

## THE WOUNDED BODY: REFLECTIONS ON THE DEMISE OF THE 'IRON CURTAIN' BETWEEN GEORGIA AND TURKEY

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### Introduction

After fifty years of rigid separation, in 1988 the border between Georgia and Turkey was opened for traffic. At the time, the opening was welcomed on both sides of the border. Many Georgians had relatives across the border with whom contact had been largely impossible since the late 1930s. Many of them took the chance to pay a visit into that other (mysterious) world. The opening of the border offered people in Georgia access to 'western' consumption goods and the possibility to sell their belongings for hard currency that was very valuable in their country at the time. Trade between the two countries quickly increased and is still very important for the region as a whole. Although these positive effects seem obvious, the inhabitants of Ajaria increasingly tend to describe the new contacts in negative terms. My informants held the opening of the border responsible for the spread of diseases, for chaos on the markets and saw it as a threat to local values.

In this article I reflect on reactions connected to the borderopening and to the appearance of the Other. The paper is based on conversations and interviews held in and around Batumi. The town is the capital of the autonomous province Ajaria, and located near the Turkish border on the Black Sea shore. Actually, for the residents of this town two new Others emerged. The first is Turkey, the real Other. The second is Europe, actually an 'old relative', but despised by Cold War rhetoric. While the first Other evokes disgust, the second evokes hope. By analysing this opposition I will reflect on perceptions connected with the radical changes that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of the 'Iron Curtain.'

### The opening of the border

When the border was opened in 1988 at first surprisingly little happened. A few visas were granted for family visits and transit trucks while the first tour operator just started organizing crossborder trips (Nisanyan 1990:111). In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed and when the governments of Georgia and Turkey simplified restrictions on traffic, Sarpi (the bordervillage) became one of the few gates that gave access to the capitalist west. The next year almost a

million people, arriving from Georgia, Russia, Azerbaijan and other republics, passed the bordergate at Sarpi. Everyone in Batumi remembers these first chaotic years. Gia Tamaishvili, a Batumian archaeologist expressed his view of the situation:

Between 1991 and 1993 I was working in Gonio [between Batumi and the border]. Even in this village the cars, buses and trucks piled up in a row. People waited for two, three days along the road. No toilets, no restaurants and no hotels, so they had to spend the night in their cabin. The beach turned into an enormous public toilet to the distress of the villagers. [...] We really sold everything in those years: aluminum, metal, old jackets, furniture, bicycles .. This was very easy, as soon as you crossed the border the Turks rushed into you to buy your goods. In those early days people were still a bit afraid to cross the border. The first Georgians who went to Turkey kept close to the border, such that they could return in case anything would happen.

Because of the tremendous discrepancy in pricesetting Georgia was still in the rublezone exporting goods to Turkey was extremely profitable. The country got stuck in a severe economic crisis, was ravaged by a civil war and people badly needed currency. Timber from the forest reserves began to move to Turkey, metals were stripped from industrial enterprises and even from tram lines to be 'smuggled' across the border. According to a Georgian author, the opening of the bordergate had the effect that all the cheap (that is, statesubsidized) goods disappeared from shops all over the Caucasus "as if a vacuum cleaner had gone through it" (Gachechiladze 1995:3). Meanwhile, Turkish goods started to enter Georgia and filled the gaps in the availability of consumption goods. Batumi was strategically situated to profit from this new trade. The increase in transnational trade transformed Batumi into a major trading centre on the cross road between Turkey and the Caucasus (see also Aves 1996).

Estimations on the volume of trade differ widely, because a large part was carried out by thousands of touristtraders (see also Hale 1996:59).

Despite the confusion it is clear that while during the first years after 1991 the net flow of goods was directed towards Turkey, in later years the flow reversed. Although the volume of official trade rose in succeeding years, crossborder movements sharply decreased after the first upheaval in the early nineties. While in 1992 about 800.000 people crossed the border, in 1996 only some 170.000 people travelled back and forth.

The nature of trade had changed in the intermediate period. During the first years the trading activities were mostly conducted by touristtraders from all over the Caucasus and South Russia. These amateur traders travelled back and forth between Georgia (or one of the other republics) and Turkey, exchanging whatever they could in return for consumer goods. When I visited the border in the spring of 1997 little reminded of the chaotic situation that had characterized the first years. New restrictions made the bordercrossing very expensive, and the (local) government had extended its control over the trade. During the past three years most trade has become concentrated in the hands of a small group of people. In Batumi, most people tell you right away what happened. The 'mafia' (that is, people with connections at the bordergate or with the political apparatus of Ajaria) have taken over the bulk of trade, leaving only bits and pieces for ordinary and honest citizens. The experience of Hayder Mamudis is typical. Together with his son he made several trading trips to Turkey:

In the beginning there was little control. All we paid was a little tip [bribe] to the customhouseofficers and in return they allowed us to export a car filled with electronic goods, although this was officially prohibited. [...] Since a couple of years ago we do not go to Turkey any more. There are simply no goods left in Georgia to sell. Besides, we can no longer pay the pocket taxes [*karmannyj nalog*] they demand at the border.

The illegal practices of the customhouse officers are common knowledge in Batumi. The officials are compared with the mafia and repudiated for their corruption and the extraordinary profits they make. Everyone knows of border officials who became millionaires and now live in newly built castles. Despite all the bad experiences, people hardly blame the officers, for they recognize that they are just tiny pieces in a large mechanism. Gia Tamaishvili remarks:

A customhouse officer had in those days [1992/1994] a very bad day when he earned less than 2000 dollars a day. I am just talking about

ordinary officers, imagine how much their superiors earned! [...] Of course nobody tried to stop these practices because those in power received money as well. [...] All kinds of institutions applied to the state for assistance. They received scrap (old metal) and ordinances with which they could pass the border. The customhouse officials knew that it was forbidden but didn't have a choice. Everyone had these kinds of ordinances. One after the other the lorries crossed the border to Turkey. Aslan Abashidze [the political leader of Ajaria] certainly knew of these practices, of the problems and the corruption. All his acquaintances came to him for a job at the customs. The wages were perhaps twenty dollars and what kind of a job is it anyway? These practices were only part of a whole structure with at the top Aslan.

Although some people excessively profited from the changed circumstances, most people are no longer able to go to Turkey. Many people still seek their means of living in the new trade. At present they work however mostly on the Batumian markets, reselling goods imported by the 'big boys'. The chaotic days of the early 1990s are over, and in a way the flow of goods reversed. In the beginning Georgians sold their belongings in Turkey but at present they only see Turkish goods entering their country, but hardly to their advantage. Teimur Tunadze remarked:

If you had been in Turkey some ten years ago, you would have seen how poor they were. There was not a thing, maybe a few wooden houses, while now they have beautiful offices and banks, luxurious shops and hotels, really everything. Turkey has been able to develop itself at our cost. For us the opening of the border meant nothing but misery. It resulted in the increase of the mafia. We sold everything and look what we have now, nothing at all.

Whether Turkey was really that poor a decade ago is besides the point, Teimur himself never went to Turkey. The point is rather that the borderopening is perceived as essentially a bad thing for Georgia. While Turkey has been able to develop itself, Ajaria is still struggling with its economy, and most people do not see any improvement in the near future.

In short, both then and now, people in Ajaria feel abused and exploited by the Turks. The new patterns of trade are perceived as a grand liquidation of Georgia. The trade has enriched Turkey and left Georgia without possessions, without products, machinery nor raw materials. "We

have sold our country," several Georgians replied to me. "In the beginning, the Turks paid ridiculous little for our belongings and now they sell throwaway goods [*odnoroznye tovary*] at huge prices." Again, they remarked, it is Turkey that is getting richer at the expense of Georgia.

These reactions perhaps hardly reflect the real effects of the border opening, but are very meaningful when one considers the wider context within which the border opening took place. I hold that to understand the prevailing negative stories one has to understand the situation itself, not only by focusing on the event or the economic possibilities it created, but on wider processes as well. The opening occurred simultaneously with the collapse of the overall economy of Georgia. Georgia endured an overall drop in production of 66% between 1989 and 1993. In October 1993, the World Bank defined some 90% of the population as living below the poverty line (Fuller 1994:34). In the Soviet Union, Ajaria had a monopoly on the production of tea and (together with Abkhazia) on citrus fruits. As Soviet policy discouraged the import of consumption goods it did not have to cope in the world market. This unique position within the economic structure was lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The importance of Batumi as a port city and its oil refining industry declined. Ajaria was further isolated by the civil war that spread through Georgia during 1993 and 1994. Although the war itself did not reach Ajaria, it meant that Russia (the largest market for the produce) became inaccessible over land. Moreover, while transport from Ajaria to Russia was seriously hindered, trading relations between Turkey and Russia quickly expanded. Ajaria had to conquer with the superior produce of Turkey, while lacking a good infrastructure. For this entrance on the world market it was ill prepared and production and trading as a whole collapsed. The neighbouring region in Turkey on the other hand, had already started to become a prosperous region, (Hann 1990; Stokes 1993:41), which even accelerated with the increased trade with former Soviet republics. No wonder that most Ajarians see themselves as victims of the new contacts from which the Turks have profited.

As said, although the opening of the Turkish border enhanced the possibilities of travel and trade with Turkey, at the same time trading relations with former Soviet republics were hampered. The geopolitical changes in the area had vast effects for the position of Batumi and Ajaria in the world. Nugzar Mgeladze commented: "For us the only way out is Turkey. We could better have a different neighbour, but what can one do." Many

people clearly see themselves as victims of these larger geopolitical changes. As Tamaz Bagrationi remarks:

Of course it is very nice that one can travel and visit one's relatives in Turkey, but to ordinary people it doesn't bring much. For us the most important thing is to get our stomach filled and only then you can think about looking at the other side of the border. They opened it, but now I ask myself why? Let them close it again, it doesn't make a difference.

Although the opening created wideranging economic possibilities for the region as a whole, it also created suspicion and a feeling of insecurity. The comments elucidate the moral dimensions of the border opening. It seems that the 'appearance' of the Other has threatened established ways of life. Up to now four factors explain the negative perceptions of the opening of the border. First, one blames Turkey for having taken advantage of the weak position of Georgia, enriching itself while depriving Georgia of its wealth. Second, although trade has increased, most ordinary citizens are not able to take advantage of this, because they lack the necessary contacts or the capital needed. Third, they saw their city deteriorate, which they attribute to the opening of the border and Turkish influence. Fourth, the geopolitical position of Georgia has changed, which left Turkey as the only place to go to, but hardly to the satisfaction of most people.

#### Evil and sacred commodities

Kopitoff's elaboration on the cultural biography of things had an enormous impact on the anthropology of consumption. He argued that shifts in the meaning of things reveal a moral economy behind the economy of visible transactions (Kopytoff 1986:64). People everywhere use certain items of consumption to render social experience intelligible (Miller 1995:149), and according to Douglas and Isherwood constructing a coherent universe out of the worlds of goods is the most general objective of every consumer (1978:65). This goal is perhaps most tedious when established consumption patterns are confronted with radical changes in the worlds of goods (see for example Gell 1986). The opening of the border obviously created a radical change in the world of goods. The resulting frustrations and confusion are not only suggestive for the difficulty of arranging them into a new coherent framework but also for the perception of Self and Other.

Several anthropologists (Veenis 1997; Verdery 1996:189) have described the fantasies of people in the former socialist block on the western

consumption society. The West was perceived as an earthly paradise, as an imaginary world full of material goods (Verdery 1996:189) When The Wall collapsed and western consumption goods became available these fantasies were confronted with reality. Veenis (1997), writing about former Eastern Germany, describes how the confrontation with reality resulted in disillusion and the disappearance of the dream. When writing about economic changes in Kyrgyzstan (Pelkmans 1996) I argued that ideal notions of capitalism survived despite the great disillusion connected with a 'transition to capitalism'. The fantasies of a capitalist future held their promises by the denial of the capitalist nature of contemporary changes. As the present changes did not correspond to popular images of capitalism as introduced by for example television people simply concluded that capitalism had not reached Kyrgyzstan yet. In this paper, I would argue that the proximity of Turkey kept the dream alive. Bad experiences with capitalism or new consumption goods are easily blamed on the Turks. But before turning to notions connected with consumption goods, I will first reflect on some western notions of consumerism in the former Soviet Union.

A strong image about consumption in the former Soviet Union is that of shortage, empty shelves and rows before shops. This image, no matter how much truth is implied in it, hinder a proper understanding of the changes in the field of consumption. Besides the centralized economy Georgia had a flourishing shadow economy. The anthropologists Mars and Altman (1984) emphasized the central role of the informal economy in Georgia, and saw personal networks as the factual pillars of the entire economy. In such an environment the picture of empty shelves has a different meaning than we often attach to it. Consider for example Teimur's comments on the availability of consumption goods:

We used to have European goods over here, from Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and even from the Netherlands and England. The government exchanged oil and iron for cloths and other products, such that we could buy coats and trousers. And then of course the sailors smuggled many products. They bought coats, liquor and cigarettes in the West and sold it in Batumi. The customs did not pose a problem, for this is a small town, where everybody knows each other. Of course they did not sell it in the streets, but through their relatives and friends. This was a very extensive network. In Kutaisi for example you could buy rare medicaments from the Jews. [...] You could

get everything, although you had to put some effort in it. Back then you needn't worry about most things. One could always buy bread, tea, food, clothes. Maybe it was difficult to lay your hand on luxury goods, but this was not too serious a problem, once you got it you were happy. People didn't have so many pretensions.

One has to remind that Batumi as a portcity and a holiday resort was relatively well off concerning the availability of goods. Moreover, the characteristics of Georgian economy within the Soviet Union had the result that real shortages hardly ever prevailed. Still, the changes in the economy have meant a tremendous increase of the availability of consumption goods. In the centre numerous luxury shops are being built and the markets in town are buzzing with activity. Mercedeses frequently pass the streets, and welldressed men and women stroll along the seaboulevard or consume vodka and 'western' soft drinks on terraces. But only a small elite can profit from these new consumption goods. If one strolls from the centre to the suburbs the face of the town changes rapidly. Streets lack asphalt, daylabourers group together at the junctions and older men and women beg for one's bread or try to sell sunflowerseeds, cigarettes or cakes. For most people, the appearance of new consumption goods is hardly an improvement, for they can not afford them anyway. When Douglas and Isherwood (1978:104) argue that industrialisation has complicated life for consumers, the effect of the new commodity flows to Batumi is far more comprehensive. For many people the appearance of different brands is often confusing and misleading. People are very careful what to buy, as quality and pricedifferences are much more pronounced than they used to be. Let me introduce some problems and meanings of the new consumption goods by recollecting an experience that was very telling to me.

A few weeks after my arrival in Batumi, I had a discussion with my research assistant Teimur. Before I left The Netherlands, I had bought new (Italian) shoes with the expectation that they would last at least until I returned. However, within a month the sole broke, while the material inside pulverized. I was a little angry at myself, for my Dutch wisdom tells me never to buy cheap. Any way, the next walk through the mud revealed that walking had become impossible so I had to tell Teimur. For him everything was crystal clear. The shoes I had bought were not of Italian origin at all. I showed him the mark and the sign which said "made in Italy" but this did not make any impression on him what so ever. He shook his head and stated: "I am sure that these shoes are made in Turkey, the

seller has tilled you." For him, this was another example of how Turkish 'mafia' operates. He showed his own shoes to me. "I bought these seven years ago. Maybe they are not very beautiful, but they are very strong, made in Russia." With a slight disappointment in his voice he added: "unfortunately they don't make them any more."

This short conversation reveals several notions that seem to be paramount in Batumi. Goods are classified through their presumed origin, which again relates to a whole series of assumptions. This classification can be summarized as follows:

Western products are expensive, but beautiful, and of good quality. Russian products are cheap, and of good quality, although the aesthetic value is low. Turkish products are cheap, but of extreme poor quality although they look quite good. Georgian products finally, are scarce and mainly restricted to homeproduce and consumption, valued for their purity and a source of pride.

Turkish commodities are generally disliked. People pointed out to me that they dislike Turkish goods, for they contain many chemicals and are very bad for your health. Many rumours circulate about Turkish produce. Maguli Davitadze summarized her concerns.

When I was sitting in the bus I heard a man say that his kids got rashes from Turkish flour. They say that the Turks add chemicals to their flour and physicians are aware of this problem. And when you use Turkish washing soap your skin starts to peel off. The children start to scratch from itches and this is very difficult to treat. They say that the Turks want to harm the Georgian women with washing powders, that they export sweets to injure the children and they damage the men through cigarettes and vodka.

My assistant had heard these conspiracy theories several times before, but pointed out that I should not take the accounts very serious. I would however suggest that the existence of such rumours is already meaningful. Some of the stories are even published in the local newspaper. My landlord showed me an article which declared that Turkish tomato ketchup would cause cancer. In the article a physician was cited who confirmed the rumours.

The attached value of the different commodities becomes only visible in their mutual relation. Turkish commodities are contrasted with the disappeared Russian goods, which are considered to be of much better quality. "Maybe the Russian stuff doesn't look very beautiful, but the

quality is good. Compare for example blouses. If you wash and iron a Turkish blouse two times it falls apart, while Russian cloths will remain good for years." Most people however agree that Turkish products at least look good: "The chocolate from Turkey is worth nothing and it is old, but you can sit down behind the packaging and look for hours as if it were television." Note however that this is hardly considered a point in their favour, for the outlook of Turkish goods is at best misleading. The problem of deception is also apparent in the case of Western goods as the example of the shoes already made clear.

Western goods are tremendously popular in Batumi. This ranges from Mercedeses to Coca Cola, Marlboro or Italian shoes. The problem is often that it is hard to distinguish between 'real' and 'fake' Western goods. A case in point is that of cigarettes. Since the beginning of the 1990s numerous cigarette brands entered the Batumian market. Very soon these cigarettes with names as *Kennedy*, *Taste of America*, *Party Cigarettes*, or *President* pushed the Soviet brands out of the market. Nugzar asked whether these brands are available in the Netherlands, which I denied. He tells me that at first everyone smoked *Parliament*, but after a while turned to *L&M*. He now is aware that these are also second quality cigarettes of Philip Morris (specifically made for the former socialist block), so now everyone seems to turn to *Marlboro*. Even these popular cigarettes, which are sold for one dollar per carton are not "real" as I discovered one evening. When I tried to light an *L&M* cigarette a rich customhouse officer grasped it away. "Here take one of these, they are imported from America." He proudly remarked that they had cost him eight dollars a carton.

The valuation of foreign products is not simply a balancing of the pro's and con's. My informants mostly gave a total valuation of the commodities and thereby stressed certain characteristics while neglecting others. Thus, that Russian products have a low aesthetic value is less important than their quality and low expense. Western products are forgiven to be expensive because they last long and have a high aesthetic value. Turkish products on the other hand, are not considered to be cheap or beautiful: they are seen as expensive because they lack quality. Concerning Turkish goods, both price and outlook are just misleading properties.

The stories about foreign products contain also a time dimension. Whereas Russian products refer solely to the past, Turkish products refer to the

present, and Western products refer mostly to the future, as they are too expensive for most residents. In this sense, it refers also to collective dreaming. Many Georgians express nostalgic thoughts about the Soviet Union by referring to the price and quality of goods. By stressing the solid and reliable nature of Russian goods, people in a way express the discomforts connected with deteriorated living standards and loss of security. In contrast to Turkish goods, European products represent a dream of a better (and more colourful) life. When in the late 1980s the ban on information from the West was removed this dream reached excessive forms. In the 1990s the dream was confronted with reality. But although the opening of the border and the arrival of all sorts of new commodities has disappointed a good deal of people, the dream is in a way still alive. In my opinion, the proximity of Turkey created the possibility to maintain the dream. By blaming the opening of the border for the displacements of the market and by attaching the label 'Turkish' on all commodities that are considered worthless, the dream can be maintained. The opening of the border with Turkey (and with the West for that matter) can be seen as an assault on the Georgian body, and dreaming is only one way out. The assault also shaped the need to redefine the Self and the Other.

#### Real and other Others

The position of Ajaria within the Georgian republic has always been somewhat ambivalent. The inhabitants of Ajaria speak the Georgian language and formed part of the Great Georgian kingdom in the thirteenth century, but not for long. In fact, it was the last region to become part of modern Georgia, when in 1878 the Russians defeated the Turks and drove them out of Ajaria. The inhabitants of the region by then had lived under Ottoman rule for three centuries, had adopted Islam and revealed to be more loyal to the Turks than to either the Russians or the Georgians. There is some discomfort in this, especially as Georgian nationalism and the manifestation of Georgian Christianity have been more explicit since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Before turning to the real Others, I will first have to say something of the position of Ajaria and the Ajarians within the republic of Georgia. The point is to make clear how the Ajarians see themselves, as Self and Other are clearly related.

Some people in Tbilisi (the capital) have some doubts regarding the status of Ajarians, and are likely to joke about them. During a short stay in the capital I was told that "people in Ajaria are not real Georgians, they are already halve Turks," and were furthermore described as *Musulmany* or

*Tatary*. In Ajaria on the contrast, Muslims and Christians alike are very explicit concerning their loyalty to the Georgian nation. When I asked Teimur (student from a Muslim family) whether each Ajarian regards himself a Georgian this turned out to be a sensitive topic: "Of course! Everyone considers himself in the first place Georgian and when someone would say that we are Turks or Tatars, that really hurts." He further commented that when Ajaria was incorporated into the Russian empire the Russians called them Tatars, but that this was considered an enormous insult. Teimur remembers an occasion when he returned home from Tbilisi by bus. "When we entered Ajaria a passenger remarked: 'Well ladies and gentlemen, we have arrived in *satataris*' [Tatarstan]. Immediately there was commotion in the bus. Several passengers railed at the man. They shouted 'go back home if you want to call this Tatarstan' and almost threw him out of the bus."

Whereas Ajarians consider themselves first of all Georgian, religion nevertheless remains a sensitive subject. Last year a book appeared with the title "Is it possible to be Muslim and Georgian at the same time?" which is perhaps already telling. Religious and national identities are intimately connected in Georgia, but in Ajaria these appear in an unusual combination. The matter is complicated by the fact that in Batumi the majority of the Ajarians have converted to Christianity, while inhabitants of the rural areas are mostly Muslims. Several authors have observed a steady process of Christianizing which has accelerated in recent years (Mgeladze 1991; Gachechiladze 1995). When talking about religion with Muslims one of the first things that strikes is the defensive attitude. Most Muslims stress that Islam for them is merely family tradition and hardly different from Christianity, for Muslims and Christians alike believe in the same god.

Several students from Muslim families told me that on the one hand they wanted to respect the tradition of their parents and great parents, while on the other hand they did not recognize themselves in their religion. Muslims who live or work in Batumi are repeatedly confronted with the fact that for most compatriots, being Georgian and Georgian history automatically implies being Christian. Malkhaz, a Georgian theologian, told me he thought of Muslim Ajarians as essentially good people but not as real Muslims. According to him they are neither Muslims nor Christians but simply people who believe in God. For him Georgians are religious by nature and cannot live without religion, thus it is quite logical that they converted to Islam when they

were oppressed by the Ottomans. Note however that whereas Muslims are not real Muslims, Christians of course are true Christians.

What is clear is that those who convert have strong relations with the city or come from families in which religion already lost a prominent position. Although on social gatherings and in interviews everybody stresses the meaning of religion, they hardly practice it. The expressed reasons for conversion do always link up with some statements on Georgian nationality, and on the violent nature of Turks and Islam. It is like an obliged part of people's identity, and being Muslim does not fit in easily. In a sense the Ajarians are the other Others within the Georgian context. They do not fit in the neat opposition which runs something like:

Georgian = Christian = Civilized = Rich  
Historical Past

Turkish = Muslim = Barbarous = No  
History

Islam is certainly discomfoting for many Ajarians and this equally applies to their historical legacy. Their being part of the Ottoman empire up to the end of the nineteenth century has to be neutralized. Most Georgian authors therefore stress that the Ajarians never abandoned their native Georgian tongue and avoided direct demographic influence. The following fragment serves as an example:

Ajaria is one of the oldest regions of Georgia. It went through a difficult historical process ... part of the population was totally massacred, while the remaining part, trying to save ones life, adopted Islam. Despite this oppression, the inhabitants of Ajaria preserved their language and culture (Birina 1956:328, translation MP).

Such descriptions are not restricted to popular writing or Soviet publications, but have become common 'knowledge'. One of the favourite subjects of modernday Georgian ethnographers is to look for Christian characteristics that pertained during the Ottoman rule. Mgeladze stresses that the influence of Islam was only marginal: "Despite the three centuries of Turkish rule, the population of Ajaria preserved and developed the typically Georgian forms of life, ethnic selfawareness, and psychology, which still today represent the essential conditions of the Georgian ethnosocial organism" (Mgeladze 1991). In my view, what these people try to do is to

save their own history, to prove that they are as much Georgian as the rest of their compatriots.

National and religious identification is very important for the perception of Self in Ajaria. This becomes also obvious in the treatment of the Other. My acquaintances in Batumi presented Turkey as an entirely different world, one in which people could not be trusted, where women were badly suppressed, and above all, as a world that lacked culture. When I told several students of my intentions to perform research on social and cultural contacts between Georgia and Turkey one of them remarked (without a smile): "In Turkey you will be finished very soon, because Turks don't have a culture, they descended straight from the mountains."

Georgia is often presented as an island in the midst of dangerous Islamic forces. The opening of the border increased interest in national identity and religion in Georgia as a whole. Perhaps the combination with the ambivalent status of Ajaria within Georgia has made this renewed awareness only more pronounced. Gachechiladze recently wrote optimistically that the new interactions between Georgia and Turkey had the result that people got rid of stereotypes such as "cruel Turks with yatagans" and "parasite capitalists" that had been dominant in Soviet propaganda (1995:3). The stories I was told, did not reveal a more balanced depiction of the Other. The old stereotypes perhaps disappeared (if people took them ever serious at all), but new ones are created. The difference is that this time the stereotypes are based on (imagined) experience rather than Soviet propaganda. This is quite obvious on cartoons which were published in the Russian newspaper *Izvestia*. They show the new moral border between Turkey and Georgia, a border that contrasts sombre prostitutes with horny Turkish men, scarcity with affluence and capitalism with corruption. These new moral divisions can not be separated from their context. The new possibilities of travel and the booming of trade form just one side of the picture. They occurred simultaneously with other processes that affected the area. Although trade offered new possibilities, the economy of Georgia as a whole declined, electricity became a scarce good, industries closed and many people lost their jobs. The forms of the stereotypes suggest that the problem is not Turks per se but markets and dislocations of economic changes, which the opening of the border and the appearance of the Other are made to symbolise (compare Verdery 1996:98). It might be precisely the dependence of the Other which is seen as threatening, which reveals the imperfectness of the own society, and endangers the idea of community.



Herzfeld in his book on western bureaucracy suggested that the basic function of stereotypes is to justify and support social and cultural exclusion. They provide nationalist ideology with the means by which it can present itself as a familiar solidarity, and gives local actors the idea that they defend cultural values (Herzfeld 1992:73). By using stereotypes people both in Ajaria and Turkey make the Other recognizable as dangerous, barbarous, or pitiable. In doing so, both sides deny each others history. Turks tend to reduce the Georgian historical legacy to 'barbaric' communism, which could only produce excesses of sex and alcohol and severe poverty. Georgians likewise deny Turkish history by stating that they lack culture: "they walked down from the mountains", as one informant told me. What is the use of this denying of the Other? I agree with Sahlins who concludes that national identity is socially constructed in a continuous process of defining 'land' and 'enemy' as an extension of maintaining boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. (Sahlins 1989:270). These identities are based on an oppositional structure and do not have to correspond with any objective cultural differentiation but only with the subjective experience of difference. Sahlins added:

"national identity, like ethnic or communal identity, is contingent and relational: it is defined by the social or territorial boundaries drawn to distinguish the collective self and its implicit negation, the other" (Sahlins 1989:271).

Mary Douglas discussion of the 'wounded body' is useful here. She applies the idea of the human body as metaphor for a bounded social system (1966:115). The opening of the border likewise, can be compared with an attack on a body, with a wound that opens the way for polluting influences. The metaphor is even in a strict sense applicable to the region, for on both sides the opening of the border is seen as the cause of new diseases. In Turkey, Georgian and Russian women (prostitutes) are held responsible for sexual transmitted diseases (Hann & BellérHann 1998). In Ajaria it is the evil nature of Turkish products that would cause diseases as we have seen in the previous part. As Douglas made clear, the threats are not only external. To keep talking in metaphors, a wound does not only increase the risk of being infected, but also of loosing blood. This is most obvious concerning the anxiety with which Georgian women have to remain pure. When I asked some students whether they had been abroad they denied, but added that they hoped to be able to go to Europe. To my next question

whether they had been to Turkey I was told by one of the girls:

No of course not, I don't need to go there [...] When you arrive [in Turkey] they immediately think that you are like those [prostitutes]. And when you come back people will talk about your trip to Turkey. Did you know we often toast to all women and girls who never went to Turkey, it is true, for a woman it is better not to go there.

The opening of the border has threatened familiar spaces by introducing strange and therefore dangerous elements. These elements have to be neutralized by defining the Self. This creates new distinctions that were formerly considered less important. While it is obvious for both governments that the opening of the border brings new economic possibilities, the local population sees quite different processes, and accordingly create their moral frontier. The border then shows how people see themselves and how they define the Other. These imagined borders are related to political and economic developments and to the history of the region. The different reactions are provoked by real processes, and reflect the influences these processes had on the lives of the people involved. Nevertheless, changing economic and political circumstances can only partly account for the confrontations. The stories, which have many characteristics of myths or collective fantasies become realities of their own. These may not contribute to 'objective' knowledge of the area, but they certainly fulfil important functions and have very real effects.

### Looking through the Curtain

In Batumi, the opening of the borders coincided with rigorous changes in social and economic life. Some people have profited from these changes but for most people it only meant misery. In the Soviet period, trade was strongly focused towards Russia. Economic relations with this country are now under pressure, and Georgia is directing its attention more and more to the West. In this respect the relation with Turkey is of central importance. Possibilities of trade and investments can decide the future of the region, but at the same time the new contacts with Turkey and Turks are very sensitive for the cultural and national identity of the Ajarians. It is only with these considerations in mind that we can assess the meaning of the border opening.

So how must the new contacts be interpreted? Most people had until recently only a very limited knowledge about what was out there on



the other side. This situation radically changed since the border was opened. It resulted in an increased flow of images, commodities and people. The stereotypes nonetheless persist in modified shape. People give their own interpretations of the forces that are affecting their society and strive to organise new experiences into a coherent vision. Although the images about the Other turn out to disagree with reality, they seem to become even sharper in the process. The Other is endowed with values by which present conditions can be understood and by which the Self can be defined as positive.

In a discussion on trader tourism between Bulgaria and Turkey, Konstantinov (1996) argues that while capitalism was for a long time perceived as the final "save haven", this image is now replaced by the realities of insecurity, inferiority, immorality of the trade route itself. The demise of the Iron Curtain has faced Ajarians with the same realities, but they see themselves as still traveling to the final "save haven." They do not have to abandon their goal and their fantasies, for they can blame the Turks for disturbances that take place. The Iron Curtain is opened, but the laces still obscure the view.

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