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Pre-print.

Silvia Serrano

## **Sharing the Not-Sacred**

### *Rabati and Displays of Multiculturalism*

Upon arrival in Akhaltsikhe, the main town of Samtskhe-Javakheti, a region in Southern Georgia bordering Turkey, one is struck by a stunning view: on the heights of the city the golden dome of a mosque springs up, alongside a madrasa, an Orthodox church, a nineteenth-century Romantic pavilion, a replica of eclectic architectural elements in stucco, and last, but not least, chic boutiques, a brand new restaurant and a hotel. Scanning further, one will find Turkish baths, two synagogues, an Armenian church and a Catholic church located alongside a fortress, in the district of Rabati, where houses and streets still need repairing.

The complex, known as ‘Rabati’, was inaugurated in July 2012, just three months before the parliamentary elections that resulted in the defeat of Saakashvili’s United National Movement. It was one of the numerous major urban renewal projects launched by the Saakashvili Government.<sup>11</sup> Whereas other projects focused renovations on religious buildings, such as the controversial reconstruction of the Bagrati Cathedral near Kutaisi, Rabati is the only example of a major project including non-Orthodox places of worship. What is unique about this project is that neither the mosque nor the church is open for worship: they are parts of a museum. As explained in the magazine *Tabula*, which is widely seen to reflect views similar to the political authorities: ‘The rehabilitated complex, in general, will not have a religious function. It will instead serve as a living history of Georgia – a place where visitors can enjoy multicultural architecture of various periods and will be able also to rest’ (Sutidze 2012). The implicit idea underlying the project is that the coexistence of different confessions can only be achieved by neutralizing the religiosity of a space, and that places can be shared only if desacralized. In other words, desacralizing religious buildings is viewed as the precondition for the creation of a shared common space around them.

Numerous scholars have demonstrated that institutional actors help ‘to redefine the sites and the sorts of activities that take place around them’ (Bowman 2012: 7). The aim of this chapter is, in considering the case of Rabati, to question the impact of institutional interventions (by governmental and ecclesiastical institutions) on the definition, transformation and reinvention of religious buildings and holy places. Furthermore, the conditions by which these buildings can (or cannot) become a shared space are examined. The study is based on official public documentations on this project, interviews conducted in Akhaltsikhe with, among others, the agents in charge of this project in April 2015, and, finally, an observation of the activities surrounding these religious buildings. The aim of this study was to investigate the rationale driving the secular state’s decision to adhere to these public policies, and consider the reaction and perceptions of the local population to them, including the public debate (or lack of) that was provoked by the project. The article is structured in the following manner: firstly, I will analyse the position of the Orthodox Church of Georgia (OCG) towards religious buildings, including those located in Akhaltsikhe. Secondly, I will examine the Rabati project as the answer of the Georgian State to the Church’s exclusivist claims

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<sup>1</sup> Other projects include relocating the Parliament to Kutaisi, and urban renewal projects in Batumi, Signaghi and Lazika, a new utopian Dubai- style city on the coast of the Black Sea.

towards sacred sites in Georgia. Finally, I will consider how and why the local population has largely endorsed the restoration of religious buildings in order to display confessional diversity.

**Figure 9.1** Rabati, April 2015, overview with old mosque, medresseh, the reconstructed St Marine church.



Photograph by the author

## The OCG and the Nationalization of Sacred Places

Religious buildings have become central to political and symbolic competition between the state and the Orthodox Church of Georgia (OCG). The government initiated the restoration of the Rabati fortress in an attempt to restrain the patriarchate's efforts to control public spaces and to spatially impose the state narrative of the nation. Hence, the project cannot be understood outside of its political context and the background of previous change in the status of religious buildings, resulting from forced secularization during Soviet rule and from their linkage with the national discourse. The restored architectural complex, delimited by two surrounding walls, is situated on the hill of Rabati, which is in one of the oldest neighbourhoods in the city. In order, however, to understand the meanings institutional actors and the local population alike ascribe to the buildings located inside, the general context of the city and the region must be taken into account.

### Delimiting the Boundaries

The leaflet handed out to tourists when they enter the Rabati complex reminds them that the city – whose name was Lomsia until the twelfth century – was founded by Gvaram Mamphali, the son of king Ashot I Kuropalata, in the ninth century. It is situated in the Samtskhe region, which was part of the larger principality of Samtskhe-Saatabago from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. It was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century. According to the treaty of Adrianople that ended the Russian-Turkish wars, ten *sanjaks* (the equivalent of a district in the administrative division of the Ottoman Empire) of the *pashalik* (province) of Akhaltsikhe were integrated into the Russian empire in 1829. This laid the foundation for the integration of Samtskhe into Soviet Georgia in 1921.

The ethnic and religious landscape of the region has been shaped by its history and characterized by several shifts of sovereignty and displacements of populations. The ruling family, the Jaq'eli, converted to Islam after the region became part of the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, the title of *pasha* was borne by a member of the family almost without interruption until 1829, when the pashalik of Akhaltsikhe was abolished. Following the example of the Jaq'eli, other feudal families adopted Islam. As Catholics were not forced to convert, Armenian and Georgian Catholic communities have remained in the region.

When Samtskhe was integrated into Russia, the resettling of Christians from the Ottoman Empire changed the demographic balance in favour of the Armenian population.<sup>2</sup> The last wave of forced and mass displacement took place in November 1944, when, on Stalin's order, between 90,000 and 120,000 Muslims were deported to Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s, the Jews who had lived in the region for centuries started settling to Israel. Notwithstanding the tendency towards homogenization, with Orthodox Christians, Monophysites, Catholics, Muslims and Jews still present, Samtskhe has remained one of the most diverse regions of Georgia.<sup>4</sup>

The history of the region is reflected in the variety of the religious buildings located in the city: this includes two synagogues, one Catholic church and several Armenian churches and Ottoman buildings. Those monuments, although not always in good condition, contain material traces of the ethnic and religious mixing and political turmoil of the region. They are urban palimpsests, appropriated by different religious communities over the centuries, and then transformed into secular buildings under the Soviet rule. For example, when on 15 August 1828 troops led by Paskevich occupied the citadel, the moon crescent was removed from the minaret and sent to Tbilisi as a trophy. Later it was replaced by a golden cross (Lomsadze 2013: 157). Then the mosque was turned into an Orthodox church, an ambo was added to the original structure, and it was not removed during the last restoration works. The complex passed under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, and later it was transformed into a museum.

As it is often the case with border regions (Valtchinova 2008), Samtskhe holds a specific place in the imagined map of the Georgian nation. Given its geographic location, memory of territorial disputes<sup>5</sup> and diversity of the population, it is viewed by political actors as a sensitive region, with a fragile Georgian-ness that needs to be constantly proven. The stability and boundaries of identity are challenged by the non-congruence of ethnicity and religion.<sup>6</sup> Hence, for identity entrepreneurs such as the Orthodox Church, it is crucial to reassert their presence in this territory, and such a step has an impact on the meaning ascribed to religious buildings that have become first and foremost the materialized landmarks of the nation.

### The 'Shouting Stones': Old Buildings, New Conflicts

The challenge the Church has set itself is to affirm the congruence of national and religious identities, and to anchor this identity in the canonical territory. The Church authorities pursue this goal not only by promoting the conversion of non-Orthodox Georgians but also by rewriting Georgian history, including the history of Georgian Muslims. In this context, control and ownership of places of worship, and the assignment

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<sup>2</sup> A According to the 1886 census, 39.4 per cent of the population of the Akhaltsikhe *uezd* (administrative subdivision of the Russian empire) were Georgians, 25.6 per cent were Armenians, 27.4 per cent were Tatars, 0.3 per cent Russians and 4.5 per cent were Jews. In the city of Akhaltsikhe, the proportion was as follows: 17 per cent Georgians, 64.6 per cent Armenians, 0.1 per cent Tatars, 0.9 per cent Russians, 15.8 per cent Jews. Retrieved 13 October 2015 from <http://www.ethno-kavkaz.narod.ru/rngeorgia.html>

<sup>3</sup> Referred to as 'Meskhetians', whether they should be considered Turk or Georgian remains a sensitive political issue.

<sup>4</sup> According to the 2002 census, 36.59 per cent of the population of Akhaltsikhe district were Armenians and 61.72 per cent Georgians.

<sup>5</sup> In December 1918 the only armed conflict between Armenia and Georgia broke out over the control of the districts of Lori/Leri, Akhalkalaki/ Akhalkalak and of Borchalo/Bortchalou.

<sup>6</sup> Between Catholic Georgians and Armenians, Muslim Georgians, Jewish Georgians, etc. The issue of the return of the Meskhetians, the local Muslim inhabitants of Meskheti, who had been deported by Stalin, was declared a crucial task by many dissidents. After leading dissident figures came to power, such as the first president of post-Soviet Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, this issue was dropped. The assignment of an ethnic identity to their descendants – Georgian or Turkish – remains the marker of political positioning towards their return. In the census previous to the deportation they were registered sometimes as 'Turks' and sometimes as 'Azeris'.

of their meanings, are crucial. By claiming ownership to all religious structures located in Georgia, the Church attempts to capture both the past and the territory.

Disputes over the ‘ownership’ of churches go back to the birth of modern nationalism in the Caucasus and to the conflicts over the ‘shouting stones’ (*kvata ghaghadi*).<sup>7</sup> They were reactivated by the privatization of properties nationalized by the Soviets and by the reopening of the churches closed at the time. Surb Nshan (the Holy Sign), located in the district of Narda, on the hill facing Rabati, is one of the five churches located in Georgia that are claimed by both the Orthodox Church of Georgia and by the Armenian Apostolic Church.<sup>8</sup> Due to these conflicting claims, it cannot be reopened for worship, although it is visited mostly by Armenians. Similar disputes have taken place around six Catholic churches, three of them being located in Samtskhe, in the villages of Ivlika and Ude, and in the district of Rabati. These churches were closed during the Soviet period; then from 1989 to 1991 they reopened and were de facto transferred to the Orthodox Church, since there was no Catholic priest remaining to conduct mass. The Akhaltsikhe church was eventually given back to the Catholic Church and in 2012, a Convent of Benedictines opened right next to it.

The patriarchate has based its claims to the property on several provisions of a 2002 constitutional agreement regulating relations between the Orthodox Church and the state.<sup>9</sup> According to article 7, ‘the State shall recognize Orthodox churches, monasteries (acting and non-acting), their remains and land premises that are built all over Georgia, to be possessions of the Church’. Article 11 states that it ‘shall acknowledge the material and moral damage done to the Church when the state lost its independence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (especially between 1921 and 1990)’.<sup>10</sup> The Orthodox Church was up to 2014 the only religious institution entitled to state compensation, whereas other organizations remained deprived of any official status at the time the constitutional agreement was signed. Since the commission in charge of the restitution of property was never set up, no inventory of the goods to be returned to the Church has ever been drawn up. Moreover, the patriarchate was entitled to define what a church is, and, hence, which buildings should become the property of the Church. For all of these reasons, the agreement has not only legitimized the claims of the patriarchate to religious buildings that were acting Orthodox churches in the past (such as the Akhmediye mosque), but also over buildings that never belonged to it (such as Catholic churches) (Serrano 2013: 95–8).<sup>11</sup>

The patriarchate has also tried to prevent the construction of religious buildings such as mosques, non-Orthodox churches, or Yezidi shrines,<sup>12</sup> and the reopening of already existing ones (Gavtadze and Chitanava 2015). When it failed, it attempted ad minima to maintain its control over the public space by limiting their visibility and opposing the erection of religious symbols. As a result, in 2015, there was no acting mosque in Akhaltsikhe, only a single prayer room, with the few pious Muslims living in the city travelling to the neighbouring district of Adigeni for the Friday namaz (prayer).

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<sup>7</sup> The expression goes back to the Armenian-Georgian dispute over the region at the end of the nineteenth century. It was first used by a Russian journalist at *Peterburgskie Vedomosti*, then by Ilia Chavchavadze. The expression was drawn from the New Testament (Luke 19:40).

<sup>8</sup> It is known by the Georgians as John the Baptist Church.

<sup>9</sup> In 2003, a court ruled against the restitution of the Kutaisi Church to the Catholic Church, and based its decision on the constitution agreement.

<sup>10</sup> Translation from Georgian. Sakhelmts’ipo adast’urebs XIX-XX sauk’unee- b’si (gansak’utrebti 1921-90 ts’lebshi), sakhelmts’ipoebrivi damouk’ideblobis dak’argvis p’eriodshi, ek’lesiatsvis mat’erialuri da moraluri zianis miq’enebis pakt’s. Rogorts čamortmeuli konebis nats’ilis pakt’iuri plobeli, ighebs val- debulebas mat’erialuri zianis nats’ilobriv k’omp’ensatsiaze (sakartvelos SSR minist’rta sabē’os dadgenileba No.183; 12.04.90).

<sup>11</sup> There was no claim over synagogues.

<sup>12</sup> See for example ‘Les minorités nationales en Géorgie’. Rapport n°412, April 2005. *FIDH*. Retrieved 2 March 2016 from <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/ge412fr.pdf>

By doing so, the patriarchate fuels latent conflicts that can turn into open confrontation. For example, in 2013, the situation in the city became tense after a petition urged for the demolition of a minaret of the mosque in the village of Chela. Muslims gathered in protest in the centre of Akhaltsikhe, and a counter-rally was then organized on Orthodox priests' initiative. Several foreign embassies reacted in an attempt to prevent further escalation, and the patriarchate sent its representative, Father Jakob, to Akhaltsikhe to ask the protesters to disperse. Eventually, the minaret was erected, but the muezzin has not been allowed to call to namaz. This is only one of numerous examples of such confrontations.<sup>13</sup>

As for Rabati, the patriarchate was not able to oppose the restoration project, but it claimed property of the Ahmed mosque and argued that the Council of Architecture of the Patriarchate should be consulted before carrying out any changes in the structure. As the argument goes:

This mosque was built in 1752 by Jaq'eli Ahmed, who was Georgian, but of Muslim confession. This mosque was built by Georgians. It was not a Turkish cultural monument. It is a Georgian cultural monument. It is believed that before the mosque was built, this place used to be a Christian chapel that fell into ruins and in its place the mosque was built. Unfortunately, no archaeological investigations were carried out. ... Then the Russians came and the mosque was converted into a church. A bell tower was added, various works were carried out and it began to serve as an Orthodox Cathedral. When you step inside, it is unlikely you might imagine it was once a mosque. We are in a fully functional cathedral, in which it is possible to conduct the service. It is a Cathedral, and the Patriarchate, on the basis of the state-church concordat, is competent to declare that he is the owner. (Father Theodore considers the Akhmediye mosque an orthodox church, 2013).

The reasons put forward by the patriarchate reveal the ambiguity behind the ethnicization of religious buildings: the patriarchate regards the Akhmediye mosque as a national heritage monument, as it was built by Georgians. Muslim Georgians, although seeing it as a sacred place, are not entitled to own this property. Converting this mosque into a church is justified by a narrative on the origins of the shrine; supposedly, it was built on the foundations of an old church, an argument often put forward in the case of contested Armenian churches, and by the emphasis on the fact that, during the nineteenth century, it was used as an Orthodox cathedral.

## The Secularization of Religious Buildings

Three factors account for the reactivation of conflicts whose origins date back to the nineteenth century, all of which are felt more acutely in Samtskhe due to its proximity to the Turkish and the Armenian borders and the large proportion of Armenians among the local population. The first one is how buildings confiscated during the Soviet period were 'returned', a process that has triggered competing demands. The second is the tendency towards blurring national and Orthodox identities. The third factor is the fact that the Church and the state both complement each other and compete over the symbolic construction of the nation state.

These reactivated conflicts concern the religious rights of minorities, ownership of the sacred sites and the visibility of religions in the public sphere. This exemplifies how the emergence of nationalism has impacted the status of holy sites and has relocated the sources of their sacredness (Albera and Couroucli 2009; Neveu 2010). By erasing traces of a non-Orthodox past and non-Orthodox religions, the Church looks to redesign the national space in conformity with the national narrative it promotes. As in numerous other contexts, it is ecclesiastic control over religious buildings that tends to turn them into repositories of core identities, hence promoting exclusionary policies.

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<sup>13</sup> In December 2008, more than 100 people had scaled the roof of the mosque and started to shout 'you are not Georgian, this is no place for you'. ('Georgia: Minority Faiths Face Bureaucratic Hurdles' 2009)

In the case of Georgia, the Church's focus on buildings, materiality and visibility is also linked to the weakness of religious practice: the discourse on identity is one of the scarce resources the OCG can utilize to raise its social influence and shape ways of life and collective behaviour. In this specific context, religious buildings are not only holy places or lieux de mémoire (loci of memory), but also places that embody the struggle for symbolic power.

## Rabati: 'A Symbol of Tolerance'

The renovation of the Rabati fortress is inherently dialogical: the aim is to inscribe governmental ideology on the public space against that of the Church, to affirm the performative presence of the state and reassert its monopoly over the symbolic production of national identity. In this context, religious buildings are not only instrumental in nationalizing the territory, but also in the 'statification' (*étatisation*) of the local society - that is in incorporating the local society into a space defined and controlled by the state.

## Bringing the State back to Samtskhe-Javakheti

The region of Samtskhe was isolated during the Soviet era, as it was declared a 78 km wide border area requiring a special entry visa. It has remained poorly integrated in the Georgian society and economy after independence. Restrictions to moving in the border zone were removed in the late Soviet period and a checkpoint at the border with Turkey was opened in the first years of independence. Nevertheless, because of the rapid worsening of transport infrastructure and political turmoil, including interethnic tensions and feuds between different armed groups, the region remained marginalized during the 1990s. Later, several state programmes were implemented and the construction of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline provided job opportunities and some financing for regional projects. The attitude of the central authorities towards the region has long oscillated between indifference and the will to assert the Georgian-ness in an attempt to curb any separatist inclination. The general feeling among the local population has been that the region was not a priority for the government.

The restoration of Rabati is a performative process in the sense that the visibility of the state is supposed to re-establish the state itself. The existence of an old citadel and a historical neighbourhood provided the government with the opportunity to develop a project with high visibility. Due to the lack of a policy of valorization and maintenance, the whole district was in a pitiful state. Nevertheless, the mosque and the fortress were still standing, a small museum was operating, and in the dark 1990s residents even relayed themselves so that the collections would not be plundered by the armed bands that then controlled the region.

The 'Rabati fortress' – the official name of the complex – was created in the spring 2012 as a non-profit public entity (*arak'omersiuli sajaro p'iri*). The Akhaltsikhe municipality owns the complex with the exception of the hotel located inside, and it has agreed with the government to channel the subsidies received from the state to the fortress. Significantly, the project was launched by the Interior Ministry, rather than the Ministry of Culture or any other body in charge of tourism or regional development. More precisely, it was launched by the Interior Minister himself, Vano Merabishvili, and was achieved thanks to his networks and coercive authority.<sup>14</sup> Merabishvili, who is a native of Akhaltsikhe and was born into a

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<sup>14</sup> Previously a prominent activist of the Liberty Institute, one of the most active NGOs involved in defending the rights of religious minorities, Merabishvili was Interior Minister from December 2004 to July 2012, then Prime Minister up to October 2012. He was sentenced to a five and a half year prison term for abuse of power and giving fake jobs to activists in 2014.

Catholic family, was then one of the most influential members of the government and one of Saakashvili's closest allies, as well as one of the most prominent protagonists in the key reforms being implemented at that time.

'Vano', as he was broadly called in the public, mobilized all the resources of the neo-patrimonial state to complete the construction of the complex on time. He personally supervised the progression of the project; he would show up in Akhaltsikhe almost every week, sometimes unexpectedly, and he would choose the pieces to be displayed in the museum. The bypassing of bureaucratic procedures and mobilization of significant personal and financial means largely explains the successful completion of the project. Thanks to the minister's personal engagement, work could be carried out over a very short period of nine months. Companies were under pressure, hiring thousands of workers involving teams doing shifts day and night,<sup>15</sup> but, eventually, the complex was opened during the parliamentary elections campaign.

The Interior Minister also played a crucial role in obtaining financing. In Akhaltsikhe, all agree that the officially allocated budget did not match the actual expenditure. Association leaders, local journalists and ordinary people alike say that businessmen were forced to spend staggering amounts to purchase plots of land or abandoned buildings that were worth a trifle in reality, in Akhaltsikhe itself and in the surrounding villages. According to the local population, 'Vano' also forced companies to build hotels, some of which closed as soon as he left office.

Indeed, the walls surrounding the complex with the mosque do not delimit the border between the sacred and the secular: in fact they create a space where the regulatory power of the state is opposed to the chaotic outside world. The restored shrines embody the return of the state into the region. By establishing its visibility, the state is able to challenge the power and the narrative of the Church, including the one forging a bond between religion and nation.

## Tolerance as a National Narrative and as a Means of Governing Religious Communities

At first sight, the project opposes the exclusive ethno-confessional conception of the Georgian nation as was advocated by Gamsakhurdia in the past and by the Church today, and prefers a pluralistic vision of Georgia and its people. The Rabati district, hosting the ruins of ancient buildings, the mosque, the madrasa inside the fortress, and then right next to it, the synagogues and several churches, was the ideal backdrop for displaying the cohabitation of differentiated ethno-confessional groups. Merabishvili's idea was to create a space where the holy sites of the three monotheisms would stand side by side: 'We wanted Akhaltsikhe to become the symbol of multi-confessional Georgia, we came up with the idea, which, unfortunately, failed to become a reality, that there would be a synagogue in this complex.'<sup>16</sup>

This message is consistent with the constant emphasis Saakashvili regularly puts on population diversity and pluralism. It is also reminiscent of the official Soviet discourse on 'Friendship between Peoples'. Indeed, the museum located inside the fortress has rooms dedicated to contemporary history, displaying the stereotypes of the different groups living in the region, each with their own folkloric attributes: the Catholics, the Armenians, the Jews, the Georgians, and the Ottoman Turks have each been allocated a display case. The

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<sup>15</sup> The chief architect claims that hundreds of people worked for his firm alone at the same time, some days even up to 1,500 (interview, Akhaltsikhe, April 2015).

<sup>16</sup> 'Merabishvili: You Cannot Destroy Anything in Rabat' ('Merabishvili: tkven ver shedzlebt rabatshi verapris moshlas'). 2013. *Samkhretis k'aribch'e* (the Gate of the South). Retrieved 10 November 2015 from <http://sknews.ge/index.php?newsid=1363#.Vk25E-pVFQJ>.

guide comments on their gratitude for the Georgian hospitality. The temple Meskhetian house located at the top of the complex is also reminiscent of the Soviet-style ethnographic museums.<sup>17</sup>

The terms with which the message regarding diversity can be imagined and should be expressed are also precoded by the government. The banner that was unfolded at the entry of the old city for several months declared Akhaltsikhe to be ‘a symbol of tolerance’. The leaflet designed for visitors to Rabati state that ‘due to historical events, Akhaltsikhe was ethnically diverse with a mix of Georgians, Armenians, Greeks, Russians, Turks, Jews. The city of Akhaltsikhe became the symbol of Tolerance’. During my fieldwork, all respondents, from politicians to employees of the complex, mentioned that tolerance was at the core of the project, and some of them, such as the Mother Superior of the Benedictine Convent, expressed regrets that the banner was removed.

Tolerance belongs to the traditional vocabulary of self-promotion within Georgian nationalism, like when, for example, it is stressed that a mosque, an Orthodox church, an Armenian church and a synagogue are all located in one neighbourhood in Tbilisi. It complements the discourse on Georgian hospitality, which emphasizes autochthony and establishes a boundary between those who supposedly are natives and thus are entitled to live in Georgia, and the so-called newcomers who are less legitimate. Similarly, tolerance as a political discourse establishes a ranking and a hierarchy between those who tolerate and those who are tolerated. Rabati makes it possible to institute a segregation between religions.

In this sense, tolerance is not about sharing. At best, it is the acceptance that what cannot be shared may be juxtaposed. While hospitality is called in for regulating ethnic diversity, tolerance is referred to for managing religious pluralism. State-backed tolerance contributes to a new style and an ambiguous ‘soft’ secularity, by which the state does not impose the principles of separation and neutrality by adopting and implementing specific legislation, but appeals to the ethics of each individual (Brown 2008: 13). The success of this discourse also accounts for the fact that it echoes the traditional national discourse on tolerance as the essence of Georgianness. By endorsing the rhetoric of tolerance, the state recognizes religious imagination as a basis for national imagination: Rabati is a tool for the government to disseminate its discourse on the nation, but, remarkably, the diversity on which this discourse rests is now religious diversity.

One reason for the wide consensus around the notion of tolerance is its polysemy: it is at the interface between the nationalist discourse and the discourse of depoliticized international governance. ‘Tolerance’ is also the name of numerous NGOs, including a local one, the Centre Dedicated to Religious Organizations at the Office of the Public Mediator (Ombudsman), as well as other programmes backed by international organizations.<sup>18</sup> In 2006, after the creation of the special office of Advisor to the President on Civic Integration Issues, a Tolerance and Civil Integration Council was created in April 2008 and was charged with the task of elaborating a ‘National Concept of Tolerance and Civil Integration’. The National Concept of Tolerance and Civil Integration was adopted by a decree of the Prime Minister on 8 May 2009 (Sordia 2009: 18).

The spatial coexistence of several places of worship belonging to different religions is taken as evidence that the state is capable of guaranteeing their peaceful coexistence. By rehabilitating the mosque, when most of the non-Orthodox religious heritage is left abandoned and in a bad condition, the state intends to act as the protector of the minorities’ cultures. But rather than promoting diversity of practices, the state’s

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<sup>17</sup> The website of the museum explains that ‘The exhibition presents Samtskhe-Javakheti’s urban life, where diverse ethnic and religious artisans, merchants, writers, scientists, travellers, interpreters, artists, knitters, tailors, house-painters, porters create Meskheti’s multicultural society’. Retrieved 2 September 2015 from [http://museum.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=69&info\\_id=11866](http://museum.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=69&info_id=11866).

<sup>18</sup> For example, the Tolerance and Diversity Institute at <http://tdi.ge/en>.

response to the monopolistic views of the Church is a confessionalization of the religious landscape. With the juxtaposition of different buildings, Rabati is the image of a society organized around confessional communities that can live side by side, each in its own space, provided that their interactions are regulated by the state. The discourse on diversity does not mean that all religions are treated equally. On the contrary, it implies a hierarchy of religious communities, placing the Orthodox Church at the top. Indeed, the only site inside the citadel where devotional practices – ex-votos, icons, and church candles – can be observed is St Marina’s church. The statization of religious buildings has not countered the supremacy of one religion over the others. Despite its positive connotations in the discourse of multiculturalism, tolerance benefits the Orthodox Church first and foremost.

## Neutralizing the Religious

Tolerance has its limits: buildings are tolerated under the condition that they are not acting shrines. The response by the Georgian administration to defuse the conflicts that crystallized around religious buildings was to transform them – whether Muslim or Christian – into monuments of the cultural heritage and to desacralize them. This ‘solution’ stems from the balance of power between the actors involved and the limitation faced by the government. It also reflects the specific vision of secularity that comes with tolerance and of what the role of the state in regulating religions should be.

Turning the mosque and the church into museums was a compromise meant to reconcile contradictory demands. The state faced antagonistic claims from various groups and institutions, such as the advocates of cultural heritage, religious minorities, the Orthodox Church of Georgia, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and also from Turkey. The international dimension of Rabati is beyond the scope of this paper. It is enough to recall that the restoration of the Akhmediye mosque was decided during negotiations between the Ministries of Culture of both Turkey and Georgia. Finally, a bilateral agreement was signed, according to which the monuments of Georgian religious architecture in the territory of Turkey would be restored, and the Georgian administration pledged to rehabilitate or reconstruct monuments of Ottoman architecture in Georgia.<sup>19</sup>

Such demands from a variety of public actors indicate that holy places have become part of the political arena. In this respect, the signing of an agreement, despite the opposition of the patriarchate, and the completion of the rehabilitation project, shows that the state has prevailed over the Church. It was able to prevent St Marine’s church from being opened for worship and to impose the restoration of a mosque on the Georgian territory, hence countering the ambition of the OCG to establish Orthodoxy as the most monopolistic, visible religion in the country. Finally, the solution promoted by the authorities indicates that they view confessional diversity as a threat. As pointed out by Wendy Brown, ‘tolerance discourse reduces conflict to an inherent friction among identities and makes religious, ethnic, and cultural difference itself an inherent site of conflict, one that calls for and is attenuated by the practice of tolerance’ (Brown 2008). By banning religious practice in all the sites located in Rabati, the state reinforced the implicit idea that the coexistence of various religions, evidenced by the presence of religious buildings, is a factor favouring conflicts.

This compromise over the neutralization of religions by turning them into cultural heritage seems widely accepted by the local population and political forces alike. Even the patriarchate publicly expressed its consent towards the project as devised by the government.

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<sup>19</sup> As described by Kmuzov (2012) the most controversial issue was the reconstruction of the mosque Azizye, in Batumi. A first agreement was planned in 2010, but could not be signed because of the opposition from the patriarchate. Negotiations then resumed, and resulted in the signature of an agreement whose content was never made public. According to the public information, four churches were to be restored on Turkish territory.

## Rabati, a Georgian Dream

The ‘Rabati project’ has faced little opposition in Akhatsikhe. As explained by one of the architects of the complex: ‘There were no problems with the Armenians. A little more with the Turks; they used to come and have a look at the works.’ Since it was completed, in other cities, even in Akhalkalaki – a city mostly inhabited by Armenians, where the ruins of another old mosque are located – it has actually been taken as an example to be reproduced (interview, Akhalkalaki, August 2014). In Akhatsikhe, the only controversies that erupted were with regards to whether the new government would keep on financing the project or withdraw. Hence, groups of tourists from different countries, including from Turkey,<sup>20</sup> visit the site without visible negative reactions from the city dwellers. How can this broad consent be explained?

### Accommodating the Church’s Discourse on Religion and National Identity

The first reason is that the ‘soft secularity’ promoted by the state addresses their main concerns regarding the regulation of religions. Indeed, there is no opposition to the deactivation of the religious as a whole – including Orthodoxy – since it is viewed as a means to neutralize Islam specifically, which is still widely associated with danger among the Christian population of Western Georgia. The fear of Islamization, as a result of the Turkish influence or of demographic change, remains strong among Georgians and Armenians alike, who are massively opposed to the return of Meskhetian families into the region.<sup>21</sup> During conversations, one often hears that ‘the Turks cannot be trusted’ or that ‘we have to keep careful’.

The restoration of the mosque has been accepted, since it is not open to worship and since the state guarantees that claims made by ‘Turkey’ or ‘the Muslims’ will be curtailed. Given that the residents of Akhatsikhe are usually unaware of the bilateral dimension of the project, they see any demand from Turkey regarding restoration work as a first step towards appropriation. Criticisms against some of the changes in the architecture of the buildings expressed by diplomats visiting the site are interpreted as illegitimate claims from a foreign power. Alleged demands about the erection of religious signs are considered unacceptable: according to one interviewee, ‘The Turks want a crescent to be set up, but that is totally out of the question.’<sup>22</sup> Among the Armenian population, some have feared that *khachkars* (cross-stones) would be removed from the fortress.<sup>23</sup> A widely shared opinion is that the mosque is acceptable

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<sup>20</sup> According to the documents provided by the administration of Rabati, in 2013, the most numerous groups of tourists came from Israel (5,436 out of 17,866 foreign visitors), Poland (2,301), Turkey (1,723) and Russia (1,620). In 2014, Polish tourists were the most numerous (3,786 out of 14,800), then the Israelis (3,433), the Russians (1,269), and the Turks (809). In 2013, the site was also visited, among others, by 112 Azeris and 64 Iranians. In 2014, the figures were 99 and 31. While no Armenian was registered in 2013, in 2014 there were 186 Armenians.

<sup>21</sup> The perceptions of Turkey by city dwellers changed as the bordering regions developed. For example, one of the respondents noticed that there are more students at Kars University than inhabitants in Akhatsikhe.

<sup>22</sup> The Turkish side has opposed the golden dome and some other architectural changes such as new windows and the ground inside the mosque. As one interviewee pointed out, ‘the Turks accuse us of not maintaining historical monuments. But the mosque and the madrasa were preserved in a good state, while in Turkey the Georgian churches fell apart.’

<sup>23</sup> Online media echoed this fear, see for example, ‘Passions Around the Akhatsikhe Fortress “Rabat”’ (‘Strasti vokrug akhatsikhskoy kreposti “Rabat”’), *Hayasa*, no date mentioned, <http://hayasanews.com/rabatkr/>. Last consulted 25 October 2015.

because it is closed to worship, but that ‘if it opens, there will be huge problems’ (same interviewee as above).

Another reason accounting for the consensus over Rabati is that the national uses of the buildings prevail over their religious uses. But in this regard, the local perception of the mosque is slightly different from the vision promoted by the OCG nationwide. One is often reminded that the mosque was built by a Georgian (Jaq’eli) even though he was Muslim. Descendants of the Jaq’eli family were invited by the authorities to attend the opening ceremony in the capacity of being the former owners of the citadel. But the fact that they used to be Muslim is usually downplayed.<sup>24</sup> It is also often mentioned that it was built ‘on a church’, or that the plans are similar to a Byzantine basilica: ‘When the Turks arrived, the Jaq’elis built the mosque like a church, because they knew that it would be turned back into a Christian shrine. That is why it looks like Saint Sophia.’ As one of the managers put it, ‘When you are inside, you can see that it is like a church.’ Whereas the patriarchate stressed that the mosque was turned into an Orthodox cathedral after the integration of the region into the Russian empire, the local population recalls that only Russian officers and their family used to visit it, not the locals, who have never considered it to be ‘their’ church. In other words, the religious practices and uses of the mosque, as transmitted in collective memory, do not prevail over their national uses. Religious buildings have become the locus where collective identity crystallizes; rather than being places of worship, their sacredness derives mainly from their link to the nation.

This hiatus with the Church’s narrative indicates that its influence on the society may be weaker than the results of opinion polls and socio-logical surveys suggest. Since ethnic and religious diversity has been largely perceived as a problem, the local population is satisfied with the state proving its ability to curb antagonist claims, including from the Church. The acceptance of Rabati suggests a certain level of indifference vis-à-vis religious buildings and churches, indifference seldom voiced in the public debate, but consistent with the low level of religiosity and of attendance in the churches open to worship. One of the managers of Rabati explains that people are welcome to visit St Marine’s church, to pray or to light a candle, ‘as long as they pay for their ticket’. The approval of the deactivation of the religious buildings indicates some ambivalence among inhabitants regarding places of worship, including the Orthodox Church, and even some disinterest regarding their religious functions. This is coherent with the idea suggested by Catherine Wanner that post-Soviet societies can be characterized by ‘syncretic secularism’, meaning ‘a blending of belief, doubt and non-belief with the desire to belong and the refusal to be coerced by institutions’ (Wanner 2014: 436).

## Tourism against Heritage

Rabati is also a project aimed at boosting the economy thanks to tourism.<sup>25</sup> The state promotes the use of the religious buildings in tourism. There are several targets: schools and domestic and foreign visitors. The nature of the work accounts for the objective of developing tourism. This is not a restoration project, but a reconstruction project – that is to say, the reinvention and the reinterpretation of material heritage. Debates about the nature of interventions on heritage are not new in Georgia or in the post-Soviet area. The criterion of material authenticity as established by the Venice Charter was challenged by the adoption, in 2000, of the Charter of Riga. Indeed, the rehabilitation of Rabati has brought about substantial changes in the original architecture (in the case of the mosque and madrasa); it has led to a reconstruction (St Marine’s church, the typical Meskhetian house); and even to a complete innovation ((e.g. a copy of an element from the Generalife

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<sup>24</sup> During my stay, one descendant of the family working as an assistant to the director of the museum was introduced to me. The very mention that he may be Muslim was unanimously rejected as incongruous: ‘they have become Christians again’.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Everything felt spanking new. Dust-free. Trash-free. Scuff-free. What is this place?’, a US-American tourist asks on his travel blog. Example of a tourist’s blog: <http://jackandjilltravel.com/rabati-castle-akhaltiskhe-georgia/>. Last consulted 10 September 2015.

in Granada with the inauguration of a wedding palace). Most of the companies that participated in the project were construction companies with no expertise in restoration. The Ministry of Culture and the Agency for the Protection of Heritage have played only minor roles in this project, which was supervised by the Ministry of the Interior. Locally, tensions are palpable between the museum staff, concerned about the protection of cultural heritage, and the staff of the complex itself, interested in its commercial development. Restorers and curators of historical monuments complain of damage inflicted to the original buildings. And it is most likely that many foreign tourists would not come and visit the place, or would think that ‘it would have been better if it had looked more ancient’, as a Ukrainian tourist I met in April put it.

The economic benefits are obviously welcome. The ‘Fortress of Akhaltsikhe’ employs a hundred people; the stores inside, several dozen employees. In 2014, thirty-two travel agencies (out of the roughly 400 existing travel agencies in Georgia) included Rabati in their tours. More than 100,000 people visit the complex each year. Furthermore, other jobs have been created thanks to the tourist activities related to the fortress, especially in the hotel trade. The unique features of each building have been wiped away. That is why a church can stand alongside a mosque, a wedding house or ‘typical’ Meskhetian house. This is also why brides go and marry in the very same place where Iranian, Turkish, Armenian or Israeli tourists go and have a stroll.

### Rabati as a Heterotopia

Rabati is not a utopia but rather a heterotopia – that is to say, one of ‘those sites ... that have the uncommon property of being in relation to all the other sites, but in such a way that they suspend, neutralize or reverse all the relations that are designated or reflected by them’ (Foucault 1984).<sup>26</sup> Rabati is a display of multi-confessionalism while there are conflicts around religions; a display about an ideal past when the real one is negated or euphemized.

Alongside the restoration work in the citadel, other projects have been carried out: urban redevelopment, construction of hotels, infra-structure (a road and a bridge), a new ‘Alpha market’ meeting sanitary standards in place of the old bazaar, an artificial lake and, in front of the walls of the citadel, a brand new gas station, a palace of justice made of glass and a ‘Smart’ supermarket with a cafeteria open round-the-clock.

This is where Nino invited me to dinner. Everything was clean and functional; everything, including the espresso machine, worked perfectly. The window opened on the surrounding wall of Rabati, with a view of the golden dome of the mosque. Nino was happy: ‘This is the only place in town where I feel like in Europe.’ Although tourists in quest of authenticity dislike the new, clean, modern complex, locally it is broadly appreciated and viewed as ‘beautiful’. There is a sharp contrast between the site and the dilapidated surrounding neighbourhoods. At night, the illuminated castle outlines a beautiful skyline and can be seen several kilometres away. Many agree that it is an artificial monument, resulting from a deliberate focus on appearances; nevertheless, it is appreciated. Even for those who remember the old castle with nostalgia and who are aware of the scale of the destruction, the improvements to the site and to the city counterbalance the damage done.

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Un de ‘ces emplacements qui ont la curieuse propriété d’être en rapport avec tous les autres emplacements, mais sur un mode tel qu’ils suspendent, neutralisent ou inversent l’ensemble des rapports qui se trouvent, par eux, désignés, reflétés ou réfléchis’.

The novelty and the cleanliness of the place provide Akhaltsikhe residents with a sense of dignity. They now belong to a 'normal' world, to a 'civilized world', unlike the world of the 1990s, of arbitrariness, of violence, unlike the world of poverty and neglect they live in today. A frequent comment reflects this pride: people mention that it is a place 'like everywhere', 'like in Europe', like in other tourist resorts. This feeling is strengthened by the fact that the complex is visited not only by Georgian tourists but also by foreign tourists. Normality is an argument advanced against any potential opposition: it is 'normal' to have a nice golden mosque, it is 'normal' to pay to have access to the church, it is 'normal' to have shops, restaurants and bars, etc. because that is the case 'everywhere'.

The normality people refer to is the alleged normality of a dreamed up, globalized world characterized by prosperity, the market economy and the leisure industry. Rabati embodies this world: here, in a single place, you can find restaurants, shops, souvenirs and monuments (religious or secular). This world is heterotopic: 'Heterotopia has the power to juxtapose several spaces in a single real place, several sites that are incompatible with one another in essence' (Foucault 1984, translation by the author).<sup>27</sup>

The change in the original Ottoman architecture has contributed to the integration of Islamic buildings into the imagined world of the market. As mentioned above, the mosque and the madrasa are the traces of a past that cannot be integrated into the contemporary national narrative articulated around Orthodoxy and the symbol of a threatening Turkish influence. They are made acceptable thanks to their transformation into an Islamic monument extracted from its specific context and integrated into a global tourist and entertainment economy.

The mosque has been deprived of its local characteristics, testimony of a specific history, and has been turned into a generic Islamic building. The original floor and windows have been transformed. The reconstruction work has provided an opportunity to cover the dome with a golden coating, although this is not a characteristic of the local architectural tradition. This golden dome is the major obstacle in the bilateral negotiations with Turkey mentioned above. But the idea comes from the Interior Minister himself: 'If you wonder where the idea of the golden dome comes from: It is a symbol of the New Jerusalem, where now there is a church, a mosque, a synagogue, and others.'<sup>28</sup>

The reference to Jerusalem is also due to the place of the Jews in the imagination of the dreamed nation. In a sense, they constitute an incarnation of the Georgian tolerance and promotion of diversity. But there is a sharp contrast between the presence of the Jews in the discourse of multiculturalism and their absence in the town.<sup>29</sup> All the eighty Jewish families living in the city decided to emigrate in the mid 1990s, when armed militias controlled Akhaltsikhe. There were only five Jews left in the city in 2015, too small a number to perform rituals. As a 'counter- location' ('contre-emplacement'), Rabati is thus 'a kind of contestation, both mythically and in reality, of the space in which we live' (Foucault 1984)<sup>30</sup>: the staging of a mythical inter-confessional harmony is the mirrored and inverted image of the real space of the conflict.

The golden dome epitomizes a generic Islam disconnected from the local situation and local conflicts, and hence reconcilable with the other religions. The other pieces of Islamic architecture, such as the replica of the Moorish architecture of the Alhambra, are equally explicit. Islam is neutralized through 'orientalization': the

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<sup>27</sup> 'L'hétérotopie a le pouvoir de juxtaposer en un seul lieu réel plusieurs espaces, plusieurs emplacements qui sont en eux-mêmes incompatibles'.

<sup>28</sup> 'Merabishvili: We will not Allow Rabati to be Destroyed' ('merabishvili: tkven ver shedzlebt rabatshi verapris moshlas'). 2013. Samkhretis k'aribch'e (The Gate of the South). Retrieved 10 November 2015 from <http://sknews.ge/index.php?newsid=1363#.Vk25E-pVFQJ>.

<sup>29</sup> Apart from Israeli tourists.

<sup>30</sup> 'Une espèce de contestation à la fois mythique et réelle de l'espace où nous vivons'.

juxtaposition of the former mosque turned into an attraction site alongside the replica of another Islamic monument in Spain, thousands of kilometres away, abolishes the geography and the history of the place. Moreover, Granada is the city that symbolizes the victory of the Christendom over Islam and that has been a landmark in mass tourism for years.

The stereotypical eternal Orient displayed in Rabati is the ideal scenery to shoot movies, soap operas, game shows or advertising clips. Various events have taken place there: a world music festival, a Red Bull street-basketball competition, a TV film about the history of Georgia, a concert of the band Erisioni, a video clip of the singer Sopho Nizharadze and two shootings for Bollywood.

## Conclusion

The case of Rabati sheds some light on the multiple meanings associated with sacred places and the uses that can be made of them in the post-Soviet Caucasus. Does the transformation of Rabati, a site hosting religious buildings, into a kind of Disneyland in the margins result in the complete secularization of the place? Are we facing a process of 'post-religious mixing' here? It is too early to decide, as the future of Rabati seems uncertain and the practices it generates are not yet stabilized. Yet some points should be underlined.

The first one is the crucial role of the state in regulating the conditions of attendance at the buildings. It promotes touristic and pedagogical uses to the detriment of religious uses. The acceptance of, and even support for, this state intervention deserves attention too. This reveals that Soviet legacies still influence not only which religious policies are implemented, but, also, and more crucially, people's expectations about the state and its regulation of religions. The promotion of diversity and the concomitant desacralization of religious buildings are accepted, since they are perceived as enabling the prevention of conflicts among religious groups as well as maintaining the previous national symbolic order.

The impact of institutional actors also contributes to their inclusion in a set of social representations about the nation, the past, the present and the way the country should develop. Religion plays a crucial role in these representations. Even though I have not witnessed any devotional practice (except in St Marine's church) in the Rabati complex, the very fact that these monuments are religious buildings does matter to tourists and locals alike. The complex has been restored precisely because several religious buildings are located inside: they are displayed in the public space as religious buildings and, as such, are recognized as having a specific value.

In Rabati, the state-regulated religious buildings have been disconnected from local histories and cultures, and they can no longer be regarded as repositories of national identities. In addition to the state, the free market has also made inroads. The area that hosts various religious buildings embodies the diversity in the supply of the religious goods, whereas the shops around and the supermarket opposite embody that of the material goods. Similarly, hotels and restaurants are part of a tourism industry whose sites – of national, cultural and religious heritage – are competing on a global scale. Everything is a fiction in the complex: the mosque and the church are not open to worship, the hotels are empty, and the luxury stores have closed down and been replaced by tourist shops that may also close down soon; customers and tourists are scarce. But this fiction is a dream: Rabati sketches what should be the path to success for Georgia, reconciling the presence of a generic religion (Roy 2012), a free market and the entertainment industry. If there is nothing sacred to be shared, this imagination is indeed shared by the Georgian authorities, tourists and most city dwellers alike.

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