

'The Land of the Golden Fleece': Conflict and Heritage in Abkhazia

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Tourism was a big industry for imperial as well as Soviet Abkhazia. Famous writers like Chekhov and political figures like Stalin himself, spent the summer in the sub-tropical climate of Abkhazia taking advantage of its 'pristine' beauty. Could we find traces of this colonial tradition in the numbers of Russians who visit the place today? How are the notions of the 'natural' and the 'unspoiled' combined with the post-conflict Abkhazian landscape? Would tourism itself be a cause of instability and another conflict responding to the rising numbers of these tourists? At the same time, as Abkhazia is home to various ethnic groups, how do the latter make use of local history and heritage? To what degree would the past and its multiple layers, such as the Greek past of Sukhumi, be a platform for new social solidarities and cohesion or a source of friction?

My visit to Sukhum-i¹ (Aqwa in Abkhazian) was intended to introduce me to the remaining Sukhumian Greek community. The Greek newspapers during the Georgian and Abkhazian war (1992–93) that led to the exodus of the majority of these Greeks referred to these people as the descendants of the Argonauts, and the country was described as the ancient kingdom of Colchis. Geography plays a crucial role in the history of Abkhazia (Apsni in Abkhazian or Abkhazeti in Georgian). On the coast of the Caucasian ranges, Abkhazia has been a Black Sea crossroads where different peoples and cultures have encountered each other since ancient times.

The legendary kingdom of Colchis² (8th century BC) became a symbol of the country's ancient glory and its long-established relations with the West through colonial encounters constituting both peaceful exchanges and violent clashes. At the same time, because of the scarce ancient sources regarding that period, the actual position and borders of the Colchian kingdom. This debate allows the appropriation of this history by different tourist campaigns of different regions, for example, Samegrelo for Georgia, Krasnodar Krai for Russia and the de facto state of Abkhazia, contributing to the perpetuation of the opposing reading of history. In this sense, the Colchian culture has become a symbol of Caucasian coastal history.

Bo Stråth writes that, '[m]yth and memory is history in ceaseless transformation and reconstruction'.³ These three categories of the past, for instance, myth, memory and history, are used in community formation and identity-building. Although they feed each other with material necessary for their constitution, they are highly

hierarchized by the ways in which modernity has tried to fix temporality in a linear and progressive scale. All three are sensitive to specific regimes of truth/knowledge that contribute to the categorization and the recognition of the past as part of each of the above categories. In this context, my paper will try to trace the new translations of Colchis and its heritage in the transition from ‘the old colonial world into the political and symbolic economy of what Wallerstein has termed the “modern world system”’.⁴ The shifts in the political economy of each period seem to play a crucial role in what Str ath called ‘ceaseless transformation’ since they re-signify how the above three categories are becoming meaningful. In this context, transformations of place and heritage are significant factors in people’s experience and understanding of these categories.

My paper is based on my visit to the city of Sukhum-i in April 2004 and my encounter with the Sukhumian Greeks as part of my fieldwork in Georgia studying the meanings of diaspora within the Greek-speaking communities of the area. My visit to Sukhum-i was made possible with the help of the United Nations Observer Mission (UNOMIG) that was based in Zugdidi in Georgia during the period 1993–2009. During this visit, I was taken for a tour of Sukhum-i’s heritage by my Greek host. As Abkhazia is home to various ethnic groups, I became interested in how they define heritage and contextualize it in their memories.

At the same time, since political order and international recognition are far from accomplished in the case of the de facto state of Abkhazia, it would be interesting to examine the ways in which this heritage contributes to the formation of social cohesion or becomes a source of friction. This paper will focus on the strategies of representation of Sukhum-i. What stands as the city’s ‘heritage’ and how? I will examine this question by comparing two different contexts of representation: first, the discussions with my Sukhumian Greek guide during my visit there and second the virtual representation of the city on the newly constructed website of the de facto Abkhazian government.

The comparison, I believe, is important because it pinpoints how the Russian imperial project in the Caucasus was applied in the case of Abkhazia, its natural landscape and its people (ethnic diversity and distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous people), and how this project was transformed in the Soviet period (the Soviet nationality policy and geo-political agenda for the Black Sea coast). Furthermore, this comparison describes how past representations of the Abkhazian capital, as a cosmopolitan city, could today be used in a new creative way in order to reinvent Sukhum-i in the post-conflict period when Abkhazia is still seeking international recognition as an independent state and trying to cope with its multi-ethnic and multicultural past.

Archives and Representations

Since the 1990s, there has been a shift of academic attention from history to its production. In this context, Ann Stoler⁵ argued that the growing interest in archives underlines their significance as sites of knowledge production and not of knowledge retrieval.⁶ Consequently, archives are examined as part of the dominant

discourses and policies on ruling and shaping subjecthood; in other words, as part of governmentality. Trying to define archive, Papailias⁷ suggests that '[it] is as much about bringing together documents, people, and times and keeping them in place as it is about dividing, excluding, and keeping out'. Archives define inside and outside worlds, accessibility and knowledge. Archives are important not only for their content, however, that is, what is included or excluded, but also for how inclusion and exclusion take place. My paper, as the introduction suggested, examines how inclusion and exclusion are possible in the production of the Sukhumian heritage in post-conflict Abkhazia. It tries to trace how things and people are represented, and how these representations are generated and nourished through an 'archive of representational strategies'. What are the meanings of archive in such a context?

I trace two characteristics of archives, localization and materiality, in the representations of the Sukhumian waterfront. The waterfront is transformed in the representations my paper discusses into an almost monumentalized 'document' of the city's past and new cosmopolitanism. How is this possible? The representations of the city's waterfront have formed over the years through a repertoire of strategies embedded in the colonial and Soviet policies of social engineering, bringing together or excluding people, times and documents, as archives do in Papailias above. Moreover, these representations are almost emblematic of the city's character. What kinds of representation constitute the Sukhumian archive, however?

Sarah Ahmed,⁸ discussing the politics of emotions, states that 'the making of one's archive—the suggestion that some texts "belonging" together—is a form of "contact zone" a space deeply inscribed with power hierarchies and colonial violence'. The making of the Abkhazian capital and its waterfront stems from various texts of different genres such as literature, tourist magazines and photographs. These texts turned buildings and sites which were connected to specific communities and people, like the Greeks, into symbols of 'the Sukhumian heritage and cosmopolitanism'. My paper will argue that today these representations risk turning these sites and peoples into exotica represented as the cultural heritage of the Black Sea's cosmopolitanism. The waterfront, its organization of spatiality and the corresponding sociality seem to be interconnected not only through a tradition of representation that transformed Sukhum-i into a tourist destination but also, *in vivo* in the narratives and representations of the Sukhumian present. In its contact zone, in Ahmed's terms, the existence or absence of the waterfront's spatiality and sociality contributed and still do, to the making and documentation of the Sukhumian heritage. This heritage is undergoing a new phase of transformation and documentation in the post-conflict period through its digitalization and the re-emergence of tourism.

Today tourism's contribution to the de facto state and its political situation in the region seems to be resurfacing. This is a positive step for the Abkhazian economy. However, would it be similarly positive for the symbiosis of the different ethnic groups of the city? Tourism, according to Coleman and Crang,⁹ consists of various performances and it is not a unified activity. One performance is the 'staging of authenticity'¹⁰ that, however, simultaneously implies the loss of the latter, challenging the very existence of authenticity. It is in this context that tourist places are being produced as part of the staging. The representation of the Sukhumian heritage as part

of the city's tourist tradition is part of this production. Abkhazia, which belonged to the Black Sea Riviera, is one of the places that played a seminal role in the development of the 'tourist gaze'¹¹ for generations of Russian and Soviet travellers. After a long period of conflict, it has started to emerge once again as a tourist destination despite delays caused by political complexities. As I will show, this re-emergence forms part of the archive of representational strategies discussed above.

Colonial Representations

In the context of the Russian colonization of the Caucasus that took place within the European Enlightenment and biological evolutionary thought regarding nations and cultures, a dichotomy between civilization and nature, Russia/the Caucasus, was established. As Ram and Shatirishvili¹² underline in their examination of the Georgian poetry and politics of the 19th century, the Caucasus was transformed into a context of complex, interdependent and often conflicting 'geo-poetics'. In this framework, the representation of nature had a central position in terms of how the region was perceived and depicted in literary accounts. This was true not only for the Caucasus. The formation of European environmentalism that involved human perceptions as well as practices toward nature was shaped in parallel with an expanding European military and economic system that evolved into colonialism.¹³ Perceptions of nature and imperial politics were thus interwoven.

Being a political exile in South Russia himself, Alexander Pushkin in his work the *Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822), started to develop the discourse of pristine beauty, eternal resistance and freedom against any conqueror that would become the dominant representation of the Caucasus until today. The success of the poem (it became an opera, inspired other poems, short stories and movies) founded a literary tradition regarding the representation strategies of the region. At the same time, the expansion of imperial rule in the Caucasus especially after the defeat of Shamil (1854) in the North Caucasus set in motion a series of changes. Industrialization, construction of a transportation network (railways) and a plan of biopolitics established the foundation of the imperial agenda. Modern techniques of quantification and categorization, such as demographics, statistics and demarcation of territory in order to map the various peoples and administrative units, laid the foundations for the demographic alteration of the Caucasus through an informal exchange of populations (Christian population, like the Greeks of the Sukhum-i arrived from the Ottoman Empire and Muslims were exiled from the Russian Empire).

The literary representations of the Caucasus, particularly the depiction of the Caucasian landscape, were not independent of the above colonial project. Picard¹⁴ stated that the ambiguous perceptions of modernity towards nature treated the latter as both a common nostalgic past, the lost Paradise, as well as a condition to be overcome thanks to rational science and humanistic morals. In this tradition, the descriptions of a heavenly land contributed to the exoticization of a place as well as the project of its modernization vis-à-vis its scientific exploration. These ambiguities played an important role in how Western colonialism undertook spatial

reformation, and the representation strategies developed in the exploration of the colonized places as tourist destinations since they provided the imagination and incentive for tourism in the age of the empire by training generations of readers as well as travellers and creating what Said calls imaginative geographies.¹⁵ Names were Russified, spas and seaside resorts as well as alpinist camps were built, tourist agencies were organized in order to offer to the imperial tourist a comfortable appreciation of exotica.¹⁶

During the same period that tourism was emerging as one of the cultural practices reinforcing the status of the newly formed Russian middle class, there was another sort of mobility in the Caucasus. The military aggression between the Russian and Ottoman empires and the economic incentives that the Russians offered, as well as the development of trade roads and the modernization of the economy, brought to the Caucasus Christian populations from the Ottoman Empire, like the Pontic-Greeks and the Armenians. Those who arrived in Sukhum-i were from urbanized environments. Some of them were merchants involved in the tobacco trade. Consequently, Sukhum-i started to participate in the network of city-ports around the Black Sea that constituted a pivotal factor in the connection of the region with the world economy of the 19th century. The emergence of an ethnically plural (Greeks, Armenians, Russians and others) middle class and its significant geographical position contributed to the transformation of Sukhum-i to a culturally diverse and affluent urban centre.

As McReynolds underlines, by the beginning of the 20th century the tourist boom in the Caucasus promoted 'the proliferation of images of the Caucasus in popular urban culture'.¹⁷ In this way, it seems that tourism in the Caucasus was strongly connected to the social capital and lifestyle of an emerging middle-class. In this framework of exploration of the 'local', the role of Russian ethnography that categorized peoples and cultures was central. As Hirsch's work¹⁸ about the development of ethnographic museums in the empire showed, the latter became the space that tried to represent the empire and later the USSR as an idealized microcosm, fashioning the tourist gaze by cultivating certain expectations and worldviews regarding ethnicities and ethnic cultures. The transition to the Soviet period did not put an end to the tourist renaissance, but it re-contextualized the colonial agenda into the new ideological premises of the Revolution.¹⁹

Abkhazian Utopias and Dystopias

In the Soviet period and the transition from the capitalist, middle-class tourism to the proletarian one, tourism became a highly ideological project that defined the role of the proletarian tourist as 'simultaneously autonomous and collective, self-improving and socially constructive'.²⁰ In this context, tourism became a politically and ideologically burdened mission. Tourists were there not only to enjoy the pristine nature of the mountains or the emerald sea, but also to testify to and monitor socialist progress and change and how this project was unravelled in various communities constructed on the ethno-territorial principle of the Soviet nationality

policy. How is this policy connected with the way heritage is considered today by the Greeks of Sukhum-i?

The affirmative policies of the Soviet Union that strongly emphasized self-determination contributed to the formation of a Greek community in Sukhum-i through the celebration of its culture within schools, theatrical clubs and associations. This principle of ethno-territoriality encouraged in the 1920s mother-tongue education to foster ethnic empowerment and ideological propagation to strengthen the identity of ethnic communities. Consequently, the Soviet policy fostered Greek cultural identity and at the same time, it created a sentiment of rootedness with the specific locality, Sukhum-i, through the daily experience of the community and its pride in its accomplishments.

This was evident in my walking tour of the city's waterfront on my first visit to Sukhum-i. The tour is one of its most renowned attractions. My host played the role of the tourist guide. She took me to the Greek grassroots offices, the offices of the Abkhazian-Greeks, so I could become acquainted with other people from the shrinking community. Then we visited the Orthodox church that used to be Greek but became Russian in the 1930s, and the Greek school that ceased to exist in the late 1930s. From there, we continued our promenade to the seaside boulevard. The old war-damaged buildings signified a past that came to an abrupt end: the hotel Abkhazia, the hotel Ritsa owned by Greeks, the depot and the restaurant Dioscurias built on the remains of the wall. For my host, all these places brought back personal and community memories of the Greek presence in the city and helped her to anchor her own memories and retrace her past in a place emptied of its people since 1993.²¹

The route we took could be indicative of the way my host wants to represent Greek Sukhum-i. She started with the local Greek association. Then she showed me important buildings that became symbols of the community, for example, the school and the church, or were important because of their affluence and cultural activity; she described their members who contributed to the urban architectural heritage of the city and added to its cosmopolitan character as a port. Finally, we visited a place of multi-layered historical and personal importance: the ancient walls built in various periods of antiquity and where in the Soviet period the restaurant Dioscurias stood. The latter triggered my host's childhood memories.

In this tour, my host turned the promenade into a testimony of her Greek roots. She used all the symbols of authentic Greekness: association, church/Orthodox religion, school/Greek language that, nevertheless, were also constructed as part of the Soviet political legacy concerning social engineering. In this way, this promenade seems to have a double mission alluding to two different but interwoven pasts: the Greek and the Soviet. As a result, the tour expresses a double claim authenticity. On the one hand, it describes a Greek consciousness. On the other hand, it postulates a Sukhumian Greek consciousness. The two are well interconnected in the history and memories of the city as well as of my host; they are communal and personal memories, like memories always are. The tour also suggested to what degree the colonial projects contributed to the formation of local histories and the creation of communities as well as their heritage. It also highlighted how this heritage is contributing to the present identity politics, as my host was quite aware of the fact

that this tour is part of the representation of her community as a Greek diaspora²² and how this ‘double consciousness’,²³ I underlined above, legitimized any such claim.

The visit to the local Greek association as the first stop on our tour underlines that my host is well aware of her mission to stage²⁴ this play of authenticity. The tour omitted, however, an important part of the Greeks’ history in Sukhum-i: the deportation of the majority of the community in 1949, in contrast to the vivid and constant presence of the community described in the work of Fazil Iskander²⁵ and his representation of Soviet Abkhazia and its ethnic plurality. Tracing the reasons for this omission, I believe, is a fruitful way to examine the ambiguities in the formation of heritage in the Sukhum-i of today.

In the 1930s, the Soviet project of indigenization (*korenizatsia*) stopped with the radical reorientation of the economic and political agenda. In 1931, Abkhazia lost its independence and was incorporated in the Soviet Republic of Georgia as an autonomous republic. Stalin enforced both political and economic centralization and started to criminalize certain nationalities with ties to capitalist nations outside the USSR, among them the Greeks of Sukhum-i. As Zapantis underlines,²⁶ reports of purges of Greeks, usually on the pretext that they had been spying, reached Greece through the consulates or family ties. The purges deprived the community of their intellectual leadership and silenced important communal institutions, such as the church or the Greek schools, which were replaced by Russian educational institutions. The real strike against the community, however, was the massive deportation of the majority of the Greeks in 1949 to Central Asia. The Greeks gradually returned to Abkhazia after 1956.²⁷ The Greeks of Sukhum-i were deported simply because the majority owned Greek passports. Consequently, the deportation was an attack against their Greekness but, at the same time, it strongly reaffirmed it.

In the early 1990s,²⁸ in the midst of the Abkhazian–Georgian war, some revisionist theories emerged in Abkhazia concerning those events and arguing that the deportations of the various minorities living in Abkhazia (Greeks, Kurds, Bulgarians) did not result from the Soviet authorities’ attempts to create special zones in areas, like the Black Sea, which were sensitive for geo-political reasons. They suggested rather that the Georgian policy of resettling ethnic Georgians on ‘free land’ (land that formerly belonged to deported families) hid a systematic plan of Georgianization that was fostered by the Georgian lobby that dominated the Kremlin during those years. I am not going to assess the evidence for this hypothesis here but what seems significant is the use of the deportations in relation to the ‘special character’ of Abkhazia and the organized demographic alteration of the area. As my paper will argue, the two are strongly connected.

In his allegory of the late Stalinist society, *Moskva kva-kva*,²⁹ Vasili Axionov describes the life of the privileged few, their expectations and fears, their illusions about the coming of a new phase of humanity as well as an increasing atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust that culminated in an endless and illogical extermination of the two heroes of the book, a young and promising student and fervent Komsomolsk leader and her partner, a hero of the Korean War and double agent of the regime’s struggle against the capitalist world. The couple decide to share a few intimate

moments in Abkhazia. The description of Abkhazia in the book is not about a place but a utopia, where there are luxurious dachas hidden on isolated cliffs near the sea and the tropical woods. The restaurants in Sukhum-i where the couple dine are for the privileged few, the servants speak French and the customers enjoy French cuisine and wine. Local Abkhazians are represented walking in the streets wearing funny hats that provoke the curiosity and the laughter of the young heroine. The presence of Stalin is everywhere. Everything in that Abkhazia is special, mysterious and exotic.

As Noack states,³⁰ although the Caucasian Black Sea, known in the 1960s as the Soviet Riviera, was much celebrated as a tourist destination, the steep and narrow seaside permitted few good places and these were reserved for the privileged. Abkhazia hosted Stalin's dachas³¹ in Gargra and Gudauta as well as those of other party members like Beria or Poskrybeshev.³² The Stalinist ideology of real socialism tried to cultivate the idea that socialism was not another utopia but instead was very close to a living reality for Soviet citizens, and would be accomplished by the right social engineering, economic transformation, ideological faith and purity, and eradication of enemies inside and outside the USSR. In this context, Abkhazia and the policies enforced are an example of how the exotica produced through the imperial policies did not die out but it was endowed with several ideological features that used similar policies of inclusion and exclusion in order to establish a utopia for a few and a dystopia for those excluded. The deportation, despite the cause, paved the way for demographic monitoring and the control of movement in the area to permit the formation of a 'special zone' in terms of who could have access and also its quality.

As Axionov describes it, Abkhazia seemed to be the Promised Land for the privileged few. When her friends asked Axionov's young heroine in which part of Abkhazia she wanted to live after her marriage, the coast or the mountain, she had no trouble in answering 'that which lies under the sky'. For the young woman, Abkhazia was everywhere, as the Soviet utopia evangelized its internationalization, and nowhere, like all paradises. The paradise described in the book of Axionov was created from above and it was the outcome of violent policies of social transformation and an ideological laboratory of socialist ideas used to hide the real traces of the regime's crimes, as shown in the stories of the Greeks and the other ethnic minorities of the Caucasus who were exiled.

This part of Sukhumian history was excluded from my tour, which covered the Greek renaissance in the framework of the Russian Empire and the Soviet nationality policy. As noted above, archives include and exclude peoples, times and documents. The visit to the waterfront emphasized the cosmopolitan past of the city and the presence of the city's ethnic communities, like the Greeks. The silence regarding the deportations is part of the repertoire of the representational strategies concerning the waterfront and the city's cosmopolitanism. The transformation of the waterfront into a tourist place and heritage of the city's cosmopolitanism stressed diversity but makes no reference to the violent making of the latter. As I argued, this repertoire of representation strategies is connected to specific spatialities and socialities. It is localized in the city's space and history.

Nevertheless, the Sukhumian Greeks do not hide their past or, in particular, the deportations. On the contrary, they are proud of them, since they interpret the deportations as a direct attack on as well as proof of their Greekness that legitimizes their diasporic identity (the visit to the local Greek association underlines this intention) and at the same time their position in the ethnically plural Sukhum-i. The omission of any reference to the historic deportations is, I think, because there is no spatial evidence of this period on the city's waterfront. It is the localization and materiality, the two distinctive features of archives, which induce the specific representation of the waterfront. In other words, the representation of the old, war-damaged buildings found in the waterfront of the capital as part of the cosmopolitan Sukhum-i is possible through the existence of a specific repertoire, an archive of representational strategies. It is this archive that turns the waterfront into a heritage of the cosmopolitan past in the colonial and the Soviet period of the city. This reconstruction, though, is not unrelated to how the city is imagined as a tourist place by the Abkhazian authorities and the silence on certain parts of Sukhumian history in the urban landscape seems to relate to how ethnic plurality is represented on the website I discuss below.

The Re-emergence of Tourism in Abkhazia

Authenticity is shown in the Sukhum-i of today in different ways and by different players. The authenticity my host tried to legitimate with reference to the 'Greek Sukhum-i' that on the one hand tried to legitimate the Greek presence in the city and on the other participation in the Greek diaspora, differs from but also relates to the one I am going to discuss here, which tries to promote Abkhazian tourism. The virtual exhibition of Sukhum-i transforms it into a virtual topos, an e-topos, but this e-topos has its own dystopic features.

The development of new technologies in the representation of places through, for example, virtual panoramas and tours has become more and more frequent. In the case of Abkhazia, whose de facto legal status prevents the free crossing of its borders since they are still contested and unrecognized by the majority of the world community, virtual representation is the only way that many potential travellers can get a glimpse of the country. This virtual visualization also gives the Abkhazian authorities an opportunity to develop their own representational strategies concerning the country and the capital. Tourism is important not only for the authorities but is also widely perceived as one of the mechanisms for development of the area.

In a short film, entitled *Abkhazia—One Side of a Conflict*, produced in 2004 with the help of the NGO Conciliation Resources,³³ a Georgian journalist arrives in Sukhum-i in order to trace the changes in the de facto republic after the Georgian/Abkhazian conflict. The only part of the film where the interviewees, inhabitants of Sukhum-i, seem optimistic about their future is when they talk about tourism. This is the same impression I got from my interviews with the Greeks, as they took me to the hotels on the beach of Sukhum-i, which were under construction or in the process of reconstruction in 2004. At the same time, they identified the most

important players in the emergence of tourism: the rising numbers of Russian tourists. Although definite data about this trend are hard to find, the Russian investment in the reconstruction of the tourist infrastructure in Abkhazia points to the veracity of this information.

This development continues the old tradition of Russian travellers in Abkhazia. Memories of childhood and family vacations in the same area as well as dachas for the holidays of the elite, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, contribute to the motivation of the Russians to visit Abkhazia.³⁴ The different forms of tourism in the past point to the different profiles of tourists in the present as well; for example, the old elite dachas that have been bought by the nouveaux riches of the new era. New divisions based more on wealth than on ideology and political hierarchy are being built. Nevertheless, ethnic continuity in terms of the pool of tourists seems to nourish the political relations of dependency between Abkhazia and Russia, presuppositions in the expectations and the marketing of Abkhazia as a tourist place, particularly Sukhum-i. Many of the characteristics found in the representational strategies used today were developed in previous periods and they are used as part of the archive I defined in order to support the current renaissance of Abkhazian tourism.

The official website of the de facto state of Abkhazia³⁵ that is in both English and Russian is owned by the State Committee for Resorts and Tourism. As the visitor soon understands, however, the most practical and richest information in terms of textual and photographic material is in Russian to cater for the majority of tourists, who come from the Russian Federation. I focus here on the representation of Sukhum-i's waterfront, in order to compare it with my 'real' tour. Online, it seems that the site stresses Sukhum-i's ancient history, nature (botanical gardens, zoo), the seafront and the more recent sites of Abkhazian identity, such as the cemeteries for the heroes of the recent conflict. The emphasis on cultural achievements and natural beauty seems to continue the tradition of the archive shaped in the colonial and Soviet periods.

The main photograph that welcomes the visitor to the Sukhum-i page is a night-time photograph of the impressively lit entrance (an arcade) to the botanical gardens of the city. This introductory page on the history of the city gives information about the city's geography and climate, emphasizing the frequency of its sunny days. Then it refers to its ancient history. Here, though, there is an important differentiation from older sites referring to the city, like *The Abkhaz World*.³⁶ The latter in its first reference to 'Sukhum' refers to its antiquity in terms of its relation to the ancient Greeks and Romans. For example, there is reference to the

6th Century B.C.: The Greeks established trading posts in Abkhazia, a Caucasian land, then part of the region known as Colchis at the Eastern end of the Black Sea. Their cities, especially Dioscurias (modern day Sukhum) grew to be a prosperous trade center.

Conversely, on the new site, the antiquity of the city refers to pre-historic periods linked to the Colchian civilization:

Remains of a Paleolithic settlement were discovered in Yashtukha village near Sukhum; it is one of the oldest settlements in Europe. Settlements of Copper, Bronze and Iron ages were also discovered around Sukhum. Dolmens, the most ancient stone buildings in the Caucasus, discovered in Achandar and Esher not far from Sukhum, date back to the Bronze Age. Cromlechs of the Megalithic culture, rows of stones piled up in circles, have also been discovered in Esher. Later in the Bronze age, around 12th–7th centuries BC, the unique Colchian culture blossomed in Sukhum and along the entire Caucasus coastline.³⁷

Consequently, it seems that there is a shift in emphasis that in the most recent site tries to stress the indigenous character of the cultures existing in the areas without Europeanizing them. The latter is a strategy often adopted by post-socialist regions³⁸ in their process to construct a new identity. Consequently, the site follows a different strategy from other Russian³⁹ and Georgian⁴⁰ official tourist sites that link the antiquity of the area to Greek mythology in order to establish a connection with European history and consequently to claim world recognition.

In another part of the site, there is a reference to the ‘cosmopolitan character’ of the city: its cultural institutions (theatres and galleries), restaurants and cafés, and the ethnic communities. The latter, however, are represented not through a reference to their ethnicity, but through their religious heritage to the city, their churches. ‘Sukhum is also home to several churches of different confessions: the Orthodox Cathedral, the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the Synagogue, and the Mosque.’ The virtual visitor could conclude that some of them belong to religious communities that might still live in the city but the question of their ethnicity remains unexplored. Then there is a reference to the bourgeois architectural heritage of the city from the 19th to the early 20th century. In the description of the buildings (clubs, theatres, restaurants, cafés and hotels) there are several references to important families of different origins (Russian, Greek, French, or Armenian) and professions (merchants or architects) who contributed to this heritage of the city.

Their contribution is described thus:

After the city was completely destroyed during the Russo-Turkish war, the city began its rebirth from the walk and it became the first street of the new Sukhum. The most enterprising and educated citizens came here to build new hotels and houses. Every building along the walk has its own history and architectural façade and is a place of cultural and architectural interest.⁴¹

There is another reference to the Greek past of the city in the Russian version of the site in the description of the Russian Orthodox church (Собор Благовещения Пресвятой Богородицы), which was recognized initially as Greek Orthodox as it was built by the Greek community (*Gretseskaya Obschina*). From the other references to the tourist attractions of the city, the visitor can learn several things regarding the imperial heritage, especially from the presentation of the Botanical Gardens, the

Abkhazian Scientific Research Institute of Experimental Pathology and Therapy (Monkey Colony), and the sites of the Russian–Turkish wars. This part concludes with a brief reference to the Abkhazian/Georgian war, the ongoing task of reconstruction and the introduction to some places of interest connected with this period of Sukhumian history, such as the Great Abkhazian Wall, the recent war, like the memorial/cemetery (Glory Park), the modern state gallery and theatre. References to the Soviet past and the Georgian influence on the city are rare or absent altogether.

The virtual representation of the city tries to convey on the one hand the Abkhazian indigenous culture and on the other its cosmopolitanism—especially if we examine it in comparison with the other cities represented, which have a less cosmopolitan past, like Gagra or Pitsunda; there the focus is on pristine beauty. Different tourist places emphasize different aspects of the Abkhazian Riviera, which draw, nevertheless, from the same archive. References to other ethnic groups and their heritages, like the Greek bourgeois families that contributed to the construction of some emblematic buildings, are underlined only in relation to the imperial past and the emergence of a merchant class. Consequently, the cosmopolitan character underlined is reduced to a marketable feature of the city's representation, a feature of its 'historical heritage'. It turns, consequently, into a 'tourist attraction' rather than a lived tradition as in the city tour with my host where it was discussed in relation to a continuous Greek presence. Moreover, any connection of cosmopolitanism to the Soviet translation of the term as a potential threat to the regime seems to be excluded.

The silence of certain periods and peoples from the cosmopolitan past of the city empties it of real meaning and facilitates its commercialization as part of a tourist representation. The transformation of the waterfront into cultural heritage seems to omit a crucial part of the ethnic Greek history of the city, which is reproduced in its virtual representation. Furthermore, the few statements about the diverse ethnic groups represent them through their religious affiliation and heritage rather than as living communities, something that seems consistent with the above understanding of cosmopolitanism. Consequently, the transformation of a utopia to an e-topia carries inclusions and exclusions with historical roots that prevent the transformation of cosmopolitanism to politics of pluralism and equality; in other words, a realistic project of inclusion of the Abkhazian ethnic communities that could contribute to the prevention of any further conflict. This type of representation is strengthened by Abkhazia's international isolation, which perpetuates the culture of fear and insecurity of the de facto state's existence and where the Other, like the various ethnic minorities, can be a source of anxiety.

I started my argument by discussing the idea of the 'archive of representational strategies'. I suggested that it is a space that brings and keeps things/people together through a repertoire of representational strategies that seems to support the recollection of the city, as part of the Black Sea's cosmopolitan Riviera. In this paper, I tried to postulate how this illustration of Sukhum-i is formed through the transformation of the city into a tourist place in different periods through Russian imperialism and Soviet planning. I concentrated on Sukhum-i's waterfront in the discourses of the Sukhumian Greeks and the official tourist website.

This transformation involved two different strategies of representations: the former emphasized the Abkhazian nature and landscape as pristine and exotic. The latter concentrated on the diversity of its peoples. The two strategies are interwoven through the same modernization project of imperial Russia in the 19th century that generated tourism and transformed Abkhazia into a tourist destination. The Soviet period changed the agenda of tourism in the area but it did not impede its boom by forming Abkhazia as a socialist utopia for the privileged few.

Today, after the bloody war (1991–93), the re-emergence of tourism offers an economic opportunity for the internationally isolated *de facto* state. Furthermore, tourist representation and campaigns on the web have turned these digital spaces into a space of recognition, where the *de facto* state tries to construct a new Abkhazian identity. The web also forms a space of contact between Abkhazia and the outside world, which has no access to the ‘real’ Abkhazia due to its political situation. At the same time, the virtual representation of Abkhazia, its transformation to an e-topos and, especially, Sukhum-i’s heritage of cosmopolitanism seem to be connected to a political legacy that often overlooks the political violence that resulted in displacements and deportations, inclusions and exclusions, and which also shaped the city’s cosmopolitanism.

Nevertheless, these new representations also inaugurate new agendas. For example, they privilege the indigenous cultures and the material evidences of the cosmopolitan past of the city whereas they try to restrict the ethnic plurality of the present. The emphasis on certain periods, like the colonial period and its legacy, and the corresponding limited reference to the Soviet period are consistent with what I discussed in relation to my tour and the framing of the deportations as part of a Georgianization plan runs the risk of marginalizing these other experiences and their interpretations of the past resulting in framing plurality only within Abkhazian/-Georgian relations and conflicts.

In reality, this strategy could undermine the argument about Sukhumian cosmopolitan character. Turning cosmopolitanism into a marketable feature and a tourist attraction could marginalize the plural present and the needs of the various ethnic communities. The case of the Greeks exemplifies this situation as it reproduces cosmopolitan claims in order to underline the community’s presence in the city’s past, and their diasporic identity, but what is the community’s presence in the city’s political landscape? If the indigenous is emphasized on the one hand and the diasporic on the other, is there any possibility for the equal participation and political inclusion of the ethnic and cultural difference? Studying the archive of representational strategies and their historical transformations—not as something that forces certain representation, but as a field of creative exploration of different texts, genres, agendas and actors—could help us introduce challenging questions in the discussion of heritage in post-conflict contexts.

In the new political economy of the city, tourism often refashions perceptions of history and produces different performances of authenticity in terms of actors and agendas but also different claims about what cultural heritage means. In the construction of this meaning, the notion of an archive of representational strategies could be helpful in order to understand how certain tourist places and gazes are

generated through objectifications, transformations and silences, which contribute to the causes of conflict rather than to a consensus. Consequently, as Sally Ann Ness argues,⁴² while discussing tourist destinations as subject to potential locational forms of violence, the formation of such tourist places ‘must be recognised as the potential agents of trauma and cultural loss as well as of commercial gain, consumable pleasure and global prosperity’. The emergence of Sukhum-i as a tourist destination seems to take this into account: in other words, it recognizes the economic potentiality of the tourist industry, keeping in mind, because of its political isolation, a narrow target group and promoting a specific but restricted agenda (the focus is on solidifying Abkhazian nationhood and statehood). That is why the authorities seem to use the old archive of representation strategies that focus on particular features of Abkhazia, such as its landscape and cosmopolitanism, and exclude others such as the different pasts and the contested histories of the present.

On the other hand, the authorities try to support their agenda regarding the ethnic character of the region. In doing so, they seem to undermine traumas of the past that are strongly connected with the above archive and the way in which people and places were categorized. Moreover, the transformation of cosmopolitanism into marketable exotica deprives some of these plural ethnic communities of a more voiced presence and present, something that could provoke more violence and trauma in the future than the authorities like to imagine. Consequently, tourism cannot be considered as an olive branch promoting economic growth and political collaboration. Rather, the performance of authenticity through various cultural practices, like the one I examined here (walking tour and online visualization), could contribute to the continuity of marginalization and conflict if it is not properly addressed.

Notes

- [1] The spelling indicates the difference in the pronunciation of the name in Abkhazian (Sukhum) and Georgian (Sukhum-i).
- [2] Ancient Greek legends told of a fabulously wealthy land where Jason and the Argonauts stole the Golden Fleece from King Æetes with the help of his daughter Medea. It was a distant land that was reached by the Black Sea and down the river Phasis (currently the river Rioni). Historically, Colchis was colonized by the Milesian Greeks to whom the native Colchians supplied gold, slaves, hides, linen cloth, agricultural produce and such shipbuilding materials as timber, flax, pitch and wax (Michael Grant, *The Rise of the Greeks*, Phoenix, London, 1987, pp. 269–280, 301–310).
- [3] Bo Stråth, ‘Introduction. Myth, memory and history in the construction of community’, in Bo Stråth (ed.), *Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community: Historical Patterns in Europe and Beyond. Multiple Europes*, PIE Peter Lang, Brussels, 2000, p. 19.
- [4] Julie Scott and Tom Selwyn, ‘Introduction’, in Julie Scott and Tom Selwyn (eds), *Thinking through Tourism*, Berg, Oxford, 2010, p. 19.
- [5] Ann Stoler, ‘Colonial archives and the arts of governance: on the content in the form’, in Carolyn Hamilton *et al.* (eds), *Refiguring the Archive*, David Philip, Cape Town, 2002, pp. 83–103.
- [6] As Stoler’s work shows, for decades, archives, especially official archives of governmental institutions, churches and missions, were used as one of the most important primary sources concerning the discovery of the past, particularly the colonial past. Archives were perceived as a store where the past was saved for the next generations to discover it. This approach often

overlooked the role of archives as places inscribed in colonial power and discursive agendas. Admitting this fact helps us reconsider archives not as sites where the past is given and found, but as sites where the past is being constructed. In other words, how did people of some degree of authority perceive the world they were living in and what did they know about it? What kind of descriptions did they use to describe it, and how? Through what kind of genres (written reports, personal letters, diaries, drawings or photographs) and in what sort of conventions (writing style) are archives constituted? This approach questions the distinction between archives as a source of facts and an objective and accurate presentation of the past and as fiction or subjective representation.

- [7] Penelope Papailias, *Genres of Recollection. Archival Poetics and Modern Greece*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005, p. 13.
- [8] Quoted from Adi Kuntsman, *Figurations of Violence and Belonging. Queerness, Migrant-hood and Nationalism in Cyberspace and Beyond*, Peter Lang, Bern, 2009, p. 231.
- [9] Simon Coleman and Mike Crang, *Tourism: Between Place and Performance*, Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2002.
- [10] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- [11] John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, Sage, London, 2002.
- [12] Harsha Ram and Zaza Shatirishvili, 'Romantic topography and the dilemma of empire: the Caucasus in the dialogue of Georgian and Russian poetry', *The Russian Review*, 63, January 2004, pp. 1–25.
- [13] Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism 1600–1860*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995.
- [14] David Picard, 'Tropical island gardens and formations of modernity', in Julia Scott and Tom Selwyn (eds), *Thinking through Tourism*, Berg, Oxford, 2010, pp. 139–161.
- [15] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Knopf, New York, 1993.
- [16] Louise McReynolds, 'The pre-revolutionary Russian tourist: commercialization in the 19th century', in Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (eds), *Tourism: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2006, pp. 17–43.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- [18] Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2005.
- [19] Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (eds), *Tourism: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2006, pp. 9–10.
- [20] Diane P. Koenker, 'The proletarian tourist in the 1930s: between mass excursion and mass escape', in Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (eds), *Tourism: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2006, p. 119.
- [21] The Greek government organized the transfer of the Sukhumian Greeks in August 1993.
- [22] Defined here both as a process of institutionalized recognition and as a symbolic understanding of historical consciousness.
- [23] The term is borrowed by the work of Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993.
- [24] By staging I do not try to undermine my host's representation as fake. Instead, I try to underline the significance that the Sukhumian Greeks place on the identity politics since, at least, the 1990s.
- [25] Fazil Iskander, *Sandro de Chegem*, Vintage, London, 1983.
- [26] Andrew L. Zapanis, *Greek–Soviet Relations 1917–1941*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, pp. 269–372.
- [27] Nikolai N. Ioannidi, *The Greeks in Abkhazia*, Alashara, Sukhumi, 1990, p. 70 (in Russian).
- [28] Nikolai N. Ioannidi, *Technologies of Criminality*, Alashara, Sukhumi, 1997 (in Russian).
- [29] Vasili Axionov, *Moskva kva-kva*, Kastaniotis, Athens, 2010 [2006] (in Greek).

- [30] Christian Noack, 'Coping with tourism: planned and "wild" mass tourism on the Soviet Black Sea coast', in Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (eds), *Tourism: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2006, pp. 281–385.
- [31] The dacha has a long and complex history in Russia and has recently become popular as a new field of study. See Stephen Lovell, *Summerfolk: A History of the Dacha 1710–2000*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2003.
- [32] Elizabeth Owen, 'Stalin's Abkhazia dacha a modest retreat', *EurasiaNet.Org*, 15 August 2010.
- [33] < <http://www.c-r.org/resources/audio-video/index.php>> (accessed 3 September 2010).
- [34] Elena Nikiforova, 'Between Adler and Gagra: the border matrix' [Special theme: Rethinking the South Caucasus], *Laboratorium*, 1, 2010, pp. 260–263 (in Russian).
- [35] < <http://abkhazia.travel>> (accessed 29 October 2010).
- [36] < <http://www.abkhazworld.com/abkhazia/apsny.html>> (accessed 7 September 2010).
- [37] < <http://abkhazia.travel/en/sukhum>> (accessed 18 July 2010).
- [38] Craig Young and Duncan Light, "'Communist heritage tourism": between economic development and European integration', in Dieter Hassenpflug, Burkhardt Kolbmüller and Sebastian Schröder-Esch (eds), *Heritage and Media in Europe—Contributing towards Integration and Regional Development*, Bauhaus Universität Weimar, Weimar, 2006, pp. 249–263.
- [39] < <http://www.russiatourism.ru>> (accessed 28 August 2010).
- [40] < <http://georgia.travel>> (accessed 2 November 2010).
- [41] < http://abkhazia.travel/en/sukhum_places/109.html> (accessed 25 August 2010).
- [42] Sally A. Ness, 'Tourism–terrorism: the landscaping of consumption and the darker side of place', *American Ethnologist*, 32(1), 2005, p. 135.

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