a privileged position ensured by the existing legal base, despite the fact that the Constitution of Georgia states that there is no official state religion in Georgia. At the same time, Georgian Muslims are in a weaker minority position, although it must be noted that their legal institutional status has improved as they are allowed to register as a religious institution since 2011.

3.4 Educational Institutions

The law officially separates secular and religious education in Georgia. Religious education can take place only after school hours, and neither the school, nor its teachers allowed to control it. At the same time, external instructors, clergy included, cannot regularly attend or direct student extracurricular activities.[126]

However, education is one of the fields where the Georgian Orthodox Christianity and Islam are competing in Adjara. There are various types of educational institutions in Upper Adjara: state-run public schools, educational institutions administered by and affiliated with the GOC, and private Islamic religious schools (madrassahs).[127]Despite the above mentioned regulation on religious education that suggests that the public schools should not take part in religious education, the state school curriculum presents Christianity as a primordial part of Adjara's history, and at the same time, associates Islam with the rule of the Ottoman empire.[128]

In addition, in 1991, the state transferred the jurisdiction of Khulo internati (boarding school) to

126 *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012*, 3.
127 Liles, *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara*, 11.
128 Ibid., 15.

the Georgian Orthodox Church and in 2009, Tbel Abuseridze university was opened in Khichauri village in Shuakhevi district, offering free schooling and free lodging for students from Adjara.[129] Both institutions accept students regardless of their religion, however, the orientation of these institutions is undoubtedly Orthodox Christian: Orthodox priests are prominent in the administration of the university and the school "above all <...> teaches Christian beliefs".[130]

But the Georgian Orthodox Church does not have full hegemony in the sphere of education in Adjara: privately funded madrassahs exist in Adjara as well. According to Baramidze, there are currently 72 working madrassahs in Adjara, 12 in the Lower, and 60 in the Upper Adjara.[131] All of which are funded by Islamic charities and NGOs. Of these, the Turkish play the most important role, as their Georgian counterparts lack state funding themselves, and cannot support the madrassahs without foreign funding.[132] Nevertheless, due to legal reasons, the status of madrassahs is of an additional, and not of a substitutionary schooling: all the students must attend public schools as well.

Summing it up, it is clear that despite the officially declared separation of the Church and the State in the educational sphere, Orthodox Christianity dominates this sphere even in Muslim Adjara.

3.5 Religion in Public Space

As Fox and Idriss argue, "national symbols – flags, anthems, statues and landmarks – are neatly packaged distillations of the nation: they are the linchpins that connect people to the nation".[133]As the Georgian national identity and Georgian Orthodoxy are closely intertwined, there is no wonder that public space in Georgia is heavily dominated by religious symbols – churches and crosses usually on

129 Ibid., 12.
130 Ibid., 12–13.
131 Baramidze, *The Muslim Community of Georgia and State Politics (Years 1991-2012)*, 20–25.
132 Liles, *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara*, 17.
133 Fox and Miller -- Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood," 545.

the top of a mountain or a hill. As Manning points out, Georgia is now undergoing the largest church-building campaign since the Middle Ages, as in the last twenty years, there were more churches built compared to any other time in history.[134]

Fourteen new Georgian Orthodox churches have been built in Adjara since the fall of the Soviet Union as well. In this border region, churches are meant to symbolize not only the entrance into Georgian territory, but the entrance into Christendom in general. These new churches, rather than mass conversions, are to encourage Muslim Georgians to return to their "true faith".[135] In addition, churches are being built even there where are no parishioners, but mosques are opened only in those villages where the majority of the population is Muslim.[136]

Serrano argues that this spread of orthodoxy in public space is a result of a strategical redefinition of the link between national and religious identity, and labeling Georgia as Orthodox territory. Georgian churches monopolize landscape and public visibility and reflect the Christian essence of Georgian land.[137]

However, many Muslim prayer houses were also reopened or newly established since the 1980s. It is estimated that in 2014 there are 185 Muslim prayer houses in Adjara,[138] more than at the beginning of the Soviet period in 1921, when there were 158 mosques operating in Adjara.[139] Even while taking this into consideration, according to local Muslim leaders, is not enough, and they cannot physically fit everyone who comes in them during Friday prayers, while new churches stand empty.[140]

Hence, it can be noted that the Georgian Orthodox Church seeks to establish its presence in Adjara and its hegemony over other minority religions by occupying public space.

134 Manning, "Materiality and Cosmology," 327.
135 Serrano, "De-Secularizing National Space in Georgia," 2.
136 Ibid., 3.
137 Ibid., 2.
138 Baramidze, *The Muslim Community of Georgia and State Politics (Years 1991-2012)*, 20–25.
139 Baramidze, "Islam in Adjara - Comparative Analysis of Two Communities in Adjara," 4.
140 Mufti of the district of Khulo Aslan Abashidze, personal communication May 2nd, 2014

3.6 Conversions to Christianity

In the 1990s, a significant part of the population was baptized in Lower Adjara. Mass conversions to Christianity started in the late 1980s. Local media reported that new churches were being opened and that "5000 people had been baptized in Batumi in a single day".[141]These mass baptisms, according to Pelkmans, were happening not only in Lower Adjara, but in Upper Adjara as well.[142] However, according to him, there is a more important conversion trend that started in the 1990s in Adjara than these mass baptisms, which can be viewed as an opportunistic or symbolic response to the nationalist movement. This trend leads to "a slower but more permanent" conversion to Christianity.[143]

As it was mentioned before, there is a consensus in academic debates that a process of Christianization is taking place in Adjara.[144] As there were no Georgian Muslims officially left in Adjara in the late 1980s, their population numbers after the fall of the Soviet Union are just estimates. These numbers vary a lot: for example, Tarkhan-Mouravi estimated the size of the population of Georgian Muslims in 1989 at around 67 percent of the overall population of Adjara;[145]Toft at the same time estimates that Adjarians consisted 34-42 percent of the total population of Adjara.[146]

The official 2002 census showed that 30.6 percent of Adjara population identified themselves as Muslims. At the same time, the percentage of the followers of the Georgian Orthodox Church was 63.9 percent.[147] Hence, in the first decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, the percentage of Georgian Muslim population in Adjara fell by anywhere from 4 to 36 percent.[148]

141 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 142.
142 Ibid.
143 Pelkmans, *Baptized Georgian*, 4.
144 George Sanikidze, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia," 12; Liles, *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara*, 8; Pelkmans, "Religion, Nation and State in Georgia"; Balci and Motika, "Islam in Post -- Soviet Georgia."
145 Zürcher, *The Post -- Soviet Wars*, 201.
146 Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence*, 109.
147 Ibid., 133.
148 More exact numbers will be available after the second national census of Georgia will be conducted in 2014.

As I have mentioned above, the Georgian Church has already established its primacy in Lower Adjara. As Liles writes, it is also expanding into Upper Adjara, where Islam is retreating back to more isolated villages, and new converts mostly come from middle class and the younger, a more socially mobile part of population. He argues that the conversion process is facilitated by cultural and ethnic association of Adjara with Georgia, and Georgian Muslims tend to chose their national identification over their religious identification.[149]

The new converts to Christianity consider their conversion to be a returning to their roots – to their native religion and true identity by making Christian-Georgian historical connections.[150] In addition, Orthodox Christianity and Georgian nationality has a meaning of modernity to those people whose middle-class status was undermined by the collapse of the Soviet Union. They associate Georgian Orthodoxy with urban life, especially in Tbilisi, and hope that the expansion of Christianity will help Adjara to get rid of its "backwardness".[151]

This is not surprising, as the dominance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the legislative sphere, educational and also in the public sphere of Georgia, puts Georgian Muslims in an inferior minority position. And as Tajfel argues, the easiest way out of an inferior situation of being a member of a minority group, is assimilation.[152] However, data I collected showed that part of Georgian Muslim women tend to choose another way out of this situation, accommodation,[153] and try to resist assimilation, to preserve their distinct group values and social group boundaries, but at the same time, to become successful in society.

149 Liles, *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara*, 8.
150 Pelkmans, *Baptized Georgian*, 27.
151 Ibid., 28.
152 Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 331.
153 Ibid., 335.

In this chapter, I showed how the intertwining of the Georgian Orthodox Church and Georgian national identity, presented in the previous chapter, led to an institutionalized preferential treatment of the Georgian Orthodox Church by the state authorities. This preferential treatment allows the Church to expand its influence in former Islamic Adjara by using public education and opening considerable amount of churches. Georgian Orthodoxy already has a hegemony in Lower Adjara and is expanding in Upper Adjara as well, while Islam is prevailing in more secluded villages. All of these factors puts a pressure to assimilate on minority Muslims. But as my research showed, some Georgian Muslim women resist the assimilation process and opt for accommodation strategy by trying to strengthen group boundaries and ensure biological and cultural continuation of Islam while avoiding distancing themselves from the Georgian nation at the same time.

Chapter 4. Research Description

The empirical part of this thesis is based on interviews and data from participant observation conducted in April-May 2014 in Adjara – the city of Batumi in lower Adjara and the district of Khulo in upper Adjara. In total, I conducted sixteen interviews in Georgian, Russian and English and they were structured around three broad main topics: everyday Muslimness and Georgianness and preserving traditions, religion-related difficulties that participants have experienced in their life, conversion from Islam to Christianity. However, a more detailed analysis revealed that there are three broad themes that encompass difficulties of being a Georgian Muslim and crosses these predetermined topics: exclusion from Georgian nation on religious grounds, exclusion from Georgian nation on by prescribing another nationality, and different in-group regulations. Hence my analysis will be based on these three themes rather than on preexisting topics.

The interviews were translated to English and transcribed. Later they were processed with a qualitative data analysis software application RDQA.[154] The content analysis of the interviews is supplemented by the data gathered during my stay with a family of one of the religious Islamic community leaders in a small village in Khulo district.

As a foreign researcher, I have encountered a couple of issues that account for some limitations of this research. First of all, as majority interviews were conducted with a help of translator, the interpersonal dynamics were not as intimate as I would have wanted and I suspect that some of the interviewees withheld information and their personal experience from me because of the presence of the third person in a conversation. In addition to that, language barrier did not allow me to discuss religion and nationality related issues in informal settings as deep as I would have preferred.

154 HUANG, Ronggui. (2014). RQDA: R -- based Qualitative Data Analysis. R package version 0.2 -- 6. URL http://rqda.r -- forge.r -- project.org/.

To counter another limitation – mainly, being an outsider – I stayed in Khulo for ten days and actively participated in a family and village life. I got accepted into the community by volunteering to teach English in a village school as well as in Khulo madrassa, by wearing head scarf both in public places and at home and by demonstrating my openness to Islam and willingness to learn as much as possible about Islam and women role in it as possible. Nevertheless, such short research period still jeopardizes the depth of final conclusions.

4.1 Interview Participants

In this section I give a brief overview of interview participants, provide some of their background information but keep their names confidential. For this reason, they will be referred not by their names, but by interview numbers.

To start with, the majority of those who identify themselves as Georgian Muslim are themselves from upper Adjara (Khulo, Keda and Shuakhevi districts) or are descended from there, when previous generations of their families moved to lower Adjara by forced resettlement or because of ecological disasters.[155] As I will describe in details later, all of the participants except one, are connected to upper Adjara, even if their families live or have lived in different parts of Georgia. Six of the participants study in Batumi, two participants are teachers in a public school in the district center of Khulo, three participants are house wifes, two participants work in a religious school in the district center of Khulo, one participant is a nurse in a hospital in then district center of Khulo, one participant is an intern in Batumi. The snowball sampling method lead me to more students in Batumi that I have expected, but I analyzed all of the interviews that I have gathered. Of course, I keep the high proportions of students among my sample in mind while interpreting the results.

INT1. A 38 year old housewife, originally from a small village in Khulo region, but now lives in

155 Ruslan Baramidze, personal communication. February 23, 2014.

Batumi. She is married, has two sons. Her family has been Muslim for at least 4 generations. Her husband is one of the religious leaders in their community. She wears hijab everyday and was taking a stance that religion and nationality are two different categories and they should never be mixed, thus she feels comfortable being Muslim Georgian. She never thought of converting to Christianity despite the fact that she knows a lot of converts. The interview with her was interrupted by her husband who started talking about more general issues surrounding Muslim minority in Adjara. The interview was recorded in Georgian with English translation.

INT2. A 23 year old student who studies in one of the higher educational institutions in Batumi. She is the oldest of three siblings and her family still lives in a small village in Khulo region. She is not wearing hijab everyday because she feels not ready for it yet. She always speaks loudly about her religion and is of opinion that only uneducated people can think that Georgians can not be Muslims. She has been called a Turk by others while wearing a hijab and once a lecturer was surprised how can such a bright student as her be a Muslim. However, she never thought of converting to Christianity because it is one of the biggest sins, and stated that religion is not important in her circle of friends. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to Russian.

INT3. A 20 year old student in one of the higher educational institutions in Batumi. Her family lives in Akhalkalaki[156] now and moved there from Khulo for economical reasons. She has three more siblings and she is the oldest of them. She is not wearing hijab either and had to defend her religious identification during history classes in the university. She was also called a Turk because of her religion and had to defend her Georgianness during such conversations. Nevertheless, she never planned to convert to Christianity as she thinks that her faith is strong enough and religion is a free personal choice. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to Russian.

INT4. A 19 year old student in one of the higher educational institutions in Batumi. She studies

156 A town in adjacent region of Samtskhe-Javakheti

history because she is interested how is Islam portrayed in historical discourse of Georgia. As other students, she wears hijab only to religious rituals and celebrations but at the same times feels that Islam is very important for her and that it is the best religion for her. She never thought of converting to Christianity because of these reasons. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to Russian.

INT5. She is 20 and a student in one of the higher educational institutions in Batumi, but her family is from the Khulo district center. She has one younger brother and her family has been Muslim for as long as she remembers. She has felt peer pressure to convert to Christianity because she was born on one of the Christian holidays and because Georgia is perceived as Christian country. But she remains Muslim because she was born and raised in this religion and she plans to die being a Muslim. In her opinion, religion is a free personal choice and should not be confused with nationality. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to Russian.

INT6. A 20 year old woman who is currently doing her internship in Batumi after studies in one of the higher educational institutions there. Her family lives in Khulo and she is the youngest of three siblings. She thinks that it is hard to be a religious minority in Georgia and it is easier to live when she is surrounded by more Muslims, for example in Khulo district where the majority of population is Muslim. She tries to respect all religions but at the same time she finds herself in situations when she needs to defend Islam from verbal insults from the majority and this is hard for her, especially when she is in minority. However, despite this she never thought of converting to Christianity as this is her family religion and she plans to pass it on to her children. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to Russian.

INT7. A 18 year old student in one of the higher educational institutions in Batumi. Her three siblings live together with her parents in a small village in Khulo district. Not everyone in her social circles knows that she is a Muslim as she is not wearing hijab all the time. But if people ask her about

her religion, she is not hiding it. In her opinion, both Christians and Muslims of Georgia believe in one god therefore it is not too hard to be in a Muslim minority in a mostly Christian Georgia. But still, she thinks that she is not accepted as Georgian when she wears a hijab. Nevertheless, she never thought of becoming Christian herself because the more she studies Islam, the stronger her faith becomes. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to Russian.

INT8. She is a 20 year old student in one of the higher educational institutions in Batumi. Her family has been living in Akhaltsikhe[157] for 46 years after being resettled there from Khulo. She comes from a big family and has five siblings. There were no Christians in her family for as far as she knows. However, she was never forced to be Muslim herself and she came to such decision after getting acquainted with other religion.

INT9. She is a 21 year old student in one of the higher education institutions in Batumi and an employee in an educational sector. She is from Batumi as well. She converted to Islam eight months ago, on November 2013, and since then her life has changed a lot. Because of religion and her appearance she had to quit her job in an NGO sector, most of her family members who are Christians reject her, and she stopped celebrating holidays. But she is not planning to give up being Muslim because she feels that it is a real religion for her and Christianity in Adjara is more of a fashion thing. The interview was recorded in English.

INT10. She is a 40 year old secondary school teacher in the district center of Khulo. At the same time she also works in one of the NGOs there. She has two children and all her family is Muslim. However, she wears hijab only when she prays or attends religious ceremonies and thinks that intrinsic religion is more important. Her best friend is Christian and she says that they just avoid the topic of religion during their conversations. However, she gets often questioned by others about why she is Muslim when she knows the history of the region. Apart from that, she has no problems feeling

157A regional capital of Samstkhe -- Javakheti region that is adjacent to Adjara

Georgian and Muslim at the same time and is passing the religion to her children. In her opinion, if her children will decide to leave Islam, it will be a sin for her because as a mother she is responsible for their early education. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to English.

INT11. A 42 year old nurse, has a son and a daughter, lives and works in the district center of Khulo. She thinks that intrinsic religion is more important. She does not cover her head everyday because she is not used to it, she prays less than needed but she thinks that these are minor sins and will be forgiven. She thinks that the nationality and religion are two different and unrelated things, but at the same time she involuntary calls all non-Muslim Georgians Christians. She never thought of converting to Christianity because Islam is her family religion. But her children will have a free choice of religion and if they want to leave Islam, she will not try to stop them. The interview was recorded in Georgian.

INT12. A 26 year old teacher in a girls madrassa in the district center of Khulo and at the same time a student at one of the universities in Turkey. She wears hijab all the time and is surrounded mostly by Muslims – she has only one Christian friend. She was refused a job in a bank because of her appearance before, but nevertheless she never thought of converting to Christianity, as in her opinion, Islam is the true religion and those who convert to Christianity are making a wrong decision in their lives. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to English.

INT13. A 23 year old housewife from the district center of Khulo. She is married but does not have children yet. She used to study in Batumi but due to financial and family reasons had to drop out. In addition to that, she has studied in a madrassa in Turkey and there she was wearing a hijab. She does not wear it now because she does not like being in a center of attention, also because people are calling her a Turk. Because of this reason, she would never consider working in a religious school as a teacher – although she has qualifications for that, she would prefer getting a job in a secular sector and not in Khulo. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to English.

INT14. A 43 year old teacher in the district center of Khulo. She also works in the

administration in a public school in Khulo. She has three children, two of them converted to Christianity. She feels that it is partially her fault because she sent them to a Christian kindergarten in Khulo and did not teach religion to them. After their conversion, she also thought of converting to Christianity but her husband was against it and she did not want spouses to be of different religions. Thus, instead of conversion, she decided to strengthen her faith and is preparing to attend religious courses in the girls madrassa in Khulo. She does not wear hijab, but even then at least once, she has been called a Turkish Muslim by someone from Tbilisi. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to English.

INT15. She is a 42 year old housewife and a leader of one religious organizations in Khulo. She has two children, both of whom are married. Her husband is one of the religious leaders in the local community. They live in a small village in Khulo district. She wears the hijab everyday and does not experience any difficulties being Georgian and Muslim at the same time. For her, nationality has less importance than religion, and during the whole interview she was drawing my attention to more general problems of the Muslim minority in Adjara, for example the lack of prayer houses in Batumi and in Khulo. She never thought of converting to Christianity because her belief is very strong and also because even a thought of conversion is a sin. The interview was recorded in Georgian language.

INT16. A 24 year old teacher in the girl's madrassa in the center of district of Khulo. She was born and grew up in Dedoplistskaro[158] as her family was settled there from Adjara. Now her family is back in Adjara and lives in Batumi. She was thinking of converting to Christianity when she was a teenager because there was a Christian teacher in her school whom she liked and admired very much. But the teacher later moved away from Dedoplistskaro, and she turned back to Islam. She went to Islamic courses in Batumi and later studied theology and Arabic language in Turkey but selected her studies just because she wanted to learn Arabic. She likes teaching Islam but never thought that it

158 A town in Kakheti, a region in the east Georgia.

would be her profession before. In Dedoplistskaro, her family, although Muslim, was celebrating Christian holidays, such as Easter, as well. When they moved to Batumi, they started celebrating only Islamic holidays, and this change was hard for her and for her four siblings. The interview was recorded in Georgian with translation to English

Chapter 5. Difficulties of Being a Georgian Muslim

In this chapter I present the results of the interviews and show that the difficulties that Georgian Muslim women experience are mostly connected to the group boundary maintenance and preservation of cultural and biological group boundaries. As it was explained in detail in the third chapter, the dominant narrative in Georgia puts Muslims outside of the Georgian national group, and prescribes them a role of the Others. The interviews revealed that there are three broad themes that can be discussed: 1) exclusion from the Georgian community using historical discourse and religious grounds; 2) exclusion from the Georgian community using nationality narrative by assigning different nationality to Muslims who wear the hijab and 3) differences in in-group behavior regulations such as drinking wine, eating pork or selecting a spouse. In this chapter I will discuss all three of them in order to show that Georgian Muslim women experience discrepancy between national and religious aspects of their identity when it comes to group boundary maintenance on a personal level. In addition, I will talk about the strategies which Georgian Muslim women employ to renegotiate their religious and national affiliations.

5.1 Exclusion on Religious Grounds Using Historical Discourse

As I have demonstrated in the third chapter, the Georgian Muslims take a middle ground position between the Muslim Others and the Christian Georgians, as the dominant national narrative states that Christianity is a crucial part of the Georgian national identity. This narrative, of which all of the interviewees were aware of, strips Muslims of their Georgian nationality in the eyes of the Georgian Christian majority because of their religion.

As a support for such exclusion, the Georgian Christians employ historic arguments. For

example, INT10 described people of Khulo asking her about her religion: “People ask me everyday: why are you Muslim? You are a teacher, you know many things about history of Georgia, how we lost our religion – Christianity – here in Adjara, you know many things about Christianity, so why are you still Muslim?” (INT10). And this historical reasoning is not always connected to the religious affiliations of those who ask such questions. As INT9 said: “yesterday I had a Facebook conversation with one man. He is an atheist, but he said that he will always fight against Muslims in Georgia because Georgia stands on Christianity, and despite that he is not Christian and despite that he hates religion, he will fight for Christianity. Because if Christians become minority, Georgia will die. He thinks like this” (INT9). Other respondents also mentioned the same 'Georgian equals Christian' narrative that opposes them in their everyday lives. INT3, who is a student, said that “it is hard during history lessons. When we start talking about religion, there are sometimes comments from other students. They say that we should not be Muslims because in the past Georgians were Christians and Islam is from Turkey” (INT3). These examples illustrate that the Christian narrative of the Georgian nation is very much alive and how it excludes Adjarians from their place in the Georgian nation because of their religion when employed in everyday situations.

There are several ways how Georgian Muslim women renegotiate their way back to the Georgian nation. The main strategy is the dismissal of the importance of Christianity for the concept of Georgian national identity by separating religious and national identity as two different concepts. In general, the respondents tended to state that there is no problem in being a Georgian Muslim because nationality should not be confused with religion. This idea was expressed in all the interviews, as well as during informal chats with other women in Adjara with my voice recorder switched off. “I am Georgian by my nationality and Muslim by my religion. Religion and nationality are two different things”(INT8) and “there should not be a parallel between Georgian celebrations and Christian celebrations. For example, I always celebrate Georgian Independence Day and other days that are

patriotic. I just don't celebrate Christian holidays" (INT6) – these excerpts illustrate the way Georgian Muslim women explain that Georgian and Christianity identities should not be merged together.

Ironically, at the same time the respondents tended to identify Georgia with the Georgian Orthodox Church themselves, and involuntary switched between the terms *Georgian* and *Christian*: for example, when asked about Georgian traditions, they would talk about religious holidays such as Christmas or Easter, and when asked about non-Muslim Georgians they would involuntary start calling them Christians. In addition to that, some of them said that even for them, the idea of Georgia is associated with the Georgian Orthodox Church and being a Christian country (INT3, INT5, INT14).

These two trends seem opposite from the first glance: one denies that Christianity is a core component of the national identity, while the other one supports the idea that Christianity is closely connected to the country of Georgia.[159] The exclusion of Christianity from the notion of the Georgian national identity by insisting that religion and nation are two different categories allows Georgian Muslims to self-identify with both social groups, Muslim and Georgian respectively. However, in this case, self-identification with the Georgian nation is not the same as perceived communality with that nation: the perception of Georgia as being closely related to Christianity, which results in the involuntary switch between terms *Georgian* and *Christian*, this still excludes the Georgian Muslim from the perceived imagined community of Georgians. To sum up, in this case the dissonance appears between different perspectives of identity, when self-identification differs from the perceived groupness and belonging.[160]

Hence by rejecting Christianity as a core component of the Georgian national identity, Adjarians tend to renegotiate their self-identification as Georgians, but apparently it is not enough to renegotiate

159 The same trend was recorded by Pelkmans in his research. See Pelkmans, "Uncertain Divides : Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics in the Georgian Borderlands," 73–75.
160 Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, 28–63.

their communality and perceived belonging to the Georgian nation as well, as they are still aware of the dominant narrative and involuntary use it themselves.

Another strategy of situating oneself back into the Georgian nation, the interviews revealed, is the rejection of the religious differences. The majority of the interviewees stated that although they consider themselves very religious and that Islam is important for their daily life and decisions, at the same time religion is not important for friendship as long as everyone respects everyone else's religion. “It is just a religion. And I know that from my own experience – I have Christian friends and there is no difference between us. We are very close, have very good relations. And religion is the only difference. I respect their Christianity and I try to never insult them, they do the same.” (INT8). INT13 mentioned that “I have a very good neighbor. And she is a priest's wife – we get along very well. We just don't talk about religion”. In this case the interviewees erased religious boundaries between Georgian Christians and Georgian Muslims and by getting rid of religious notion in everyday discourse and understanding of Georgianness situated themselves back to the Georgian nation.

According to Pelkmans, such an accommodating attitude amongst Georgian Muslims is connected to the negative experiences that are a result of expressing religious difference.[161] As religion is the basis of the social comparison between the Georgian Christian majority and the Georgian Muslim minority social groups, positive social comparison is crucial for developing positive self identity and self-esteem. However, the comparative self-perception of minorities is usually derogative.[162] In this case, the removal of the basis of social comparison between Georgian Christians and Georgian Muslims from the everyday discourse helps the latter to maintain a positive self-image.

To sum up, Georgian Muslims are excluded from the imaginary Georgian community based on religious and historical reasons. Georgia is imagined as an historically Christian country, and Islam is perceived as an attribute of the Others, hence the Georgian Muslims are not part of Georgian nation. To

161 Pelkmans, “Uncertain Divides : Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics in the Georgian Borderlands,” 74.
162 Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 330–331.

overcome this, my respondents employed a couple of strategies. First was to reject the historical narrative of Christian Georgia and emphasize that religion and nationality are two different categories. However, at the same time, the respondents involuntarily affirmed this dominant narrative themselves by drawing parallels between Christianity and Georgianness. In this case they affirmed their self-identification as Georgians, but at the same time there was a lack of perceived groupness with the Georgian nation. Another way to renegotiate one's way back to the Georgian nation was to avoid the topic of religion in general in the everyday situations, such as interactions with friends or neighbors. In this case, the religious boundaries are erased between the Georgian Christian and Georgian Muslim groups, and the disappearance of the main social comparison factor between these two groups contributes to the maintenance of positive self-esteem for Georgian Muslims.

5.2 Exclusion from the Georgian Nation by Assigning Other Nationality to Muslims

This large theme is similar to the first one, but is based not on religious, but on nationality dimension. If in the first case, Muslims can not be Georgians because Georgians are Georgian Orthodox Christians, then in this case, Georgians can not be Muslims, because Muslims are Turks, Tatars, Iranians etc. In particular, this Othering by prescribing another nationality to Georgian Muslims happens when a woman wears a hijab.

On the first night of my stay in Khulo, both men of my host family, the father and the son, were not at home. The 18 year old daughter Z., 42 year old mother N. and I were the only people in the house at the end of the village. The absence of men, and never ending tea on a wood stove, encouraged us to share our personal stories, and Z. told me that she was once married, when she was 17. Her husband was a Georgian Muslim and eight years older than her. They got married here, in Khulo, and later moved to Tbilisi to live with his family. However, their marriage lasted only few months, because

her mother-in-law, according to Z., “was a cow”: she demanded that Z. should stop dressing as a Muslim, would put her hijab and long dresses away, made her put on short skirts, open blouses and high heels. Her mother-in-law's arguments were that Z. should look like all the other Georgians around her, but Z. valued her religion so much, that she left her husband and declared him dead to her. She returned to her family in Khulo district and they took her back thus showing their approval for Z's. decision to leave a family where she was not allowed to be a true Muslim woman.

This story demonstrates the importance of the hijab for devoted Muslim women. Without it, Z. could not see herself as true Muslim and took the ultimate way out and left her husband, at the risk that her own family would not take her back and she would never be married again. In this story, the hijab served as a symbol of Muslim group boundaries that were so important for Z. to protect that she was ready to make personal sacrifices.

All the respondents of the interviews mentioned hijab in one way or another. And it is not surprising – a hijab draws a strict boundary between 'the Muslim' and 'the Georgian'. The respondents' answers can be divided into two groups – one group, coming from a more religious background, insisted that a Muslim woman must wear a hijab everyday, everywhere she goes. The other, more moderate group, argued that a woman is free to choose if she wants to cover her hair or not.

As women are constructed as the symbolic bearers of group boundaries in everyday life,[163] wearing a hijab can put women to the other side of the *Muslim Other – Christian Georgian* group boundary from the perspective of the “real Georgians”. In the opinion of the INT7, who does not wear a hijab everyday, she would not be accepted as a *real* Georgian if she started dressing in a Muslim way. The same fear was shared by other interviewees as well. As INT2 expressed, one needs to be morally prepared to wear a hijab and to be able to ignore opinions and comments by other people. Not surprisingly, the only interviewees who wore a hijab everyday were those involved in religious

163 Yuval -- Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 45.

activities and to whom a shared group values of Islam were very important.

In Adjara, one can observe a very interesting trend of wearing the hijab. In Batumi, one rarely sees any women who cover their hair, but this can be explained by the fact that in Batumi there are more Georgian Orthodox than Muslims. But even in Khulo district, where, according to estimates by the locals, Muslims comprise about 60 percent of the population and Christians about 30 percent, women tend to cover their hair only in more familiar settings, such as the family home or the village which they live in. English teacher K. from a small village school told me that she never covers her head in school as it is not acceptable. She only covers her head at home, in a more private sphere. When I was walking to the district center of Khulo for the first time with my hair covered, the daughter of my host family was pleasantly surprised – according to her, not even every Muslim would do that. I witnessed another case, when a neighbor relative of my host family was traveling to the center of Khulo wearing just a moderate scarf on her head that partially showed her hair. And when she is at home, her head is always fully covered. Hence, these women tend to express their religious affiliations only in more private spheres, and avoid unwanted attention in society by partially discarding their role as boundary keepers.

The interviews provided a couple of explanations for such behavior. First of all, when they wear a hijab, women are forced to defend not just their religious preferences, but also their national belonging, as in the eyes of the society they become Turks, Tatars or Iranians:

> And then I walk in the street and all eyes are on you – look, I look like this. And it can be awkward... In the streets some people say that maybe she is not Georgian, maybe she does not speak Georgian. I was walking, one woman and man asked me something, but before I answered, another one said: oh, she does not speak Georgian, she is Iranian! I was in shock – excuse me, I am Georgian! It is kind of a problem, you know.(INT9)

Thus, a hijab requires them to take a personal stance, not only to defend their religious beliefs, but also their national affiliation. Therefore, when women wear a hijab, they are not perceived as a part of Georgian nation, despite their self identification with it. Again, we see a disagreement between different notions of identity that cause discomfort in everyday situations. Almost all the respondents have been called Turks, Tatars or Iranians at some point in their lives, either to their faces, or behind their backs.

However, a hijab causes not only psychological discomfort by excluding women from the Georgian nation, but also a more practical problem. INT9 had to quit her job when she converted to Islam and started wearing a hijab, INT12 was refused a job in a bank because she was wearing a head scarf, an acquaintance of INT2 also did not get a position in a governmental sector because she was wearing a hijab. The teachers and other public sphere employees in Khulo were convinced that there is an official regulation that forbids wearing hijabs while working in a public sphere. But to this day there is no official ban on hijabs for public employees, let alone employees in the private sector. The existing Law on Public Service neither implicitly nor explicitly regulates wearing of hijab in public sector. [164]

The majority of my respondents as well as other Muslims that I met in Khulo or in Batumi were quick to state that it is a personal decision if one wants to wear a hijab or not. On the other hand, drawing from the interviews, it is necessary to wear a hijab for a real Muslim woman because "I wear it not for myself, not for men, but for God" (INT1). The mentioning of God as the main reason to wear it, suggests that the hijab captures the main, and the most important social group values of Islam. Thus, when a person decides not to wear it, she distances herself from the core shared values of the group.

To negotiate this position some women take a stance that states that even if not wearing a hijab is a sin, it is a small sin compared to others, thus God will forgive them (INT10, INT11).

164 *The Law on The Public Service*.

In addition to that, some of the respondents took another way out of this situation. For example, INT10 as well as INT15 insisted that covering ones head is not only Muslim, but also Christian tradition: “It is not acceptable in any religion to wear such short dresses and be without a scarf. In Christianity, a Christian women must wear it as well, but they do not do it. They know that it is a sin but they do not do it”(INT10). INT15 elaborated on this thought by stating that the headscarf is a Christian, thus, Georgian tradition. In this way women position themselves back into their nation by stating that their hijabs are not a sign of their religion but also it is a part of tradition of their country.

To sum up, a hijab puts a Muslim Georgian woman into a situation where she must renegotiate her belonging to the Muslim social group and to the Georgian nation at the same time. If she choses to cover her head, she is excluded from the Georgian nation and is seen as an outsider, as a Turk. If she choses not to cover her head, she blends into the Georgian society but then she distances herself from the core values of the religious group she belongs to. In addition to either choosing to wear a hijab and constantly defend their national belonging, or choosing not to wear a hijab and blend in with their nation group, there are other strategies that women employ. One of them is to downplay their decision not to wear a scarf as a minor *sin* that does not result in a deviation from the core tenets of Islam. Another strategy is to situate oneself back to the Georgian nation by stating that a hijab is not only Islamic, but also a Christian, and even Georgian tradition. In this way, as followers of not only Muslim, but also Christian and Georgian traditions of covering their heads, the women affirm their Georgianness and keep their Islamic identification as well.

5.3 Different In-Group Regulations

The third broad theme encompasses different cultural customs and their regulations in both social groups. As Pelkmans writes, one of the main difficulties in being both Muslim and Georgian for

Georgian Muslim men in Adjara, is connected to what are perceived as Georgian customs – the social role during *supras* and alcohol consumption related to that.[165] However, as I will demonstrate later, for women alcohol consumption is not such a big issue. The larger effect on their daily lives is a regulation that Muslim women can only marry into Muslim families, whereas Muslim men are allowed to take wives that follow other religions.

To start with, the interviewees agreed that wine is important in Georgian culture, but the alcohol restriction in Islam does not seem problematic to them: "It [being Georgian] conflicts with Muslimness[166] only when it comes to drinking wine and eating pork. Especially wine. Georgians think that it is their tradition and so on, but I don't drink and I think that it does not prevent me from being real Georgian" (INT2). She explains why it is not a problem for her: "For example, when we sit at supra, we Muslims do not drink wine and do not eat pork. And when I don't drink wine and do not eat pork mtsvadi[167] , Georgians are surprised – how come, you are Georgian and you do not eat pork and do not drink wine? But to be Georgian is not only to eat pork and drink wine, it is more. That is why it does not matter if I drink or not – I am still Georgian" (INT2).

INT10, INT11, INT13, INT14 mentioned that their families and they themselves drink wine, but only on special occasions – such as birthdays, New Year, arrival of guests etc. But they also stressed out that their husbands are the ones that tend to drink more, even without any occasions – INT10 complained about her husband who never cleans cups and glasses when he has friends over for a drink when she is at work.

In general, the respondents did not give much importance to drinking wine as their male counterparts did in Pelkmans research.[168] It can be explained by looking at the different male and female roles during supra. Anthropologists who write about Georgian feast traditions argue that supra

165 Pelkmans, "Uncertain Divides : Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics in the Georgian Borderlands," 71.
166 She used word *muslimoba*, and *muslimness* is the most direct translation for this word.
167 Barbecue; shashlik in Russian
168 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 125–136.

reflects Georgian society with clearly distinguished male and female roles in it.[169] To put it in a nutshell, the men take a leading role and perform their manhood through rather formal toasting and drinking, while women are responsible for the preparation of food and sometimes tend to retire to a more informal space in the kitchen to bond amongst themselves. However, another anthropologist Linderman challenges this static understanding of supras, and the male and female roles in it, and argues that men and women do not play static, prescribed roles in supras, as women can also be toastmasters and fully participate in supras.[170] But from my several years of personal experience of being a woman in Georgia, I argue that even if women tend to actively participate in supras, the widely perceived idea is that supra belongs to masculine domain, and the masculinity of participants is proved by means of drinking and toasting. It is expected from men to finish their glasses of wine after each toast, but women are allowed to take small sips or switch to soft drinks without offending anyone. Thus, I argue that Georgian Muslim women do not feel such pressure from society to actively participate in supras as men do, therefore the alcohol restriction in Islam does not jeopardize their role as Georgian women.

If regulations of drinking are more important for men in their daily lives, then regulations on selecting spouses are more likely to affect women than men because Islam forbids Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men.[171] This rule shapes the decisions of women that I talked to, because it means that the decision to marry a Muslim is not solely the respondents', but is also one of the rules of the social group they belong to.

Those respondents who were not married, unanimously stated that their future husband must be Muslim and that they will raise Muslim children. INT2, INT5, INT6, INT9 and INT16 said that the

169 Manning, *Semiotics of Drink and Drinking*; Kotthoff, "The Social Semiotics of Georgian Toast Performances"; Mühlfried, "Banquets, Grant -- Eaters, and the Red Intelligentsia in Post -- Soviet Georgia."
170 Linderman, "The Gendered Feast."
171 Leeman, "Interfaith Marriage in Islam: An Examination of the Legal Teory Behind the Traditional and Reformist Positions," 756–757.

regulations of Islam are the main reasoning behind their choice of their future husbands. INT2 and IN5 went even further, and explained that they see Georgian Christian men only as friends, and could never be attracted by them, or be romantically involved with them, because it is forbidden in their religion. In this case, women are performing the role of biological reproducers of Islam, because her children will be born into Islam, as their father will be Muslim as well.

Another reasoning for not marrying a non-Muslim man, was that the spouses should be of one religion so there would be less quarrels in the family (INT8, INT9), or so that the children will be definitely raised as Muslims (INT8). If the first reason was more connected to the biological reproduction, this reason is connected to cultural reproduction and preservation of Islam and continuation of it throughout generations.

But none of the respondents mentioned any discomfort due to the fact that they must marry only Muslims. On the contrary, they supported this social group norm with more personalized arguments, such as less quarrels in the family, or easier decisions on the children's religious upbringing. This shows that the role of biological and cultural reproducers of Muslimness is acceptable for respondents. In addition to that, the majority are married to Georgian Muslims, or preferably want to marry Georgians – this shows that national belonging is of equal importance as religion, hence the social group that is and will be culturally and biologically reproduced by these women is clearly defined as Georgian Muslims and not as a part of the Islamic population in general.

To sum up, this third theme can be defined as different cultural norms and regulations amongst Muslims and amongst Georgians. But if drinking wine caused identity conflicts amongst Georgian Muslim men as Pelkmans has shown, it did not affect women to the same extent. This can be explained by different gender roles in Georgian society, which means that women are not expected to actively participate in supras, whereas for men it is a crucial event to perform their nationalized masculinity. Also, the restriction on marrying into another religious group does not seem to cause any identity-

related conflict either – Georgian Muslim women support this restriction by giving personalized reasons, and by doing that, affirm their roles as biological and cultural reproducers of the Georgian Muslim social group.

Coming back to my hypotheses, it can be stated that Georgian Muslim women in Adjara experience a discrepancy between Muslim and Georgian aspects of their identity. My research revealed that there are three broad themes that should be discussed when talking about religious and national aspects of Georgian Muslim women identity. First of all, it is their exclusion from the Georgian nation based on religious reasons, second, it is their exclusion from the Georgian nation by prescribing a different nationality to them, and thirdly, there exist different in-group regulations.

The first and the second theme show women constantly renegotiating themselves back to the respective social groups when they are excluded on a basis of dominant historical narrative or their appearance. If the first theme of exclusion is based on religious reasons, the dominant national narrative is more universal and gender-neutral, because Pelkmans' research on Georgian Muslim men revealed the same tendencies, then the second theme is solely gendered. Women get prescribed another nationality based on their appearance. When they wear hijabs, they express their belonging to Islamic community but at the same time they are excluded from Georgian nation based on their appearance. To put it in other words, when Georgian Muslim women decide to look like Muslim, they mark and defend Muslim group boundaries, but this leads to their exclusion from perceived Georgian nation. If they decide not to wear a hijab and look “Georgian”, then they are jeopardizing their status as a loyal Muslim group member. Hence my hypothesis that the perceived role of women as social boundary protectors can partially account for the discrepancy they experience between Muslim and Georgian aspects of their identity is verified. The third broad theme discussed in this chapter also supports this hypothesis by demonstrating that women are willing to perform their role as social group boundary protectors, as they do not object to the requirements by their social group to do so.

Chapter 6. Staying Muslim

In this chapter, I present my findings related to the respondents' choice not to convert to Georgian Orthodox Christianity. I use the content analysis of the interviews to support my second set of hypotheses that, 1) the perception of being the main protectors of the Georgian Muslim social group boundaries, prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity; and 2) the perception of being the main cultural and biological reproducers of the Georgian Muslim social group, prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity.

I have showed in the fourth chapter, that there is an ongoing expansion of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in the former Muslim areas of Adjara. This expansion is executed through building new churches, through Christian educational institutions and through the history curriculum in the public schools. The GOC has stronger positions than Islam, because of existing national legislation that gives preferential treatment to this Church compared to all other minority religions. This ongoing expansion of the Georgian Orthodox Church, together with the positioning of the followers of Islam outside of the national imaginary of the Georgians, as shown in the third chapter, put pressure on Muslims as the minority group, and assimilation by converting to Christianity seems to one of the easiest and most obvious ways out of the uncomfortable minority situation.[172] However, the Georgian Muslims seem to choose a strategy of accommodation[173], and try to retain their separate identity and group values, as the interviews showed that my respondents are keen on keeping strong group boundaries.

Only two out of fifteen respondents admitted that they wanted to change their religion at some point of their lives. INT14 wanted to convert to Christianity when two of her children made this step. However, her husband did not want to become Christian, so she stayed Muslim:

172 Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 331.
173 Ibid., 335.

> The main reason for me was that Christianity is Georgian, more Georgian than Islam. But I also think that to change one's religion is a big sin. Also, my husband did not want to convert. Now I pretend to be a good Muslim. Although I agree with my children. I am Muslim, as my husband did not want to convert to Christianity.
>
> <Why is Christianity more Georgian?>
>
> I don't know, because it is always like this... For Georgians, Christianity was here all the time. And Islam was by force. Today no one forces one to become either Muslim or Christian. But I understand very well that there is no big difference between religions. The main importance is to believe in God and be a good person. Simply, I wanted Christianity because I wanted to pray in the Georgian language. But as my husband does not want to become Christian, I don't want husband and wife to be of different religions. (INT14)

INT14 stated that the main reason for converting to Christianity was that Christianity is more Georgian as it was not forced on people, but brought with peace. In addition to that, it is important for her that she would be able to pray in the Georgian language, as opposed to Arabic. The main reason for her staying Muslim, was her husband's decision not to become Christian, as she did not want her spouse to belong to a different religious group. Interestingly enough, although she said that she just pretends to be a good Muslim, she later said that she is organizing a group of women her age to go and start studying Islam in the Khulo madrassa.

INT16 said that she wanted to become Christian when she was a teenager, when she lived in Dedoplistskaro, a town in eastern Georgia. No one in the family taught her Islam, and when she was in 11th grade in the public school, she had a very good teacher who was Christian. She admired her very much, and that was the main reason she wanted to convert to Christianity. In addition to that, in Dedoplistskaro, she was surrounded by Christians and did not like the way Muslims dressed and cover

themselves. However, the teacher later moved to Tbilisi and she stayed in Dedoplistskaro. Soon after that, when she turned 16, her family sent her to Batumi to study Islam. After that, she went to study theology and Arabic language in Turkey, and now she teaches the Quran in the madrassa in Khulo. However, she never imagined herself being a religious teacher, and studied theology just because of the Arabic language.

Here we see that although the reasons for wanting to convert to Christianity in both cases are different, the outcomes are similar. Both respondents not only did not leave their religious group, but also decided to immerse themselves more into their group values and beliefs: INT14 is planning to start studying Quran and INT16 now works as a religious teacher in the girls' madrassa. It needs to be mentioned that both of them are also planning a career at the same time: INT14 is planning to study for a PhD, and INT16 is planning to get a job in Tbilisi at some point in the future. This is an example of what Tajfel called accommodation strategy: when members of minority attempt to retain their own separate identity, but at the same time seek to achieve marks and goals of success valued in society as a whole. According to Tajfel, one of the preconditions to such strategy is the existence of strong values and culture norms that are different from the majority, and the members of the minority group are not willing to give them up.[174]

Those who state that they never even thought of conversion based their decision on the following reasons. First of all, they state that even the thought of conversion is a sin. In other words, even an idea of leaving a given religious group indicates that the individual deviates from its core principals and core values. In addition to that, the respondents tended to reaffirm their unconditional belonging to the Islamic community by stating that "I was born, raised and I will die a Muslim. And nothing can ever change that" (INT5).

The last quote brings us to the main idea of the continuation of Islam throughout generations.

174 Ibid.

The interviewees saw it as the mother's duty to raise Muslim children. Although some of them (INT4, INT5, INT6, INT9) indicated that both parents and all grandparents should be involved in the religious education of the child, they and other interviewees stated that in reality, mothers are the ones teaching Islam to their children as they are closer to the child, and they tend to stay home more than their spouses. "[Who taught you about Islam?] My mother. Because she was always at home as she is a house wife. My father was working and that is why he was not participating so much. But he also took care that I would have love for my religion and, when he had time, he also was talking to me about religion" (INT5). INT2 and INT5 (both of them are not married and have no children) said that if their future children at some point would decide to leave this religion, this would be their fault, and their sin as a mother. INT14, whose two out of three children converted to Christianity, also took a self -blaming stance: "I thought that they would not convert, I thought that when they grew up, I would teach them Islam. But I did not have time to do it. As a parent, I failed to give them religious education" (INT14). To conclude, the interviewees saw the continuation of Islam in their families as their responsibility and were ready to take the blame if their children decided to convert to another religion.

The need of preservation of Islam in the family prevents women from converting not only because of the future generations, but due to respect of the previous generations as well. When asked about their family religion, thirteen respondents – all apart from INT9 whose family is Christian and INT14 who comes from a mixed family – proudly stated that their families are Muslim for several generations, as long as they can remember. This corresponds to Pelkmans' observation that the Muslims in Adjara put more emphasis on respect to the family and the ancestors in the case of religion, than on the traditions of Georgia.[175]

In order to present a better portrayal of reasons behind their decision not to convert, besides expressed strong religiosity and family traditions, I looked how the respondents position themselves

175 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 167.

towards those who have converted. All the respondents had at least one acquaintance, close friend or a relative who has converted to Christianity. The converts to Christianity were not perceived well by them: although the narrative of religion being a free choice did not disappear when talking about converts from Islam to Christianity, they were still portrayed as sinners, as someone that made the wrong choice, as someone under someone else's influence, as neither real Muslim nor real Christian. Their conversion was explained as following a fashionable trend, or as a way for material gain, they were following a fashionable trend. To quote Tajfel, "[w]e are what we are because *they* are not what we are"(emphasis in original).[176] In other words, positive self-evaluation in comparison to members of other social groups, positively contribute to ones self-esteem and the group's self-image.[177]

This negative attitude towards those who left the in group is also a way of preserving and strengthening social group boundaries. According to Tajfel, the awareness of belonging to a certain minority group depends on how clearly the group boundaries are perceived. The clear perception of group boundaries is based on three systems of belief – that a given minority group is separate from the others and it is impossible or at least difficult for an individual to leave this group and become a member of the majority; that the social consequences of being assigned and belonging to a given minority group has certain social consequences for all the members of this group; and that the members of a given minority group have their own views that are different from the majority.[178] In the case of Georgian Muslims, the converts to Christianity are perceived through a negative lens. They are portrayed as not real members of either Muslim or Georgian Orthodox Christian religious groups, hence their individual mobility to the majority religious group from the minority did not jeopardize the established group boundaries.

To sum up, only two of fifteen interviewees (here I exclude the recent convert to Islam) thought

176 Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, 323.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid., 314.

of converting to Christianity. However, none of them did – instead they chose to strengthen their own connection to the Muslim group. Others stated that they never even had a thought of converting to Christianity because they are real Muslims, and even the thought of converting to another religion is a sin. In addition to that, they also put emphasis on the continuation of Islam in their families from the past to the future generations and their role in it – or to rephrase it, to ensure a biological and cultural continuation of Islam.

In addition, the respondents took a negative stance towards the new converts from Islam to Christianity. This negative attitude towards the former ingroup members not only helps to achieve a positive self-evaluation, but also is a way of preserving and strengthening group boundaries by denying that those who managed to move across it were real members of the former group and became real members of the new group.

These findings are in accordance with my second set of hypotheses that: 1) the perception of being the main protectors of the Georgian Muslim social group boundaries prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity; and that 2) the perception of being the main cultural and biological reproducers of Georgian Muslim social group prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

In my thesis, I looked at the religious and national aspects of Georgian Muslim women identity. In particular, I discussed the difficulties that they experience by being Georgian Muslims, ways of overcoming these difficulties in contemporary Georgia, and the reasoning behind their decision to stay in the Islamic minority nevertheless.

The theoretical background of my thesis is based on Tajfel's and Brubaker's and Cooper's concepts of identity. However, I discarded the masculine approach that is used in mainstream studies on nationalism and religion and looked into women' experiences instead. Based on feminist literature that emphasize women' role as bearers of group culture as well as on previous research done in Adjara on Georgian Muslim men (mostly by Pelkmans), I put forward four hypotheses:

1. Georgian Muslim women in Adjara experience a discrepancy between Muslim and Georgian aspects of their identity;
2. The perceived role of women as social boundary protectors can partially account for the discrepancy they experience between Muslim and Georgian aspects of their identity;
3. The perception of being the main protectors of the Georgian Muslim social group boundaries prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity;
4. The perception of being the main cultural and biological reproducers of Georgian Muslim social group prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity.

I started my argument by showing that Adjarians have experienced a decline in the importance of Islam as the main identity reference and an increase in importance of their Georgian identity. At the same time, Georgian national identity is not secular, as it is closely intertwined with Georgian

Orthodoxy in the national imagery, and this puts Georgian Muslims between complete membership in the Georgian nation and complete alienation as the Others, and such a position undoubtedly leads to a constant negotiation of distinct identifications.

Moreover, this intertwining of the Georgian Orthodox Church and Georgian national identity, led to an institutionalized preferential treatment of the Georgian Orthodox Church by the state authorities. This preferential treatment allows the Church to expand its influence in former Islamic Adjara by using public education and claiming public space. Georgian Orthodoxy already has a hegemony in Lower Adjara and is expanding in Upper Adjara as well, while Islam is prevailing in more secluded villages. All of these factors combine to put pressure to assimilate on the minority Muslims. However, as the analysis of the interviews revealed, Georgian Muslim women resist the assimilation process, and opt for an accommodation strategy by trying to strengthen group boundaries, and ensuring the biological and cultural continuation of Islam and avoiding distancing themselves from the Georgian nation at the same time.

My research is based on analysis of sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted in Batumi and in the district of Khulo, as well as on participant observation data from the district of Khulo. The analysis revealed that there are three broad themes that should be discussed when talking about religious and national aspects of Georgian Muslim women identity. First of all, it is their exclusion from the Georgian nation based on religious reasons, second, it is their exclusion from the Georgian nation by prescribing a different nationality to them, and third, there exist different in-group regulations. Therefore, the first hypothesis that women experience discrepancy between religious and national aspects of their identity is verified.

The first and the second themes show that women are constantly renegotiating themselves back to the respective social groups when they are excluded on a basis of dominant historical narrative or

their appearance. The first theme of exclusion is based on religious reasons and the dominant national narrative is more universal and gender-neutral, Muslim men revealed the same tendencies. To overcome this exclusion, my respondents employed a couple of strategies. First was to reject the historical narrative of Christian Georgia and emphasize that religion and nationality are two different categories. However, at the same time, they involuntarily affirmed this dominant narrative themselves by drawing parallels between Christianity and Georgianness. In this case they affirmed their self-identification as Georgians, but at the same time there was a lack of perceived groupness with the Georgian nation. Another way to renegotiate one's way back to the Georgian nation was to avoid the topic of religion in the everyday situations, such as interactions with friends or neighbors. In this case, the religious boundaries are erased between the Georgian Christian and Georgian Muslim groups, and the disappearance of the main social comparison factor between these two groups contributes to the maintenance of positive self-esteem for Georgian Muslims.

If the first theme was gender-neutral, then the second theme of exclusion by prescribing different nationality is solely gendered, as women get prescribed another nationality based on their appearance. When they wear hijabs, they express their belonging to the Islamic community, but at the same time they are excluded from Georgian nation based on their appearance. Hence when Georgian Muslim women decide to look like Muslim, they mark and defend Muslim group boundaries, but this leads to their exclusion from the perceived Georgian nation. If they decide not to wear a hijab and look "Georgian", then they are jeopardizing their status as a loyal Muslim group member.

In addition to either choosing to wear a hijab and constantly defend their national belonging, or choosing not to wear a hijab and blend in with their nation group, there are other strategies that women employ. One of them is to downplay their decision not to wear a scarf as a minor *sin* that does not result in a deviation from the core tenets of Islam. Another strategy is to situate oneself back to the Georgian nation by stating that a hijab is not only Islamic, but also a Christian, and even Georgian tradition. In

this way, as followers of not only Muslim, but also Christian and Georgian traditions of covering their heads, the women affirm their Georgianness and keep their Islamic identification as well.

The third broad theme – different in-group regulations – stressed out the role of women as the boundary protectors of Islamic and Georgian social groups. Interestingly enough, drinking wine, that caused identity conflicts amongst Georgian Muslim men as Pelkmans has shown, did not affect women to the same extent. This can be explained by different gender roles in Georgian society, which means that women are not expected to actively participate in supras, whereas for men it is a crucial event to perform their nationalized masculinity. And the restriction on marrying into another religious group does not seem to cause any identity-related conflict either – Georgian Muslim women support this restriction by giving personalized reasons, and by doing that, affirm their roles as biological and cultural reproducers of the Georgian Muslim social group.

These findings support my hypothesis that the perceived role of women as social boundary protectors can partially account for the discrepancy they experience between the Muslim and Georgian aspects of their identity.

As only two of fifteen interviewees thought of converting to Christianity, and none of them actually did, it shows that my respondents are devoted to continue their membership in Islamic social group. Even those who thought of converting to Christianity later opted for strengthening their own religion beliefs, and the others believe that even a thought of conversion would jeopardize their belonging (or in their words – "it is a sin"). My respondents put emphasis on the continuation of Islam in their families from the past to the future generations, and on their role in it – or in other words, on biological and cultural continuation of Islam.

In addition to that, the respondents took a negative stance towards the new converts from Islam to Christianity. Following Tajfel, such negative attitude towards the former ingroup members not only helps to achieve a positive self-evaluation, but also is a way of preserving and strengthening group

boundaries by denying that those who managed to move across it were real members of the former group and became real members of the new group.

These findings support my hypotheses that 1) the perception of being the main protectors of the Georgian Muslim social group boundaries prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity; and that 2) the perception of being the main cultural and biological reproducers of Georgian Muslim social group prevents women from conversion to Georgian Orthodox Christianity.

This research was intended to fill the literature gap on Georgian Muslim religious and national aspects of identity by looking at this issue from feminine perspective. It can also serve as a contribution for future research on Muslim groups in Georgia from comparative perspective (Adjarians, Azerbaijanis, Kists, Meskhetian Turks) or as a contribution for policy papers concerning minority cultural group rights, such as wearing a hijab.

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