

Panel: Minority Identity in Georgia

*Who are the Mingrelians? Language, Identity and
Politics in Western Georgia*

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1. Introduction

That new states in the former socialist world have been reasserting nationalizing agendas is already a well-researched and widely debated phenomenon. This process is not limited, however, to titular groups which previously enjoyed a degree of autonomy. Other – and not necessarily smaller - groups bearing more locally or regionally connoted identities have also been profoundly affected by the so-called new ‘tribalism’. This may in part be explained by new possibilities for debate due to the removal of Soviet-era constraints, which allowed only for officially recognized identities, and partly as a reaction to the new titular discourses of nation-building.

This paper deals with the case of the Mingrelians, a group inhabiting the western province of Mingrelia in Georgia, and formerly also part of the disputed territory of Abkhazia. In recent years the identity of the Mingrelians, and the ‘correct’ status for their most obvious distinguishing trait, the Mingrelian language, has become the subject of an increasingly wide debate. Crucially this debate is not entirely new, but reminiscent of similar debates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But for the first time, a group of Mingrelian intellectuals are actively and openly pursuing what they see as the recovery of their own cultural heritage as Mingrelians. This has engendered a vigorous renewed controversy over how Georgian and Mingrelian identities, and the relationship between them, are to be imagined. In the post-Soviet context of secessionist conflict in Georgia, it is not difficult to see why there should be extreme reluctance, particularly in the centre, to concede or encourage the expression of further identities beyond the level of the nation. Especially for Georgian understandings of the conflict in Abkhazia, and the Georgian claim *to* Abkhazia, any notion of Mingrelian separateness is intolerable. In this sense the Mingrelians are in a not dissimilar situation to their closest linguistic relatives, the Lazi in Turkey, in that separatist conflict elsewhere in the state imposes severe constraints on the open expression of any degree of cultural individuality.¹ Indeed my approach here owes much to the approach taken by

¹ I use the often negatively connoted term ‘separatist’ with reservations. Here I refer to conflicts that are widely perceived to be related to separate political group identities.

anthropologists dealing with similar questions in the Lazi case (Bellér-Hann 1995; Hann 1997).

My purpose in this paper is twofold. Firstly I seek to identify the different sources constituting a Mingrelian identity and the different frames of reference to which they apply. I hope to demonstrate that these are varied and in some senses in conflict with one another. Secondly this paper will present a survey of the different modern attempts to construct Mingrelian identity, and analyse their approach in relation to the sources of identity available. I will then situate these constructions of Mingrelian identity in their political context. Many of the views to be examined here would be rejected out of hand by my Georgian colleagues as 'unscientific'. My approach differs somewhat in that I see folk and popular beliefs as an important level of subjective reality constitutive of the distinctions and categorical orders which make up 'identity', and as such they merit our serious attention. I stress that I am not so much concerned with the objective qualities of this or that language or group, as in what beliefs are being promoted about language and identity and what role those beliefs are playing in the new cultural politics of nation-building in Georgia. This research is based on a survey of relevant academic and media sources in Georgia, and ethnographic interviews carried out on successive visits to the field between June 1999 and June 2000.

2. Basic Data

The Mingrelians are a group compactly settled in the western province of Mingrelia, situated on the Black Sea coast. Prior to the conflict in Abkhazia, Mingrelians made up the overwhelming majority of the Georgian population there, particularly in Abkhazia's southernmost Gali district. Under its historical name of Samurzaq'ano, Gali is regarded by Mingrelians as forming an integral part of Mingrelia. The Mingrelians of Abkhazia are now mostly displaced to other parts of Georgia, most significantly the Zugdidi district in Mingrelia which borders Abkhazia, and the capital Tbilisi.

The Mingrelians' most obvious distinguishing trait is the Mingrelian language. Mingrelian is an unwritten language belonging to the indigenous Kartvelian language

family, consisting of two other unwritten languages, Lazuri, spoken in north-east Turkey, and Svan, spoken in the mountainous region of Svaneti in Georgia, and Georgian, the national language of the Georgian state. Some linguists refer to Mingrelian and Lazuri, which are the only two mutually intelligible Kartvelian languages, as dialects of a single Zan language. Zan, however, had already split into Mingrelian and Lazuri variants by early modern times and it is not customary to speak of a unified Zan language today. No reliable figures for the number of Mingrelian-speakers exist, but it is thought to be in the region of between 400,000 and 500,000, a not insubstantial number in a total population of between 4-5 million.² Most Mingrelians use Georgian as their literary language. Many Mingrelians from Abkhazia, however, having received their education in Russian-language schools, use Russian as their literary language, and have only a poor or passive knowledge of Georgian. With insignificant exceptions, no monoglot Mingrelians remain. In Mingrelia written Mingrelian, using the Georgian script, is limited to the very small-scale and sporadic publishing of folk-texts. All literature, press and educational activities are carried out in Georgian. Observations in the field reveal, however, that Mingrelian may be spoken in virtually any other social context, including in many cases the domain of work. Thus although the linguistic situation may broadly correspond to that described by the term diglossia, the distinction between Georgian and Mingrelian may be less schematic than a diglossic high/low distinction implies. Russian media, both printed and broadcast, are also widely available, and code-switching into Russian is much more common than in other parts of Georgia.

3. Historical Outline

I now turn to a brief historical outline of the region. Although Mingrelia's boundaries may have fluctuated considerably over time, the region has a long and illustrious history as an independent political unit. Georgian historians link the region to the Colchis of classical Greek sources, known as Egrisi in indigenous sources; Colchis-Egrisi, however,

² In the context of obsolete census data forming the basis for electoral rolls in the parliamentary and presidential elections of 1999-2000, the demography of Georgia is a politically fraught subject. Official sources put the population of Georgia in 1999 at 5,444,700 (using 1993 data for Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Cxinvali region). Independent research suggests that emigration has been far more significant than official sources allow for., and estimates the total population for the same year to be in the region of

covered a much larger territory than today's Mingrelia (Beradze 1999, Mak'alatia 1941). In the third century B.C. Colchis-Egrisi was superseded in terms of local influence by its eastern neighbour Iberia, an event viewed in Georgian historiography as the first unification of Georgia (Topchishvili 1999). After subsequent fragmentation and suzerainty under the kingdom of Pontus, the kingdom of Lazica emerged as a local kingdom along the Black Sea coast. For centuries balanced between Byzantine and Persian empires, Lazica was not incorporated into either. Although the Black Sea coast was initially exposed to Christianity much earlier Lazica did not receive Christianity fully until the sixth century, some two hundred years after the conversion of its eastern neighbour Iberia. Sustained unification with a wider unit did not occur until a new unification of the western kingdom of Abkhazeti in the eighth century, leading eventually to the establishment of the united Bagratid Georgian kingdom in 1008. Part of the former territories of Colchis and Lazica formed one of the kingdom's provinces, known as Odishi. Although a decentralized state politically (Suny 1989, 33), it was unified by the flowering of a high culture based on the Georgian language, both as a *lingua sacra* and a literary medium.

Following the demise of the Georgian kingdom, the prolonged decline of royal power was particularly marked in the province of Odishi. Royal control over western Georgia as a whole was lost in the fifteenth century, and for the next four hundred years Odishi existed as a more or less independent principality. Indeed by the seventeenth century Odishi was the dominant local power in political terms, subjugating the surrounding principalities and entertaining independent relations with Russia. Ottoman suzerainty over the region for much of this period may have been crippling in economic terms, but in cultural terms no attempt was made to convert the Mingrelians to Islam. Throughout its history the rulers of Odishi were always drawn culturally towards their eastern political rivals, forming part of a Georgian cultural system that transcended the often internecine political conflicts between its constituent parts (Antelava 1999). One can only conjecture that this is in part due to their common religious affiliation, and also to

4,110,000. See State Department for Statistics of Georgia (1999) and C'uladze and Badurashvili (1999) for these contrasting figures.

the shared memory of mediaeval and genetic unity. The distribution of this culture within Odishi was reflective of social stratification: all worshipped in Georgian, but speaking and writing Georgian was limited to feudal and ecclesiastical elites. The vast majority of the population spoke in Mingrelian. In the eighteenth century increased Ottoman-Iranian pressure forced the disparate principalities of the South Caucasus to seek protection from Russia. This led to Odishi's final incorporation into the Russian empire in 1803. From this historical outline we see then that the periods during which Mingrelia has formed part of a wider Georgian state have been relatively brief.

A politics of Georgian ethnic identity can really be dated only to the late nineteenth century, when the increased involvement of the Russian state in cataloguing information about its population resulted in an increasingly pervasive classification of languages and groups. Russian linguists and ethnographers defined the Mingrelians as a separate *natsional'nost'* on the basis of language, and unsuccessfully attempted to introduce a written standard and liturgy in Mingrelian (Shuxardo 1899). Georgian intellectuals vigorously condemned these attempts to 'divide and rule' as they saw it, and portrayed Mingrelian as either a dialect of Georgian or the 'Old Georgian' language (Gogebashvili 1991[1902]). A subsequent spurt of local interest in Mingrelian ethnography during Georgia's independence between 1918 and 1921 was widely condemned as separatism by the Georgian intelligentsia (Beridze 1920). Debate over the relatedness or otherwise of the Mingrelians to the Georgians continued into the early Soviet period. In the 1920s, Mingrelians, along with Svans, Laz and Ajarians, were differentiated from Georgians using the ethnographically connoted term *narodnost'*. These categories all featured in the 1926 census. There was also some local support for a Mingrelian autonomy, centred around local party secretary Isak'i Zhvania, although this was vehemently opposed by other intellectuals of Mingrelian origin.

After that time the modernizing discourse of communism re-evaluated many former *narodnosti*, which became negatively connoted as traditional and backward identities which had to be assimilated by more developed socialist nations. Mingrelian, along with Svan, Laz and Ajarian, was deleted as a census category and subsumed within the

Georgian national category for all censuses thereafter. Concessions were made, however, in view of the practical difficulties of disseminating party ideology to a local population that did not speak Georgian (Zhvania 1930). These took the form of a limited Mingrelian press which was gradually phased out and replaced by Georgian. Up to the late 1930s, the integrative role commonly assumed of the institutions of modernity was thus rather ambiguous: successive censuses and the arrival of literacy as a mass phenomenon had in effect encouraged the population in Mingrelia to think of itself in terms of a Mingrelian linguistic identity. From the 1930s, however, there was a certain congruence between the position of the Georgian intelligentsia, which saw Georgian culture as fulfilling a civilizing mission for the Mingrelian peasantry, and communist ideology, which now related ethnic identities to titular ‘developed nations’ with institutionalised high cultures. From this time Mingrelian became a taboo subject even within the specialized realms of linguistics and ethnography and in public discourse came to be regarded as a dialect of Georgian. Many informants attest to a sense of shame and embarrassment at speaking Mingrelian outside of Mingrelia during the Soviet period, above all in Tbilisi. However, it should be emphasised that the 1930s incorporation of the Mingrelians was conceptual rather than practical. Despite its official ‘disappearance’, Mingrelian continued, as it does to this day, to be spoken as the everyday language of the populations of Mingrelia and Mingrelian-speaking Abkhazia.

4. Sources of Mingrelian Identity

I would now like to examine the ways in which a schematic Georgian/Mingrelian contrast obscures the different sources of identity and frames of reference associated with the category *Mingrelian*.

Mingrelian as a social identity

In a broader historical perspective a contrast between these categories conceals a pattern of stratification and difference related to the distribution of cultures across *social strata* rather than ethnic groups. Mingrelia possessed many of the attributes of Gellner’s model of the pre-modern agro-literate society, where elites accentuate and preserve cultural differences between themselves and the rest of society (Gellner 1983). In this model we

find an explanation of the cultural division of labour between Georgian and Mingrelian as high and low cultures respectively in the form of diglossia. The association of these categories with possibly distinct *ethnic* or group identities is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating only to the late nineteenth century. It is consequently strongly associated with Russian and Soviet rule. Earlier observers used the term *margali*, ‘a Mingrelian’, as being synonymous with ‘peasant’, a point to which we shall return below. This association continues to some extent today in the continued dissociation of the Mingrelian language with ‘high culture’, although there is no sense in which Mingrelianness is associated with a significant wide social stratification of this kind today (the nexus between Mingrelianness and refugee status is a specific exception to this, to which I shall return below).³

Language

In terms of ‘objective’ characteristics that we might call ethnic and that might allow us to see the Mingrelians as a distinct group, the most obvious is the Mingrelian language. Western linguists do indeed often categorise the Mingrelians as a separate group on this basis. This also features strongly in subjective perceptions - the belief that a Mingrelian should speak the language is strong, otherwise she is not a ‘proper’ Mingrelian. For most Georgians (including many Mingrelians), however, differentiating between Georgians and Mingrelians represents an artificial and politically motivated fragmentation of a homogeneous Georgian nation, equated with Russian interference. What most non-Mingrelian Georgians are not aware of, however, is that a different principle applies in Mingrelian compared to Georgian in the sub-division of identities below the level of the nation. In Georgian, *megreli* is the term used to render ‘a Mingrelian’, and is equivalent to other denominators of regional identities, such as *imereli*, someone from the Imereti region or *ach’areli*, someone from the region of Ach’ara. In general usage these terms correspond to a more local level of identity than the superordinate ethnonym for Georgians, *kartveli*. In Mingrelian, however, a linguistic principle is used to distinguish between the terms *margali*, ‘a Mingrelian’, *shoni*, ‘a Svan’, and *kortu*, the term applied to

³ Interestingly some folk etymologies of *margali* in Mingrelia today continue to link the term to meanings associated with the earth, through the root *-rg-*, ‘to plant’.

all other Georgians who speak Georgian as their first-learned language. In Mingrelian, then, Mingrelians are *not* included in the category *kortu*, which lacks the superordinate sense of *kartveli* in Georgian. This sometimes causes confusion for Mingrelians themselves, especially when the Georgian terminology is being used with Mingrelian meanings. This often leads to self-correcting statements intended to avoid the implication that a *megreli* is not a *kartveli*. One should thus be aware of these differences in the systems of naming groups – in Mingrelian the *margali/kortu* distinction has a specific linguistic content.

Events of recent years have served to heighten the role of language in Mingrelian self-identification. Firstly, awareness of the Lazuri-speaking population in north-eastern Turkey, has increased as a result of the opening of the Georgian-Turkish border. Mingrelians commonly see themselves as forming part of a wider speech community, which in terms of its numbers is generally wildly over-exaggerated. In the field one hears popular estimates of the number of Lazi as high as 3 million, though the likely figure is unlikely to exceed 250,000 (Bellér-Hann 1995). The Lazi are popularly regarded as ‘ethnic kin’, to the extent that Mingrelians will sometimes even refer to themselves as *lazebi*, ‘Laz’.⁴ This is significant for several reasons. Firstly the existence of ‘Mingrelian-speakers’ beyond Georgia’s borders has challenged the otherwise widespread view amongst Mingrelians that Mingrelian is of no practical use outside of Mingrelia. Since Turkey is Georgia’s principal trading partner, the Lazuri-Mingrelian connection affords Mingrelian a new validity in the minds of its speakers.⁵ Secondly it has boosted the specifically linguistic content in Mingrelian self-identification, since the focus is on language, which unites the Mingrelians with the Lazi, rather than religion, which differentiates them. Lastly the Lazi are manifestly *not* seen as Georgians or as

⁴ Bellér-Hann distinguishes between the categories Laz and Lazi (Bellér-Hann 1995). The former in the Turkish context refers to a wider regional identity associated with the north-eastern Black Sea coast. The former refers to a sub-group within the Laz category, the Lazuri speech community. In the Georgian context there is less ground for confusion. Laz here refers unequivocally to Lazuri-speakers, of which there are very few actually resident in Georgia. They are to be found in some villages in Mingrelia, and in the villages between Sarpi on the Turkish border and the capital of Ach’ara, Batumi.

⁵ A further challenge to Mingrelian’s low practical value has been the requirement by one of Zugdidi’s most visible employers, the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), that its local staff speak Mingrelian as well as Georgian.

forming part of the Georgian nation, which thus calls into question the basis for the Mingrelians' own relatedness to both groups.

Secondly as a result of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict, there has been a dramatic shift in Mingrelia in the balance between Georgian and Mingrelian in favour of the latter. Most informants in Zugdidi attest to the gradual diminishing of the use of Mingrelian in the town in the late Soviet period. Following the conflict, according to official Georgian and international sources between 110,000 – 120,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) are now living in Mingrelia, the vast majority of whom are Mingrelians. Many of these Mingrelians, having grown up in the Mingrelian and Russian-speaking milieu of Abkhazia have a limited knowledge of Georgian. Hence it is the Mingrelian language which most obviously unites these two populations. Many in Zugdidi attest to a Mingrelianisation of the town's linguistic space as a result of the arrival of the displaced population. This process carries its own dynamics of perception. As a result of a strong association between the categories IDP, Mingrelian, and Mingrelian/Russian speaker, Mingrelian is thus newly associated with a rather negative social category (IDP). This distinction is especially salient in Tbilisi, but it is also present in Mingrelia itself. Many in Zugdidi associate Mingrelian speech with the low-status domains of the street and bazaar as a result of the influx of IDPs. I therefore do not see this as a Georgian-Mingrelian stratification since it applies even within Mingrelia.

These are important factors, then, in increasing the salience of language in Mingrelian self-identification in recent years.⁶ It should be noted, however, that Mingrelians do not refer to Mingrelian as their mother tongue (*deda ena*), a status unequivocally reserved for Georgian. This even applies to IDPs with poor knowledge of Georgian. Mingrelian by contrast is referred to as a *k'utxuri* ('regional', 'local'), *saurt'ierito* ('for informal communication') or *salap'arak'o* ('oral', 'for speaking') language. It is also frequently

⁶ One aspect of this increased awareness of Mingrelian, and an interesting if limited example of Mingrelian's printed use, is the selection of Mingrelian words as company names. An admittedly cursory and rather chaotic examination of the company registration records in the Zugdidi Mayoralty revealed at least 30 companies registered using Mingrelian words for their names. I am grateful to Abesalom T'ughushi for pointing this out to me.

referred to in a sentimental register as the Mingrelians' *ak'vnis ena*, 'language of the cradle'.

The importance of Mingrelian should not, however, obscure the equally important role of Georgian in Mingrelian identity. All Mingrelians from Mingrelia itself (as opposed to Abkhazia) receive their education and worship in Georgian. A common belief in Mingrelia is that the purest Georgian is spoken by Mingrelians precisely because it is a language which they learn subsequent to the acquisition of Mingrelian. Georgian is thus a learnt or studied language (*shesc'avlili ena*) for Mingrelians. It was often pointed out to me that it is precisely because Georgian and Mingrelian are different languages that the latter does not interfere with the former, unlike in other areas of Georgia, thus accounting for the correctitude with which it is spoken in Mingrelia. It should also be noted, however, that for many Russian-literate Mingrelians formerly living in Abkhazia Georgian was of little practical relevance.

Descent

In terms of 'objective' characteristics, being a Mingrelian is not exclusively linked to language. Mingrelianness is also conferred by descent in the form of the family name (*gvari*) (Vamling 2000). The *gvari* is seen as an important denominator of regional origin in Georgia and all those with a surname ending in *-ava*, *-ia*, or *-ua*, are counted as Mingrelians. This also applies to those born elsewhere in Georgia and who perhaps have never even been to Mingrelia. Consequently there is a not insubstantial number of Mingrelians counted in this way who do not have facility in the language; the overall Mingrelian descent-group, therefore, and the Mingrelian speech community are not co-extensive. This raises a problem for any linguacentric view of Mingrelian identity.

Mingrelianness as an identity of descent is suggestive of a sort of tribal affiliation. It is not usual, however, to apply a tribal concept in the Georgian context, where it has a more limited recognition than, for example, in Central Asia. This is largely because of the generally very early ethnogenesis claimed in official discourse for the Georgian nation (ranging between the third century B.C. to the twelfth century A.D.). Inasmuch as tribe

and nation are seen as opposed categories, the former is not seen as relevant for contemporary reality. Yet it is in tribal form that a Mingrelian identity is recognized in official Georgian historiography for what is seen as ‘pre-national’ history. According to the Georgian historical tradition that identifies the Georgians as the descendants of Noah via his son Japhet, Egros was one of the eight heroic sons of Targamos, descended from Japhet (Gordeziani 1993, 7-8). Egros’ name is closely related to the indigenous term for Colchis, Egrisi, itself the root for the Georgian and Mingrelian words *megreli* and *margali*, ‘a Mingrelian’. Georgian foundation myths accord a special significance to the Colchians as one of the founding partners of Georgian unity (the other being the Iberians), which Georgian historians commonly date to around 300 B.C. (Gordeziani 1993, 18). The Mingrelians are thus recognized in historical sources as a legitimate tribal identity in antiquity and as Colchians in Georgian foundation myths. In popular discourse in Mingrelia the mythic figures of Aietes and Medea figure strongly as metaphors for the longevity of the Mingrelians through their ‘Colchian ancestry’.

While these myths form an active part of Mingrelians’ self-perception today, a tribal aspect to Mingrelian identity seems to be limited very much to the realm of prehistoric myth. Conversations with Mingrelians reveal that a self-categorisation as a tribe (*t’omi*) emerges only in this context. Mingrelians today are more likely to refer to themselves using the Soviet idiom of *etnos* rather than the possibly more negatively connoted Georgian term *t’omi*. Furthermore other aspects of a tribal belief system, such as knowledge of genealogies and sub-distinctions associated with particular territories, are not present. But while a tribal content in this sense is absent, two points are worth drawing out. First, Mingrelianness through the family name does have a strong component of heredity, which is correspondingly resistant to complete disappearance.⁷ Second, Georgian foundation myths explicitly recognize the heterogeneity between the different components establishing the Georgian nation. There is thus a congruence here

⁷ I would like to stress that this does *not* mean that I am talking about the Mingrelians as if they *were* a racial group. I am merely arguing that a descent-based conception of groupness forms one component of membership in the Mingrelian group. Thus individuals who from families who have for generations lived in Tbilisi, and who may never have set foot in Mingrelia, but who bear Mingrelian family names will refer to themselves as having Mingrelian ancestry.

between official and popular discourse in the recognition of a heterogeneous basis for the Georgian nation.

Orthodoxy

As we have seen Lazica officially adopted Christianity in the sixth century, although early Christian missions were present along the coast a long time before that. Unlike their neighbours, the Abkhaz, however, the Mingrelians have never had a separate ecclesiastical identity.⁸ Their confessional identity as Orthodox thus unites them unequivocally with the Georgians. Although religion suffered curtailment in Mingrelia as elsewhere during the Soviet period, discussions with priests in Zugdidi reveal a ‘boom’ in religious worship in post-Soviet Mingrelia. The exaggerated adherence to certain rituals, particularly concerning public demonstrations of grief and other manifestations of the ‘cult of the dead’, are seen as specifically Mingrelian traits, both in Mingrelia and elsewhere in Georgia. Religion, therefore, situates the Mingrelians within a centuries-old common Georgian Orthodox tradition, and as their current and historical language of worship, links them to Georgian.

Mingrelian as a regional identity

The category Mingrelian also denotes a *regional* identity that is co-equivalent in its frame of reference (regional peculiarities in cuisine, folklore and enactments of traditions associated with a wider Georgian national culture) to other regional identities in Georgia, such as Imeretian, K’axetian or Rach’an. These regional identities are widely celebrated in Georgian humour. At this level Mingrelians are associated with characteristics of cunning, being given to exaggerated generosity and display and also a rural backwardness. As a result of the displacement of population from Abkhazia Mingrelians are also strongly associated especially in Tbilisi with market trade and the negative aspects of capitalism, i.e. profit-seeking dishonesty. Amongst Mingrelians themselves this stereotype is commonly transformed into positively connoted values of wiliness and ‘working the system’. What is significant is that these stereotypes only make sense

within an overall framework situating Mingrelians as a local variant in a wider system of Georgian national values. Indeed it is precisely the Mingrelian exaggeration of virtues recognized as Georgian that constitutes an important element in the way Mingrelians represent themselves to outsiders. If Georgians are hospitable, Mingrelians are hospitable to a fault, if Georgians are a devout people, then Mingrelians are especially so and so on. It is this belief which lies behind the very common joke in Mingrelia, usually uttered in Russian, ‘*Mingrelets – vyshchiy sort gruzin*’.

This regional level of identity is also actively associated with differences in the ethnographic sphere. Certain historical traditions, such as milk-brotherhood or eating at the long, low table known as the *tabak’i*, are closely identified with Mingrelia as specifically Mingrelian traditions. These traditions died out at the beginning of the twentieth century, and as traditions relating to the lives of great-grandfathers and mothers, form an important part of collective familial memory. Other traditions, such as the preparation of regional specialities such as *ghomi*, are very much alive and well. Again these distinctions derive their meaning as variants within a common framework of Georgian customs and ethnography.

Sources of Internal Difference

Finally, a simple Georgian/Mingrelian contrast obscures the extent to which Mingrelians are themselves internally differentiated. I have already alluded to the distinction between the descent group and the speech community. In linguistic terms Mingrelian is itself divided into two principal dialects, the Zugdidi and Senaki dialects. These are not sufficiently differentiated, however, as to present problems of mutual comprehension. Conversations with informants revealed, however, that perceptions of a hierarchy of prestige between the different dialects of Mingrelian also exist. One old Mingrelian woman from Mart’vili told me that she stopped speaking Mingrelian in favour of Georgian when she moved to Zugdidi because her dialect in Mingrelian was a source of constant amusement to the speakers of the Zugdidi dialect. This suggests that even

⁸ In Abkhazia Greek was retained for longer than elsewhere along the Black Sea coast as the language of worship. An autocephalous church was established in Abkhazia in 750, which Abkhazians today see as

amongst Mingrelian speakers a system of differentiation applies, which calls into question the notion of a homogeneous Mingrelian speech community.

Also significant is the divide between those who use Russian as their literary medium and those who use Georgian. Since the vast majority of the former are composed of the internally displaced from Abkhazia, this distinction also has a regional flavour, ‘russophone’ Mingrelians being mainly associated with Gali region. Conversations with IDPs from Abkhazia reveal that the Russian/Georgian-speaking divide amongst Mingrelians also has an element of prestige associated with it. Association with the metropolitan culture for Russian-speaking Mingrelians provided a sense of higher prestige and access to a wider world not available to non-Russian speakers. These IDPs are now faced with the dilemma of retaining a Russian-speaking identity and thereby remaining stigmatized as ‘russified Georgians’, or acculturating into a less prestigious Georgian-speaking identity.⁹ This stigma is reportedly more strongly felt outside of Mingrelia itself.

These internal distinctions suggest the artificiality of viewing the Mingrelians as a ‘natural’ or self-evidently cohesive group. Yet it is undeniable that over the last few years larger political events have served to de-emphasise the internal Georgian/Russian-speaking axis amongst Mingrelians, and to emphasise their cohesiveness as Mingrelian-speakers.

Conclusions

I hope I have indicated the extent to which the category *Mingrelian* is imbued with multiple meanings which take their meaning from different frames of reference – social, ethnic, historical, regional, genetic – and thus why there might be confusion and disagreement over what sort of category it is in relation to the national category *Georgian*. Clearly privileging language leads to a differentiation of Mingrelians from other Georgians and the suggestion that *Georgian* and *Mingrelian* are co-equivalent

their ‘own’ national church. See R. Clogg (1999).

categorical identities. Privileging regional customs or religion or descent, however, situates the Mingrelians within a common Georgian frame of reference. One's disciplinary approach to the issue seems to have an important bearing on what one's view of the Mingrelians' 'true identity' actually is. It is precisely in the selective appropriation of sources for identity that competing visions have their basis. I would now like to examine the three positions which have made different contributions to this debate in more detail.

5. The Centre View: Mingrelian and the Dominant Ideology of Georgian Nationalism

What I call the centre view derives from the values of Georgian nationalist ideology. In calling it the centre view I do not have a strictly geographic meaning in mind; rather I have in mind the sense in which this discourse arrogates the qualities of a centrist orthodoxy, normalcy and rationality to itself. In analyzing it I have relied on the works of Georgian linguists and historians, the Georgian press and conversations with Georgian intellectuals. I emphasise, however, the extent to which this view informs attitudes on this subject in wider society.

The basic premise of the centre view is that Georgia is a nation-state, the state of and for the Georgian nation. The basis for defining membership in the Georgian nation is strongly (though not exclusively) ethnocultural and has its strongest defining characteristic in the Georgian language. The adoption of Georgian as the national literary language plays a vital role in conceptualizing the origins of the Georgian nation in this view, according to which the Georgian nation came into being as a result of the tribal unity unifying Colchis with Iberia and the selection of Georgian as an official language in 284 B.C. (Gordeziani 1993; Topch'ishvili 1998). This foundation myth thus establishes the unity of Colchis with Iberia and links it explicitly to the writing down of Georgian

⁹ It is worth recalling here the Georgian term commonly used to describe any Georgian who has 'lost', i.e. does not have, full facility in the Georgian language, *gadagyvarebuli* ('degenerate').

and its adoption as a ‘national state language’.¹⁰ In the treatment of this subject by the prominent Georgian academic T’ariel Put’k’aradze, Director of Kutaisi University’s Dialectological Institute, Mingrelian’s subordinate status is already assumed for this period: although the multilingualism of the Georgian kings of this time was proverbial, Put’k’aradze emphasizes that Mingrelian was *not* listed by contemporary chroniclers as one of the six languages they were expected to know (Put’k’aradze 2000).¹¹ Mingrelian and Georgian are thus differentiated as having played different roles already in antiquity. The Georgian language was subsequently central to the undeniably remarkable civilizational achievements of the mediaeval Georgian kingdom. But even following its demise, centuries of political disunity did not compromise the cultural integrity of the nation. If in other parts of Europe linguistic diversity resulted in the formation of separate but closely related nations, this did not happen in Georgia. I now quote Aleksandre Oniani, a well-known Georgian linguist:

“Consciousness of common ancestry and of spiritual and genetic relatedness never weakened amongst the Georgian people and for this reason it preserved a centuries-long tradition of national-state unity unruptured to this day. In this sense the Georgian nation is composed precisely of the unity of the Kartvelian language speakers. This was in large part due to the fact that Georgian was always the natural (and not imposed) general-popular language, the language of science and culture and the only literary language. This is the great burden which alone of the Kartvelian languages history entrusted to Georgian, and because of which Georgian is the general-popular national language of all Georgia and the buttress of the Georgian’s people’s unity” (Oniani 1998, 222).

¹⁰ It is difficult to imagine what adopting a language as an ‘official state language’ might have meant in practical terms in this period of history. What seems to be significant is the inference of continuity with the modern period.

¹¹ According to the Georgian chronicles *kartlis cxovreba*, the Georgian kings were expected to speak Armenian, Xazar, Syrian, Hebrew, Greek and Georgian. Although this was stipulated specifically for the eastern kingdom of Kartli, Georgian scholars generally include western Georgia as having fallen under the same conditions. I am grateful to Professor George Hewitt for pointing this out to me.

This interpretation of the role of Georgian in Georgian national history lays the basis for the current view in the academic establishment on the relationship between Georgian and Mingrelian. This entails a redefinition of Mingrelian as something less than a language in the same sense as Georgian. The basic argument here is that while Mingrelian may be a separate language in the linguistic sense, in *sociolinguistic* terms it is a functional equivalent of a dialect of Georgian (Jorbenadze 1991; Oniani 1998). It should thus be seen as a code rather than a language, corresponding to particularistic, communal and intimate spheres as opposed to the universalistic, context-free and rational values associated with Georgian. Redefining Mingrelian as a dialect divests the notion of a separate Mingrelian group of its principal objective distinguishing feature, and implies that Mingrelian should have the status of any other Georgian dialect. It should therefore be studied as a sociolinguistic phenomenon but not accorded any form of cultural status, since it does not represent anything external to Georgian culture. In this view then, Mingrelians are unequivocally defined as Georgians.

The sociolinguistic theory is complemented with a strong emphasis on the social origins of the category Mingrelian. In this view the term *margali*, ‘Mingrelian’, was used to denote ‘peasant’, being synonymous with the Georgian words *glexi* or *q’azaxi* meaning peasant or villager. According to Put’k’aradze, in the Mingrelian language this meaning of *margali* was historically linked to and contrasted with the word *zhinoskua*, meaning ‘high-born’, equivalent to the Georgian word *aznauri* (‘noble’) (Put’karadze 2000). Social distinction was nevertheless linked to linguistic hierarchy: a *margali* was not only a peasant but someone who spoke ‘as they speak in the village’ (*soplurad*), while a *zhinoskua* could speak in the literary Georgian language. Put’k’aradze suggests that it was the demise of the *zhinoskua* following the Russian Revolution that engendered the semantic transformation of the term *margali* from denoting a social class to denoting ethnic particularity, and in his view, the illusion of ethnic distinctiveness. In this view, then, Mingrelian is correctly read as a social category, whose linguistic particularity derives from social and not ethnic difference. There is historical evidence to support this view. Put’k’aradze is quite right to emphasise the link between Russian influence and the officially endorsed ethnic stratification of the population in Mingrelia. There is a marked

change between the observations of pre-nineteenth century Georgian writers and foreign Kartvelologists of the early nineteenth century and Russian observers later in the century. If the former saw Mingrelian as a ‘distorted Georgian’ or dialect of Georgian (Vaxushti 1842; Brosset 1849; Klapproth 1829), the latter rationalized linguistic difference in terms of the co-existence of two different groups (Borozdin 1885).

This approach is tied to a strong belief within the research community of linguists in Georgia, that languages and dialects may be objectively defined and differentiated. As a non-linguist I do not have the expertise to enter into a discussion of the relative merits or feasibility of such an exercise. However, I will observe that this socio-linguistically orientated approach in its focus on the variety of speech forms contrasts with a more political approach, which focuses on the process whereby particular varieties, through interaction with political, social and economic phenomena, come to be named and bounded as individuated cultural artefacts. Languages in this perspective are “social facts, named and counted” (Laitin 1992, 7). My fieldwork indicates that it is the latter perspective which captures better speakers’ own belief systems. I have yet to meet a Mingrelian who, whatever else they might think about the language, believes that Mingrelian is a dialect of Georgian. Mingrelian’s non-intelligibility with Georgian, and its own well-known differentiation into different dialects, are directly observable phenomena in the everyday lives of Mingrelian-speakers which militate against accepting dialect status for it. However theoretically satisfying (or politically expedient) it might be to distinguish between a language and a sociolinguistic dialect in this case, defining Mingrelian in this way simply has little resonance with the lived *habitus* of its speakers.

There is however a more aggressive aspect to the centre view. Implicit in it is the notion that any separation of Mingrelians from Georgians would leave them bereft of high culture, leaving them with only an uncultured, parochial identity. In the post-Soviet context this view has been recently expressed in overtly aggressive terms. In July 1999 a poem written by the popular Georgian poet Murman Lebanidze containing the following lines was published in *Literary Georgia*, the official organ of the Georgian Writers’ Union:

‘Just as next to the mother-Mtkvari, the Ch’oroxi and Enguri,
The Rioni and Texuri, Iori and Aragvi,¹²
So with language, - next to Georgian, Mingrelian
Does not have the right to make its voice heard...

‘You made the word of the enemy your deed,
You instilled something alien in your simple peasantry.
O, shame, you translated Rustaveli, -
You made doggerel of the Georgian poem!

‘I will say no more about this, -
Are we not two sons of one mother, -
It had to be said once and for all,
Let there never be need again!¹³

The poem provoked extended polemic in the national press and was condemned in the Georgian parliament, while in Mingrelia itself it caused a furore. The editor of *Literary Georgia*, Tamaz C’ivc’ivadze, in the following week’s edition attempted to clarify the intent of the poem, by claiming that an editorial slip had resulted in the omission of the poem’s title. This would have made it clear, he said, that the poem was addressed to those who had translated Shota Rustaveli’s mediaeval epic and cornerstone of Georgian literature *The Man in the Panther’s Skin* into Mingrelian, and not to Mingrelian-speakers per se. Despite offering his apologies, C’ivc’ivadze nevertheless stood firm on the message of the poem, and again I quote:

¹² The Mtkvari is the river flowing through Tbilisi, while all the other rivers named flow through other parts of Georgia.

¹³ As a Georgian colleague pointed out to me, Lebanidze’s poem is curiously self-defeating. Unity here seems to imply subaltern status for the Mingrelian component, since Lebanidze explicitly portrays the Georgian/Mingrelian distinction not as a divided self, but as two different selves. Lebanidze’s stance is thus inevitably hierarchical, thereby emphasizing rather than minimizing difference.

“Our enemies tried everything to instill in Mingrelia the idea that Mingrelians are not Georgians, that they are an independent nation. Were Mingrelians to translate the Bible, or *The Man in the Panther’s Skin*... then it transpires that indeed we are two nations. This cannot be allowed. Where have you ever seen that, say, the French or the English have two languages in their state? It is averred by academics that Mingrelian is a dialect. It may be that 12 languages can exist in a state, but when we are talking about nations, here there can be only one language” (C’ivc’ivadze 1999).

Elsewhere prominent linguists have warned that the translation of literary works and the Bible into the Mingrelian or Svan languages is an act of national betrayal leading to the collapse of the Georgian state (Sarjveladze and Oniani 1997). The strong implication here is that cultural self-expression as Mingrelian would mean association with the hated regimes in Sukhumi and Cxinvali. In this discourse, then, to self-define as Mingrelian is to betray one’s Georgianness, and thus oneself.

How can we then characterize the centre view? Naturally enough for a nation-state ideology, the centre view focuses on social origins of Mingrelian and downplays linguistic difference to the point where the Mingrelian language is not officially recognized to exist as such. It is the ethnocultural definition of national membership in Georgia which necessitates this downplaying of the significance of Mingrelian and Svan, itself evidence of the resilience of the Herderian equation of language and identity in Georgian nationalist ideology. It is undeniable that a quite plausible case may be made for the social origins of linguistic difference, and for the analysis of Mingrelian and Georgian bilingualism as a socially mediated diglossia. But the centre view takes on a more obviously ideological aspect in the contemporary ‘dialectalisation’ of Mingrelian. Georgian national ideology here takes on a specifically European form of language ideology, that which ranks languages as possessing inferior or superior characteristics. Ralph Grillo, in his study of dominant and subordinate languages, suggests that “an integral feature of the system of linguistic stratification in Europe is an ideology of

contempt: subordinate languages are despised languages” (Grillo 1989, 173-174). Georgian from this perspective may be seen not as the minority language in the way we have been used to seeing it, but as a ‘dominant language’. As the central element in Georgian nationalist ideology for successive generations of Georgian intellectuals, I suggest that an ideology of linguistic hierarchification forms an integral part of the ideology of Georgian nationalism. The centre view ascribes to Georgian the values of rationality, civilization and legitimacy with regard to its own cultural hinterland; conversely Mingrelian is portrayed as culturally deficient and politically suspect. I want to suggest therefore that the Mingrelian-Georgian axis thus provides an internal dimension to Georgian self-definition in the positive register of cultural achievement and advance. I stress that this is far from being a universal view amongst Georgian intellectuals: many non-Mingrelian intellectuals also disagree with the message of Lebanidze’s poem. It is, however, the publicly expressed view of perhaps the most influential part of the Georgian intelligentsia and may justifiably be seen as a mainstream or orthodox view.

6. The Autonomist View

I now move onto the autonomist view, which quite simply privileges language as the source of an autonomous, separate Mingrelian ethnic identity. It thus sees the Mingrelians as an assimilated group, and portrays them as the victim of Georgian nationalist policies. Public expression of this view has been more forthcoming from outside of Mingrelia than within it. Promoters of this view claim that this is because of fear on the part of the Mingrelians. On the basis of my fieldwork I would say this was an exaggeration: Mingrelians who take this view can and do freely express themselves informally, even to an outsider such as myself.

Where does support for this view come from? It has come on the one hand from philanthropically-minded linguists, who have expressed concern for the preservation of Mingrelian against the obliteration represented by full assimilation (Feurstein 1992; Hewitt 1995). Mingrelian is thus seen as an ‘endangered language’, and indeed it does comply with many of the characteristics of such languages as defined by Western experts

(Edwards 1992; Grenoble and Whaley 1998). In their pleas for endangered languages, linguists in Herderian mode commonly invoke the ‘rooted identities’ and ‘submerged nations’ that they see such languages as representing (Hale *et al* 1992; Dorian 1993). Popularisation and institutionalization of the languages in question is consequently seen and portrayed as a ‘coming home’ to an authentic identity hitherto masked or dormant. Wolfgang Feurstein’s campaign to popularize the Lazuri language is a classic example of this sort of endeavour (Bellér-Hann 1995; Hann 1997).

Linguists working in this vein are clearly bound to clash with ideologists of nation-state unity. Here we must note the other source of promotion for Mingrelian separateness. The most tangible attempts to popularize Mingrelian as a literary medium have come from the authorities in Abkhazia, namely in the form of the sporadically published Russian-Abkhaz-Mingrelian newspaper *Gal*. The Abkhaz claim to have done this out of purely philanthropic motives, for the benefit of the Mingrelian-speaking population of the Gali district in Abkhazia. The political context is self-evident for all, however. My fieldwork revealed that while many had heard of *Gal*, few had actually seen it. Those who had reported bemusement at the act of reading journalistic Mingrelian, and complained that the heavy presence of loan-words made this a difficult and unnatural task. This in part may be due to the fact that an old orthography from the nineteenth century was used, rather than that used for the sporadic small-scale publication of folkloric texts today. The logic of reading Mingrelian when one could read the Russian next to it was not obvious to informants.¹⁴ Moreover the general view was that it is not for the Abkhaz to promote Mingrelian: this could only be seen in terms of Abkhaz political desires for a ‘Mingrelian buffer-zone’ between Abkhazia and Georgia. If a Mingrelian press were to exist it should be at the instigation of Mingrelians themselves and not outsiders. Philanthropy and politics thus seemed inseparable in this appraisal of *Gal*. Local efforts to produce a Mingrelian press have foundered because of economic rather than political reasons. Conversations with publishing enthusiasts in Zugdidi revealed that their main interest was to promote folkloric interest in Mingrelian texts, however, rather than to produce a modern newspaper.

¹⁴ This is despite the fact that the articles were not translations.

There is a more general underlying point here, however, and that is that the act of reading Mingrelian is simply unknown to all those born after the 1920s; it thus does not enter the repertoire of communicative practices associated with the language by its speakers. An illustration from the course of my fieldwork should make this clear. As I came across documents from the 1930s and had need to photocopy them, I in fact became the first purveyor of written Mingrelian text to those who carried out this work with me. My visits to the photocopier would soon turn into clusters of those working there and bystanders falteringly reading the text out loud, with frequent interruptions to discuss the meanings of words in the text. There was often disagreement over these meanings, leading to extended discussions of synonyms, the appropriate translation into Georgian and so on. Reactions to this first act of reading Mingrelian were often humorous, accompanied by observations on the lexical wealth of the language and the impoverishment of today's spoken Mingrelian compared to that of the texts I was copying. What I was observing was therefore not so much a 'linguistic coming home', or the awakening of an innate or latent identity, as a challenge to established distinctions in the minds of these 'new readers'.

At bottom the autonomous view is hardly distinguishable from the centre in its privileging of one language over another as the true source of authenticity. Both views share the same ontology of the relationship between language and identity. Thus, even if one sympathises with linguists concerned for the future of languages falling into desuetude, this does not detract from the political nature of their cause. From the examples given above it seems that selecting the Mingrelian language as the primary defining characteristic of the Mingrelians necessarily also entails *persuading them that this is the case*. Persuading of a group of its dormant or submerged status is the classic Romantic nationalist endeavour, and its claims for authenticity should thus be treated with suspicion. Even if it has played a vital role in the formation of nationalist ideologies and popular understandings of ethnicity, in the Caucasian context the application of a Herderian view of language and authenticity may not be particularly useful. One further example should clearly illustrate my point. While attending a conference in Abkhazia in

1999 I was told by Abkhaz intellectuals that the Mingrelians are a separate nationality because of the Mingrelian language, unintelligible to Georgians. However, this logic cannot explain why many Abkhaz, as is the case with several other former ASSR nationalities, do not see the fact that they use Russian as their main language as vitiating their cultural identity as Abkhaz. This is just another reminder that imposing a European ideological concept, which does not even apply in many cases in Europe, to the Caucasian context may confuse rather than clarify.

7. The Local View: The Discourse of Mingrelian Originality

Having looked at these two theoretically similar yet politically diametrically opposed views, I would now like to examine a third view. This is the view of a group of Mingrelian intellectuals who have in recent years actively offered their own interpretation of who the Mingrelians are. Public interest in Mingrelian received a major boost in 1996 when the Kuji-Parnavaz Society was established in Tbilisi. Its principal activity is the publication of the periodical entitled *aia*, a reference to one of the mythic names for the Colchis of antiquity. Published in Tbilisi, the journal is expressly dedicated to recovering the history, language and folklore of ancient Colchis, and features articles on history, folklore, etymologies, legends associated with Colchis, poetry and linguistics, as well as polemical articles. The journal is written in Georgian, although some poetry is published in Mingrelian too. It has been published regularly since 1996, and during that time has expanded from a rather flimsy pamphlet to a sizeable periodical-type publication. I was informed at the Zugdidi State Library that *aia* was not available there; the journal is nevertheless freely available in the bookshop in Zugdidi. Many in Zugdidi had heard of the journal and had read articles from it; further afield, however, the journal was not well known.

I do not have the competence to assess many of the historical or linguistic claims made in *aia*. Leaving its more specific claims aside, however, I see *aia* as deserving our attention as an exercise in ideology. The first editorial in *aia* explains the rationale behind the journal:

“Treasures without an owner...are usually appropriated by others, and all Georgia already suffers today from the bitter fruit of this process...If we love our motherland, we should love Colchis and Iberia to the same extent, as children love their mother and father. Georgia, no more and no less for each, is the country of Colchidians and Iberians...Georgia’s hospitable and philanthropic land, its spiritual treasure-house and ancient history have a genuine owner and that owner is the Georgian people: Colchidians and Iberians arisen from the same root” (Sich’inava 1996).

While framing inquiry into the Colchidian past as a patriotic endeavour, Sich’inava also posits the duality of the historical Colchidian-Iberian relationship as a reality in contemporary Georgia. Central to the recovery of the Colchidian past, in his view, is the Mingrelian language, but this is not to suggest Mingrelian separateness; rather that the original locus of Georgian genius is to be found in Colchis, and by extension, in Mingrelian. For this reason I choose to call this view the ‘discourse of Mingrelian originality’. It should be stressed that the contributors to *aia* reject any separatist ambitions, both in print and in conversation. Several discussions with contributors to *aia* revealed a categorical rejection of ‘Mingrelian separatism’, and the view that this is an unjust accusation leveled at Mingrelians by the centre. My own interviews with Mingrelians lend credence to this view: ‘Mingrelian separatism’ has little basis amongst the wider population in Mingrelia. Use of the word separatism, nebulous at the best of times, in the context of Mingrelia is thus rather misleading.

What does recovering the Colchidian past entail? Firstly a good deal of rehabilitation for Colchis, which in the pages of *aia* is presented as ‘the ancient world’s oldest and strongest coastline state’, ‘homeland of the founder of medicine, Medea’, ‘the cradle of human civilization’ and the ‘source of cartographic map-making and ideogrammic writing’. Secondly, contributors to *aia* suggest that until now this has been a secret history, deliberately distorted and hidden. One of the Mingrelian language’s most ardent supporters, Mamant’i Dzadzamia, for example, observes that “the history of Colchis and

ancient Georgia in general as yet remains to be convincingly studied and evaluated. Furthermore, it is beyond doubt that in Georgian historiography the history of Colchis is artificially excluded and what is more falsified, after the point at which Colchis lost its greatness and the Colchidians' leading role amongst the Kartvelian tribes was surrendered to the past" (Dzadzamia 1997). Elsewhere a distinctly colonial relationship between Georgian and Colchidian histories is suggested: "Today in broad daylight without any kind of hesitation the Tbilisi intelligentsia plunders the history of Colchis. It is represented in Georgia's history in the same way as Georgia was represented in the history of the Soviet Union" (Zhordania 2000). What is suggested here is a reversal of a perceived distinction between the active, civilized Georgian-speaking Iberians, and the passive, uncultured Mingrelian-speaking Colchidians. Far from acquiescing to the higher civilization of the Iberians, in this view the lost civilization of Colchis was forcibly subjugated and its history erased.

Thirdly Colchis is consistently re-presented as the state of the Mingrelian-speaking Colchidians. This interpretation has particular ramifications with regard to the relationship between the Mingrelian and Georgian languages. Dzadzamia tells us: "it is beyond doubt that in the Colchidian kingdom... the language of the state and of learning would unquestionably have been the Colchidian language [i.e. Mingrelian], which would have been unfeasible without its own, i.e. Colchidian, script" (Dzadzamia 1997). Dzadzamia suggests that this script was pictogrammic in nature, and through a re-working of the Golden Fleece myth, that this script was 'stolen'. The finger is not pointed in a clear-cut fashion here, but the inference is clear in this further comment: "modern all-Georgian alphabetic writing has its origin in the old Georgian, specifically old Colchidian, pictogrammic writing from that time". Far from being a dialect, then, Mingrelian is none other than Georgian's root-language. Dzadzamia indeed has taken this further in an elaborate theory to suggest links between Mingrelian and the original language of humankind, in a classic rendition of the language myth of primordality (M. Dzadzamia and C. Dzadzamia 1997).

A quite legitimate question to ask at this point is whether this is just another case of intellectuals engaging in polemic while ordinary Mingrelians continue in blissful ignorance of their efforts. My fieldwork revealed that there is a significant amount of interest locally in the Mingrelian language and in the region's history. Both are seen as insufficiently researched and 'known', by philological enthusiasts and ordinary Mingrelians alike. Constraints to this interest are primarily economic rather than political, as I have indicated. My own presence was generally viewed positively although I frequently had difficulties in explaining that my interest was sociological rather than linguistic. Moreover, fieldwork revealed that many of the beliefs just examined have a strong resonance with the beliefs of many ordinary Mingrelians. Thus although we are often reaching into the realm of pure mythology here, I see this view as worth taking seriously.

In what ways then do these views resonate with the attitudes of ordinary Mingrelians? Many Mingrelians express the view that Mingrelian has preserved many forms and words lost in Georgian, which lends credence in their view to the idea that Mingrelian is 'older'. As I indicated earlier Mingrelians commonly portray themselves as exaggerating characteristics explicitly recognized as Georgian: Mingrelians are 'more Georgian than the Georgians'. There is a certain congruence between these attitudes and carving out a historical niche for the Mingrelians as the original source of all things Georgian. But there is a more explicitly political aspect to parallels between the claimed neglect and falsification of Colchidian history and the recent history of Mingrelian. The fate of the history of Colchis as interpreted in the pages of *aia* provides a powerful metaphor for the current state of Mingrelian: unrecognized and unstudied, yet representing the authentic depository of Georgian culture. Allow me to quote here from my fieldnotes:

Many, and virtually all amongst middle-aged and elderly informants, are highly conscious of Mingrelian's chequered past as a printed language. In some sense this is seen as a sort of 'secret history' – the [Zugdidi Historical] museum is frequently referred to as the place where they keep all the 'old papers'. Sometimes it is

implied that some or other force took the Mingrelian script ‘away’, that someone ‘did not like it’, or that it did not suit someone’s interests.

The point here is that Mingrelian’s arrested development as a literary medium is popularly attributed to an outside force, while the wishes and needs of the local population were ignored. Interviews with older informants suggest that as a result of the post-1930s taboo placed on Mingrelian, the language assumed for its speakers a special significance as an unofficial and therefore for them more authentic source of identity. In this reading, Mingrelian provides an alternative history of the Mingrelians, a history seen as untainted by Soviet falsification and one that firmly resides in and ‘belongs’ to the people. Mingrelian, and the very fact of its survival without any form of institutional support is seen as a symbol of resistance to outside, i.e. Soviet, rule. However, in this narrative the boundary between Soviet power and an official Georgian nationality is highly ambiguous. For older Mingrelians at least, they are perceived as contemporaneous and intimately connected events. Allow me to give an example of the powerlessness with which many as young men and women encountered conflicting definitions – official and their own – of their nationality. One old woman from Abkhazia related to me the occasion when she went to collect her first passport. Looking over the new document she was shocked to read ‘*Gruzinka*’ under the category *natsional’nost*, ‘They got it wrong!’ [*oshiblis*!], she told me; but her attempts to have her nationality corrected to ‘*Mingrel’ka*’ were met with ridicule. For this informant the arrival of an official nationality and an imposed Georgianness were simultaneous events. Thus for older informants especially a sense of layeredness to Mingrelian and Georgian identities is strong. The portrayal of Mingrelian identity in *aia*, then, resonates strongly with both local narratives such as this, and the local reaction to the most visible expression of views, such as Lebanidze’s, towards Mingrelian emanating from the centre.

But the project represented by *aia* faces at least two major obstacles. Firstly, the views expressed in *aia* represent one extreme within the broader group that we might for the

sake of convenience label the Mingrelian intelligentsia.¹⁵ Other Mingrelian intellectuals fiercely oppose these views. These more ‘orthodox’ Mingrelians, moreover, are those which hold influential positions in institutions of education and research both in Mingrelia and Tbilisi. It is this group which is responsible for the publication of a substantial new history of Mingrelia in which any cultural particularity for the Mingrelians is explicitly rejected (Antelava 1999, 10). Thus viewing the debate over Georgian and Mingrelian identities in terms of a geographic centre-periphery dynamic is misleading. It is perhaps within the periphery itself that there is the greatest potential for conflict between the centre and local views. As in the past it is intellectuals of Mingrelian origin who are amongst the most vehement advocates of the Mingrelians’ Georgianness.

Secondly, much less prominent in *aia* are articles dealing with religion. The focus of the journal is on language as the true source of cultural identity, and thus on Mingrelian as the most authentic source of identity. This seems to be a recurrent trait of language revivals where confessional identities would link the target speech community with a wider population. As we have seen there is no autonomous religious tradition in the history of Mingrelia. Conversion to Christianity took place in the very remote past in the sixth century A.D. and according to historical tradition was undertaken by the kings of Lazica of their own volition. There is thus no sense in which a forcible conversion can be claimed; indeed Christianity in Mingrelia, as elsewhere in Georgia, has been central historically to the cultural boundaries between Mingrelians and their Ottoman overlords. Orthodoxy unequivocally identifies the Mingrelians as Georgian, and Georgian as their ‘own’ language of worship. While adherence to religious values may have been weakened after seventy years of enforced atheism, rituals associated with the Orthodox faith are assiduously followed in Mingrelia. Indeed the exaggerated nature of certain rituals in Mingrelia, for example, the *t’irili* (‘public bewailing’) of the bereaved, is

¹⁵ Few would accept the category of a ‘Mingrelian intelligentsia’; indeed for some this would be seen as an intrinsically contradictory concept, and would regard themselves as belonging to the Georgian intelligentsia. By it I simply mean intellectuals of Mingrelian origin, and thus those who are credited authority to speak on the issues I am concerned with here.

famous across Georgia. It is difficult to conceive in theory of how the promoters of a specifically Mingrelian identity could purge that identity of this crucial component.¹⁶

8. The Political Context: Mingrelia and the Georgian Civil War

I would now like to situate these debates in the wider political context of post-independence Georgia, and specifically the Georgian civil war. For the debates I have described have a much wider political relevance, which unfortunately confuses and raises the stakes in the contest between them. As well as the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict Mingrelia has played a significant role in the context of Zviadism, the political movement supporting Georgia's first elected president Zviad Gamsaxurdia. Zviad was the son of K'onstantine Gamsaxurdia, one of Georgia's most revered twentieth century writers. As their surname indicates, the Gamsaxurdias were of Mingrelian origin; as leading philological figures of their day, both father and son typified the mainstream intelligentsia view on the Georgianness of Mingrelians (Gamsaxurdia 1989). As a fierce advocate of a Georgian nation-state, Zviad Gamsaxurdia was categorically opposed to any subdivision of the Georgian nation. Yet Gamsaxurdia found his strongest support base in Mingrelia, a phenomenon difficult to ascribe to ideological factors, and probably indicative of the importance of personality in Georgian political culture. Following an increasingly chaotic period in power, Gamsaxurdia was deposed by his own former supporters in early 1992. Following his fall, Georgia descended into civil war between rival paramilitary gangs. Gamsaxurdia's deposers, the infamous *mxedrioni* ('horsemen') paramilitaries, carried out especially savage reprisals against Zviadist supporters in Mingrelia. At the same time Shevardnadze was installed as the new head of state, and the Citizens' Union of Georgia (SMK) was formed as a political party support base for the new incumbent.

¹⁶ The introduction to a small volume of Mingrelian folk-sayings provides a fascinating example of how linguistic difference is interpreted in terms of religious unity: "There is something symbolic in the fact that God gave the Georgian tribe three languages...Although we only have one script there is something supernatural here too: the Christian god is of one essence, but he has three natures". The three Kartvelian languages are thus portrayed as a holy trinity, an interesting input into the myth of the Georgians' chosenness (Tavdshvili 1994, 3-4).

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which Zviadism's connection with Mingrelia is a phenomenon antecedent to the war or deriving from it. Conversations with ordinary Mingrelians would indicate that the latter is the case. It was pointed out to me that Gamsaxurdia enjoyed a high degree of support across the whole of Georgia, not just in Mingrelia. Rather it seems that it is the actions of the *mxedrioni* that have been interpreted by some in terms of a Georgian-Mingrelian distinction. Claiming an ethnic content to the Georgian civil war is a highly dubious exercise: cultural issues were not at issue in the conflict. It is quite wrong and misleading to refer to the Georgian civil war as a 'Mingrelian conflict'. Yet it is undeniable that in popular consciousness there is a strong link between Zviadism and Mingrelia today. In parts of Mingrelia, particularly those where houses burnt by the *mxedrioni* still stand, Gamsaxurdia is revered as a 'local hero'. In the oral reproduction of the civil war in Mingrelia I was able to observe a strong association between the *mxedrioni* and eastern Georgia. Some saw Mingrelia as having endured a specific tragedy in the form of the ethnically motivated reprisals of the *mxedrioni*. This reading seems to fuel a wider western-eastern boundary within Georgia. One young man informed me that Mingrelian youths try to avoid military service in eastern Georgia because of discrimination, although my own experience of meeting Mingrelian conscripts in the eastern district of Axmet'a revealed no such complaints.

This theme has recently been taken up in the national press. In 1998 an article was published in the *resp'ublik'a* newspaper, entitled *samegrelos t'ragedia – davic'q'ebas ar ekvemdebareba* ('The Mingrelian tragedy will not be forgotten'), subsequently published as a separate brochure (K'varaxelia, K'veselava and Zhvania 1998). In it the authors, all of Mingrelian origin, claimed the existence of a pervasive discrimination against Mingrelians in Georgia, that civil war violence in Mingrelia was ethnically motivated and that Mingrelians are unjustly tarnished with separatism in Georgia. The delineation of a 'separate tragedy' for Mingrelia, thereby lending a regional and ethnic character to the civil war, is fiercely opposed by the mainstream intelligentsia. Linguist Aleksandre Oniani, writing in the governmental newspaper *sakartvelos resp'ublik'a*, provided an extended critique of the article, affirming that "[T]his terrible crime perpetrated by criminals and bandits is not only Mingrelia's but all Georgia's indivisible pain" (Oniani

1998b). Oniani, furthermore, condemned the brochure as contrasting the incumbent Shevardnadze with the ‘legal authority’ and ‘national government’ of Gamsaxurdia. Former supporters of Gamsaxurdia will indeed refer to his government as the *erovnuli mtavroba* (‘national government’) or *erovnuli dzala* (‘national force’), contrasting it with Shevardnadze’s government, which by its associations with former Soviet rule, a pro-western orientation and anti-nationalist stance, is seen as insufficiently ‘national’. This debate sees the question of Mingrelian identity taking on a much more global and wide-ranging character.

Recent high-profile political events in Mingrelia appear to confirm that the ethnic card is being used in the service of a wider political agenda. In October 1998 the renegade colonel and former Zviadist Ak’ak’i Eliava staged an attempted insurrection and assault on Georgia’s second city Kutaisi. Although the rebellion was quickly quelled, Eliava continued to provide highly vocal criticism of the government that regularly included threats of Mingrelian secession, until his assassination by Interior Ministry Forces in 2000. In early 1999 the shady figure of Aleksandre Ch’ach’ia established a political movement named the ‘Union for the Democratic Revival of Mingrelia’. Despite this movement’s clear links to the Ajara-based opposition party ‘Union for the Democratic Revival of Georgia’, articles appeared in the national press claiming that Ch’ach’ia was recruiting his movement on the basis of a ‘Mingrelian criterion’. Despite this flurry of publicity, however, the movement rapidly disappeared. These events, and the typically very high publicity they generate, confuse the issue of Mingrelian identity further by blurring the boundary between political regionalism and cultural revivalism. Manifestations of the former, a salient trend across all Georgia, are frequently censured in terms of the latter, thus making a ‘special problem’ out of Mingrelia.

aia is unreservedly Zviadist in its political orientation. Is there a connection between the portrayal of Colchis in its pages and its Zviadist tendencies? I suggest that we can discern a further level to the debate over Mingrelian in the pages of *aia*. What is covertly suggested is an affinity between the putative ethnic distinctions between Georgians and Mingrelians and a wider political and geographic east-west divide. This multiple layer of

oppositions, between Colchis and Iberia, Mingrelian and Georgian, west and east, Gamsaxurdia and Shevardnadze, national and cosmopolitan, provides interpretations of the past and present that are strikingly similar. Colchis, as we have seen, is imbued in this discourse with the qualities of ethnic originality and purity, which, in the Zviadist view, also characterizes the ‘national’ government of Gamsaxurdia compared to the cosmopolitan, non-national or anti-national Shevardnadze and the *mokalakeebi* (‘citizens’), a term which in Zviadist use is a pejorative description of Shevardnadze’s supporters. Mingrelian is thus in danger of being subsumed as a symbolic resource for a much wider-ranging oppositional discourse, more relevant in its interpretation of contemporary events than those in antiquity. This suggests the instrumental use of the ethnicity in the articulation of a discourse of *political* opposition. The ‘Mingrelian content’ of these events seems to be best seen as the politically expedient use of the ethnic card as a stick with which to beat a centre nervous of any manifestations of regionalism. The playing of the ethnic card in centre-periphery relations between Tbilisi and Mingrelia is unfortunately a further impediment to sensible discussion about Mingrelian identity. It is indicative of a desire in certain quarters to explicitly link political regionalism to cultural revivalism, and contributes to misunderstandings of what exactly it is that we are discussing when we are talking about Mingrelian identity.

9. Conclusions: The Mingrelians’ Divided Self

This paper has argued that Mingrelians are today being presented with stark new choices over how they choose to see themselves. In its essence this is a debate about authenticity, to which each of these rival versions lays claim. What is common to all of them, however, is the starkly communitarian nature of the authenticity on offer: it is to the purity of the Romantic nationalist that each of these versions - Georgian, Mingrelian and Colchidian - at bottom appeals. In each case, however, a positive choice by the Mingrelians would seem to imply a concomitant denial of some other part of their identity, in a part of the world where monoculturalism has never been the norm. Thus the centre view entails an acquiescence with a negative stereotyping of Mingrelian, which clashes with the symbolic authority accorded it by its speakers as ‘the language of the cradle’. The autonomist view, in its similarly uncomplicated privileging of one language

over another is little different. Both of these views would take the Mingrelians' divided self and 'purify' it in the name of an authentic rooted identity. By extension these views also divest the Mingrelians of the moral authority to decide for themselves who they are, by portraying their biculturalism as confused or unwitting. The Mingrelians are thus a case of a group which stands outside of the established conceptual order: from this perspective they suffer from the disease of liminality, for which the nationalist prescription is to purge and purify.

Do then the views of the contributors to *aia* perhaps present Mingrelians with a more authentic choice? To some extent *aia* may be seen as a positive challenge to the centre view to *broaden* understandings of Georgianness to incorporate a Mingrelian identity beyond the purely regional, rather than an attempt to *separate* Mingrelians from Georgians. It is all the more significant a challenge to the Georgian self-image for being an internal one, and one which merits a serious response. It is indicative of the limits to which the idiom of the nation-state in Georgia can be expressed even with regard to the *titular* nation. If there is to be a consolidation and development of a Mingrelian identity in the future – with all of the problems that that implies – it will form a significant challenge to the nationalistic discourse of the nation-state. It is worth recalling here just how recent an ideology this is in Georgia. Introduced by Romantic intellectuals in the late nineteenth century, it was only implemented as a political platform under duress by the Menshevik government in the years 1918-21. As I briefly indicated, the period of *korenizatsiya* in the 1920s, usually associated with the consolidation of nations in the Soviet context, was precisely the period in which the heterogeneity of the Georgian nation was explicitly and officially recognized. A nationalistic discourse thus has no strong tradition in Georgia. The real challenge posed by *aia* is to suggest that it is the Georgian national self that is divided, and thus a re-evaluation of the relevance of the nation-state ideal in the Georgian context.

However, it is also suggestive of an overtly instrumental use of a 'Mingrelian question' tied to interests elsewhere in the political field. Moreover, anyone familiar with the conflicts over historiography in the Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-Ossetian, Armenian-

Azerbaijani and other similar settings will recognize a depressingly similar set of claims in the articles of *aia* to history, peoples and territory, couched in the seemingly limitlessly transferable Soviet idiom of ethnogenesis. I suggest that the discourse of *aia* is thus strongly derivative, and that replicating similar essentialisms in the search for a pre-Georgian Mingrelian idyll should properly be seen as a dubious exercise in myth-making. It ultimately also leads to an impoverishment of the choices available to the ordinary individuals 'for whom', or 'in whose name' this struggle is being waged.

I have argued rather that a Mingrelian identity is made up of many different and fluctuating elements. 'Mingrelianness', a rather loose concept, emerges in specific contexts and with different meanings. I would like to argue that it is precisely the way in which Mingrelianness accommodates and sits happily alongside other cultural components that explains its resilience. This brings us to the central point that any construction of Mingrelian identity must deal with the high degree of cultural homogeneity between Mingrelian and Georgian identities. A stark choice between identifying as Georgian *or* Mingrelian is quite alien to the vast majority of Mingrelians. Most have internalized Mingrelianness, Georgianness, Christianity, locality and other facets of their identity in a complex and non-hierarchical way. It is inconceivable that the Mingrelians could purge the Georgian elements from a separate Mingrelian identity: this could only be achieved by invoking a past so distant as to be largely fantastical and adhering to a Draconian and quite inauthentic linguistic particularism. Sadly the conflict in Abkhazia has already seen the demise of a unique niche of syncretism between Abkhaz, Georgian, Mingrelian, Russian and Soviet identities amongst the Mingrelian-speaking population there. If Mingrelians themselves have internalized a syncretistic approach to the culturally varied environment in which they live, it is a sad indictment on the intellectuals of whatever hue claiming to speak for them when they seek to eliminate one or other constituent part of that environment. I hope thus to have shown that the question that I somewhat provocatively posed in the title of this paper is self-defeating: it is precisely the syncretism of the Mingrelians that is authentic, not the visions of purity of either nationalists or revivalists.

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