Muslim Meskhetian Returnees in Georgia: Finding Home through Memory, History and Place

Jvan Yazdani
Sapienza Università di Roma

Introduction

The Muslim Meskhetians with which this paper deals are returnees from a deported nationality whose history of collective labelling and self identification has followed different and often conflicting political and ethno-national orientations. The Meskhetians nowadays living in Georgia are a very tiny, politically marginalized group: their plight, like that of other Georgian minorities, has often been cast in ethno-political terms or reduced to a dimension of national security, introducing non-negotiable categories of "identity" and "culture" into public debate (Sabanadze 2014: 120-132; Tournon 2007: 101, 203). They are also part of what has become a transnational population, dispersed throughout the former Soviet Union, Turkey, and the United States. The interplay between these two different scales, the local and the transnational, introduces a further element of complexity in the analysis of Meskhetian returnees' aspirations and practices.

The ethnographic data on which my analysis is based were collected during one year of fieldwork between 2014 and 2015 in two Muslim Meskhetian communities in Georgia. The first settlement, in the western region of Guria, was founded in the late 1970s in response to the need for labour for tea production at a local *sovkhoz*[1]. The population of Meskhetian returnees in Georgia had then reached a peak, only to be followed by another mass expulsion in the early 1990s, due to resurgent nationalistic fervor in the country (Baazov 2001). Today it appears as a compact community, composed of returnees who already hold Georgian citizenship. The second community consists of people resettled from Azerbaijan in the region of Samkshe-Javakheti, their historical homeland

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bordered by Armenia and Turkey to the south and southwest, in the wake of the passing of the law on repatriation by the Georgian government in 2007. They live in ethnically heterogeneous neighborhoods, side by side with Christian Meskhetians, Armenians, and migrant Georgian households forcibly resettled after the Meskhetian deportation of 1944. The majority repatriated independently of the legal framework laid down by the Georgian government[2] and, even though they hold an official "repatriate status", have not acquired Georgian citizenship. They denounce this situation as unjust, and believe that – as a formerly deported people – they should not be left in a state they perceive as legally and socially precarious[3].

The starting point for my analysis is the issue of mass deportation and its consequences for both individual experience and collective identification. Mass deportation constitutes a liminal experience whose extreme consequences on individuals' lives, and communities, challenge naturalizing tendencies in the analysis of the perception of movement and space. In the range of types of movement, the mode of mass deportation is quintessentially "destination-to-destination" (Ingold 2011: 152), precluding the "way through" and the sensory dimension associated with it. The question that I shall therefore focus on has two parts. First, how is the catastrophic event of deportation historicized? Second, to what extent are the memories and narratives it produced relevant to the contemporary life paths of the deportees-returnees? In addressing these issues, the experiences of two Meskhetians – Kerim and Resul[4] – will be explored, taking into consideration the different historical and socio-political contexts of their migration: Kerim's, from the Soviet Union of the 1970s-1980s; Resul's, in the wake of the 2007 Georgian law on repatriation. Their journeys and "return home" allow me to highlight how ties to an ancestral homeland are experienced and reproduced under different citizenship regimes and historical conditions.

Historical background

In 1944, between November 15th and 18th, about 100,000[5] Meskhetian Muslims living in the south-western corner of the Georgian SSR, a region historically known as Meskheti[6], were rounded up by the Soviet authorities and exiled to Central Asia. Their deportation was inspired by a preventive principle: Muslim Meskhetians were seen as potential collaborators with Turkey, thus the operation was meant to establish a more "reliable" border population (Nekrich 1978: 103-105). Thousands perished due to the initial deportation, or from cold, malnutrition, and disease during the first years of displacement[7].

Until 1956, Meskhetians lived under NKVD "special settlements' regimes" in the territories of exile. Deprived of civic and political rights, they were not allowed to travel outside. These harsh living conditions encouraged them to form into a cohesive group (Swerdlow 2003: 9). Indeed, before deportation, not only had they not received any form of political autonomy, but it is also speculated that they had no perception of belonging to a different nationality (Kreinlder 1986: 389).

In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev lifted several of the restrictions on some of the formerly deported peoples (Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks and Karachais), allowing them to return to their places of origin. The Meskhetians, though, were not permitted to repatriate to Meskheti, owing to the renewed strategic importance assumed by their homeland, situated along the frontier with Turkey, with the onset of the Cold War (Trier *et al.* 2007: 18). The lifting of the special settlement regime constraints allowed them, instead, to move to the Azerbaijani SSR, where over 25,000 Meskhetians resettled from 1958 until the end of the 1960s, a move that many of them interpreted as the opportunity for a prospective return to their homeland (Yunusov 2007: 175).

From the moment of the lifting of the special settlement regime in 1956, and with the formation of a temporary Committee for Return in 1963 (later evolved into the Vatan Society), the Meskhetians started their first organised efforts to return to their homeland. Throughout the last two decades of the Soviet Union's existence, small numbers continued to return quietly, but the first opportunities for large-scale, organised repatriation came only in the late 1980s, following Gorbachev's liberalisation policies (Open Society Institute 1998: 41-48).

In the early 1990s, however, public attitudes in Georgia towards the repatriation started to become entangled with nationalistic politics; some members of the patriotic intelligentsia adopted anti-Meskhetian rhetoric, while episodes of violence and discrimination spread in the wider society, resulting in the expulsion of a significant number of repatriates (Tarkhan-Mouravi 2007: 511).

When Georgia joined the Council of Europe in 1999, the issues of repatriation and rehabilitation became an official commitment of the government[8], but only in 2007, the *Law of Georgia on Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Resettled from Georgia by the Former Soviet Union in the 40s of the 20th Century*, was adopted. Since the beginning, the legal framework for repatriation and integration has been met with criticism by advocacy groups and Meskhetian organizations, on the grounds that it provided too limited time for submitting applications, imposes requirements that make application compliance for obtaining citizenship difficult, leaves too much room for interpretation by government

officials, and requires legal provisions that many potential repatriates find economically insurmountable (Trier *et al.*: 37-49). If we look at the actual number of successful applications for repatriate status (about 10.000), and especially considering that, of the 1.700 statuses granted, only in 412 cases the applicant was granted conditional citizenships, we can easily understand why the whole programme has been described as unsuccessful[9], or, as in a recent resolution passed by the Council of Europe, "*focused on providing a legal repatriate status to the eligible applicants and not on facilitating the actual repatriation itself*"[10]. However, the repatriation predicament, seventy years after deportation, and with the constitution of a transnational diaspora, is woven in a complex mixture of imaginaries and practical challenges, and thus can't be reduced exclusively into a legal and institutional frame, at least not that of a single government. Ethnographic observation of repatriates in two different communities in Georgia, one of which was constituted well before the passing of a law on repatriation, restores historical depth to the relationships between the deportees and their homeland, underlining at the same time how history and identity are reappropriated and signified locally.

Collective designations

In this essay I refer to my informants as "Meskhetians", or "Muslim Meskhetians", thus placing emphasis on their geographical origins at the moment of deportation and their religious faith. This choice also reflects an interest in the way deportees' communities are practically oriented towards the place of deportation, rather than a preoccupation with identity in a strict and exclusionary fashion. The preference given to the term "Meskhetian" should then be understood in regard to the particular setting of research: other settings are likely to display the predominance of different self designations, most notably that of "Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks", with an emphasis on their Turkic language and traditions. The terminology I adopt has therefore a situated character, and is intended to describe the narratives of people who strive to integrate into the fabric of a specific, locally dominant discourse, that of contemporary Georgian identity and citizenship, thus taking into account their right to self-identification. In this respect I am following the example set by other authors who endeavored to adopt a terminology as neutral as possible, acknowledging at the same time a variety of equally legitimate designations (e.g., Tournon 2009: 193; Trier *et al.* 2011: 4).

Both "Turkish" and "Georgian" orientation tend to stress the idea of an autochthonous population, and at the same time share a primordialistic understanding of it, while describing other identity markers as imposed

or artificial. Among my "Georgian-oriented" informants, many would thus passionately maintain the need for differentiating religious faith from *nationality*, interpreting the latter as a set of feelings and practices in common between them and the rest of the Georgian population.

The thesis of the "Georgianness" of the Meskhetians, and of their Turkification after the Ottoman invasion of 1578, came into being in the late 19th century (Swerdlow 2003: 7) and later, from the first paradigmatic antecedents (viz., Khakhanov 1891: 5-6), continued to influence scholarly interpretations of their ethno-genesis, until this day (e.g., Lordkipanidze & Totadze 2010: 78-79; Gachechiladze 1995: 183). Pro-Turkic scholars argue instead that Turkic names were Georgianised during and after the first Georgian independence (1928-1920) (for an assessment of the "paper wars" between academics on the two camps, see Swerdlow 2003).

What emerges through ethnography is an exercise in recontextualization, on a personal and family level, of discourses that would theoretically presume a neat distinction of the terms of ethno-national identification: away from the extremes of identity politics, and also from certain prescriptive tendencies within the local historical and public debate, the returnees explore interstices of private and public memories, hence bridging the chronological and symbolic gap between deportation and return.

Secret decrees and public narratives

In 2014, during fieldwork in Akhaltsikhe, a Georgian town in the southwestern region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, I had the opportunity to observe a community of returnees at a time when the recent adoption of a new, more restrictive immigration law (see Note 3), was creating concern among many of them, as greatly hampering their chances of living in Georgia. In this sensitive conjuncture conversations, held both during and outside formal research settings, were more emotionally charged than usual, revealing the historical anchoring not only of narratives about the past, but also of present concerns. One of those who were expressing concern was Resul, one of the most active and outspoken among the recently immigrated Meskhetians, and also a person genuinely interested in the history, folklore and traditions of his own people, to which he had dedicated years of studies and actual fieldwork research, interviewing the elderly about the pre-deportation past, collecting idioms and toponyms, etc. Resul was born in exile, but I assume his "return project" to fit into the category of return migration this analysis deploys. In like manner, Anastasia Christou and Russel King, in their research on second-generation Greek-Germans diaspora, motivate the use of an "emic reading of return", instead

of a strictly statistical one, by drawing attention to a process of family socialization characterized by an emphasis on ethnic cultural capital and a strong ideology of return (Christou & King 2010: 639). Moreover, growing up in a transnational social field also entails the acquisition of social skills and competencies that can be effectively deployed in practices and life projects that bind home and the host-land (Levitt 2009: 1238-1239).

On one particular occasion Resul and his acquaintance, Giorgi, a local of Christian background, engaged in a friendly debate about some aspects of the 1944 deportation. The matter in dispute was inherently historical, but something more than gratification in winning an argument was clearly at stake, especially for Resul. The question debated involved the gap between the circumstances of the 1944 deportation, as narrated by deportees, and the evidence available in official directives issued by the Soviet state. How reliable could the official account of the events be considered? To what extent did the local levels in the chain of command and the rank and file follow the Soviet state's directives?

This type of dissonance between official, public account and oral, personal testimonies is found also in the struggle for memory put up by other groups of victims of Soviet deportations. For example, Greta Lynn Uehling refers to a "counter-narrative", produced by Crimean Tatars deportees, that challenges the mainstream point of view on the events of their deportation, as minimizing the suffering and injustice it caused to them (Uehling 2004: 94-95). Similarly, claims to high levels of mortality, related to transportation and conditions at the places of exile, among ethnic Greeks deported from the Caucasus in 1949, have been described as a "*myth* of the exile" originating from memories and written accounts of earlier deportations (Hionidou & Saunders 2010: 1490). Comprehensive analyses of Soviet national policies and operations in the 1930s and 1940s diverge also in assessing whether they amounted to forms of ethnic cleansing (e.g., Martin 2001a: 311-343; Pohl 1999: 137-138) or rather, if their racial dimension should be deemphasized (e.g., Mazower 2002: 1168). At this point it is important to realize that, as Yaakov Ro'i pointed out, the literature on the "Punished Peoples" reflects, in many respects, a typical postcolonial discourse: scholars – especially among the nations concerned – agree that punishment of whole nationalities was grossly out of order, and urge for recognition and compensation (Ro'I 2009: 155, 169-170).

Returnees' narratives should then be understood as part of a moral-historical vision, alternative to what the subjects perceive as a colonizing order of the world. In other words their collective claims, as Liisa Malkki argues in the case of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, become part of historically situated and culturally constructed narrations of the past (Malkki 1995: 103-104).

Such narrations, among Meskhetian returnees, cover a number of emotionally charged topics, such as the fate of the bodies of those who perished on route to the designed destinations, the actual number of deaths occurred, the presence of medical personnel on the trains, the type of assistance and practical help they received in the lands of deportation in the days and months immediately following their resettlement, etc.

In the exchange between my two informants, the chasm clearly widened as the deportee appealed to a legacy of family and group narratives, sustained by decades of oral transmission within his community, as a form of rhetorical resistance to other accounts, perceived as questioning their integrity as an unjustly punished people. Thus, their dialogue offers to ethnographic scrutiny a margin over which the two narrations collide, notably around the status of orders and the degree of efficiency displayed by the Soviet state in carrying out the deportation.

This conundrum clearly unfolds in the conversation:

Giorgi: who would dare not to fulfill Stalin's orders?!
Resul: Here [on official documents] you read certain things that are completely contradicted by the testimony of those who personally witnessed the events! Some of them are still alive and can tell you!

The narratives based on accounts by direct witnesses are nowadays circulated within, and increasingly beyond, the Meskhetian diaspora, by a significant number of publications, websites, conferences, etc. On the other hand, we find a narrative influenced by a certain degree of suspicion towards the Meskhetians and their plight, not uncommon among Georgians but certainly decreasing in popularity (European Centre for Minority Issues – Caucasus, 2012: 17), in this specific case capitalizing on the aura and authority emanating from old official Soviet directives.

Such conflicting narratives find their rationale not only in the present living conditions of the deportees, but extend themselves deep into the history of the previous century. One way to make them more intelligible would then be to narrow down the analysis to what is at stake today for the subjects; the other, complementary way, would suggest us to take into account the controversies over the nature of mass violence and totalitarianism in the 20th Century, and their salience in reading deportees' narratives of dispersal and return.

The primary point of contention in the exchange between Resul and his Georgian acquaintances over the accounts of the 1944 Meskhetian deportation was the actual implementation of Stalin's directives, that is, how effective the Soviet chain of command could be considered. Behind the possible answers to this question lie different understandings of totalitarian political systems. Of particular relevance to this case are those

studies that question the monolithic character of said systems and their capacity to enforce obedience through terror[11]. This approach resonates better with the narratives of the deportees, when they speak – for instance – of the suffering and deaths after their arrival in Central Asia, the so called "abandonment in deportation", attributed by historians to lack of coordination between the place of departure and the destination (Werth 2003: 227;). In fact, archival documentation is suggestive of an effort to provide the deportees with the necessary means of survival. According to the Decree of GOKO – the Soviet State Defense Committee – No. 6279cc of 31 July 1944, during the transit the deportees should have received, among other things, "food provisions", "sanitation and medical services" and, once arrived, livestock in compensation for the personal belongings left behind (Bugay 1994: 38-41).

A question thus seems to run through the words of my informants: Were the sufferings and deaths resulting from a deliberate strategy of the Soviet leadership, or – assuming a certain degree of good will on the part of top level authorities – from disobedience at the lower levels of the chain of command? It may be argued that the significance attributed in the dialogue to the expression "prikaz" – Russian for "order" – with reference to the decrees issued by the Soviet leadership, could signal the tension between a normative interpretation of the past, and one that scrutinizes it in search of meaning and, ultimately, justice.

By assuming a clear-cut boundness of individuals to orders, Resul's Georgian acquaintances seem to perpetuate the myth of a monolithic Stalin government, thus interpreting it through the very Stalinist *Weltanschauung* (Shukman 2003: 31), much like the official account embraced by Slavic voices in Greta Uheling's account of Crimean Tartars' repatriation and struggle for memory (Uehling 2004: 94-95). The narrative testimonies of Meskhetians like Resul run counter to that myth, because they acknowledge the discrepancies between official Soviet directives and the experiences of exile and deportation; at the same time, they seem to rebuff the idea of having been tormented without a reason. In their need to find meaning, what could be worse than accidental suffering? This tendency of survivors to emphasize premeditation has been noted by Michael Mann, who also argues for a sociology of power that accounts for the fact that most deaths inflicted under communist regimes were not intentional murders: they did originate from schemes of revolutionary transformation[12] and plans to destroy collectivities, but at the same time had a contingent nature, occurring within authority structures not fully institutionalized, or even chaotic (Mann 2005: 319-329).

Thus, the returnees' struggle to historicize the violence of deportation appears to be related to a quest for recognition within their polity. Their

stories bridge past and present through an idiom of vulnerability, which stems from the sense of having been exposed to the whims of a power that is at the same time unfathomable but guided by a hostile principle.

Hence, in the following pages, I will try to demonstrate how the predicament of return becomes tangible for the subjects involved, and comprehensible in ethnographic terms, by combining the aforementioned perspectives: what we observe through the interactions from the field, I infer, is a contraction of the time-frame as the returnees perceive it, making the past suddenly present in their lives. This is in keeping with Ricoeur's proposal to go beyond a phenomenology of memory and en epistemology of history, towards a hermeneutics of the historical condition, thus entering «the region of conflicts among individual memory, collective memory, and historical memory, at the point where the living memory of survivors confronts the distantiated, critical gaze of the historian» (Ricoeur 2004: 86-87). Such an undertaking, after all, resounds with the eagerness displayed by returnees themselves in pursuing historical points of reference in the places associated with the memories of deportation, thus advancing an alternative "time" to the mainstream historical speed posited by dominant narratives and institutional frames.

Same homeland, but different paths home

The ethnographic data presented in the previous chapter were elicited from fieldwork research in a community of recently repatriated Meskhetians: the analysis focused on how alternative modes of narrating the tragic past of deportation reflect, and are likewise shaped by, present conditions of vulnerability, notably, in connection with institutional changes on immigration law.

The following considerations draw on field notes collected during a 6-month stay in a village of western Georgia, a close-knit community of returnees who have managed to settle back in their *homeland* during the late 1970s, at that time in the territory of the Georgian SSR. To understand the formation of this community, it is necessary to take into account not only the efforts by some sectors of the Georgian intelligentsia, and by Meskhetian activists of the time, but also that, starting in the late 1960s, Soviet authorities had modified their approach towards the deported nations: in order to lessen the influence of national activists, they had started adopting "carrots and sticks" policies that combined repression with limited concessions, making return possible under certain conditions (Shiro 2007: 225-234).

In April 1977, a note was issued by the director of the local *sovkhoz*, stating that the administration «would not raise objection against

recruiting permanent workers» (Baratashvili 1998: 7). Among those granted permission was Kerim, one of my key informants in the settlement. Unlike Resul, who was born into exile in Central Asia, he was deported as a child in 1944, and managed to return to Georgia SSR only in his 30s. Here is his brief account of the deportation journey, of the subsequent years and of his eventual return to the homeland:

> My life … my paths … I was born in Chechla; then in 1944 they rounded up everybody in the station of Tavarni in Akhaltsikhe. I was a kid. We stopped in Borjomi, then Tbilisi, Baku, and Makhachkala, in Dagestan, then Astrakhan … and from the steppes of Kazakhstan into Uzbekistan … we settled in Olmaliq, there were cotton fields all around. Then I went to an orphanage … in 1974 I went to Kabardino-Balkaria. When I was about 30 years old, they said that ten families would be allowed to go back [to the Georgian SSR].

Kerim lived a mobile life – at least until his mid-thirties – but this was more the result of overwhelming structural and historical forces than of deliberate choices. His homecoming was also experienced and structured collectively, relocating – and assembling *en route* – a complex array of ties, ranging from familial to ideological ones. A consideration of these endeavors and of the difficulties the subjects encounter in constructing actual transnational communities, should lead us to acknowledge the losses often entailed in spatial mobility, and the efforts the subjects make to mobilize social relations (Amit 2002: 13-25).

I therefore propose to outline a set of principles that, following Kerim's and the other settlers' daily discourses, seem to stand out in their collective ethos: that is, the values of good neighborly and close-knit community. These not only make up the *raw materials* for their daily interactions but also provide an interpretative key to understand to what extent, as a *de facto* transnational population, their lives are characterized by a combination of incorporation at the local level and transnational attachments (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004: 1011). Considered historically, these principles reveal the socially and discursively constructed nature of an idealized collectivity.

When Kerim and his family managed to go back to homeland, in the early 1980s, the local population was employed by the local *sovkhoz* in the cultivation and production of tea. While today his house is located in a compact, ethnically uniform Meskhetian settlement of about twenty households, at that time he used to live side by side with people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Proceeding from a concept of culture that is able to bring social relations and social action back into the picture (Glick Schiller 2003: 101), we can then consider the transmission of cultural knowledge in the

very contexts where it is generated, reassembling its "intergenerational transmission" and its "environmentally situated experience" (Ingold 2000: 137-138, 159-160), since the socio-historical processes outlined above do not presuppose a stationary concept of transnational community, but one that implies temporality and participation in actual social relations.

Kerim's arrival was concomitant with that of his first cousin once removed and another distant relative. Within two decades, not only did most of the other returnee households in the region moved into the settlement but also a close web of kin relations was formed among the siblings of the three major families, thanks to intravillage marriage patterns. This trend gradually decreased with younger generations, making way for an increasing number of families formed by local men and women of Meskhetian background coming from deportee communities in Azerbaijan and Central Asia. These kin networks hold today a double-fold significance: they reinforce senses of locality and neighborhood, and give the same connections a trans-border, diasporic scope. Supporting the idea of a collectivity that strives across borders is not only the process of formation of new families but also other features of returnees' lives that show their need, and their capacity, to reach across borders for resources, such as the propensity of most men of working age to move to tea growing regions in Turkey during plucking seasons, or the occasional reliance on remittances from Meskhetian diasporic communities in other countries.

In fact, Guria is today one of the poorest regions of Georgia: its economy and agricultural production was impacted by the changed political circumstances in the early 1990s, causing it to lose, along with the rest of western Georgia, the virtual monopoly on the supply of subtropical crops to the socialist bloc (Pelkmans 2006: 182). Entire fields and hillsides around the settlement of returnees are carpeted with abandoned plantations, still providing locals with enough tea leaves for their family consumption. By joining their journeys I tried to get a sense of what the abandoned fields represented to them, especially to the elders who had been working in the collective farm system. During our foraging walks, Kerim used to reminisce about the past, keeping his discourse on a geo-historical level, and recurring to elements in the landscape as points of reference. For example, a particular path on the ground, once traversed by hundreds of people every day on their way to the *sovchoz*; a spring where villagers took potable water prior to the installation of water pipes in the settlement; or the sight of distant mountains with a particular historical significance. His narratives managed to merge memories, often painful, and general historical knowledge, in an ambitious yet coherent way.

Kerim had returned to his homeland after decades of wandering, only to witness the collapse of the political system whose leadership had previously established his people's unreliability, and later accorded, to some and under strict conditions – as we saw earlier – a partial rehabilitation. The knowledge he willingly shared with me presented itself as a synthesis of both lived experience and mediated discourses, reading the landscape and the traces of recent history in the region, and integrating them into his life experience. His was a form of knowledge reminiscent of «the power of gathering memories and expectations, the familiar and the strange» (Casey 1996: 24-25) or, as in Tim Ingold's explication of *inhabitant knowledge*, incorporating practices and movement:

> […] for inhabitants, things do not so much exist as occur. Lying at the confluence of actions and responses, they are identified not by their intrinsic attributes but by the memories they call up. Thus things are not classified like facts, or tabulated like data, but narrated like stories. And every place, as a gathering of things, is a knot of stories (Ingold 2011: 154).

At the end of our work on the tea plantations, upon returning home, Kerim's kitchen garden – passionately cultivated *on the very soil* of his historical homeland – would also provide a stage to divulge, via a video call on Skype with his kin abroad, his story and the success of his journey of return. Thus meanings and values associated with landscape and familiar places combined the past and the present, saturated with practices that hold and recreate a sense of belonging.

It is against the backdrop of the historical experience of deportation, codified in terms of uprootedness and dispersion of a primordial community, that the returnees create a nexus between everyday practices and their group ethos. By emphasizing, for example, the capacity to turn any barren land into fertile ground, they give meaning to spaces, and assert a right of return based on the assertion that "their people would certainly improve the local economy though hard work, dedication and honesty" – paraphrasing the words of my informants – as they claim to have also done in the lands of their exile.

National repertoires and cultural resources

Resul's and Kerim's life paths and migratory patterns diverge considerably but, as we have seen, processes of cultural transmission within their communities provided them with similar sets of values and ways of collective identification. In the first place, they share a common understanding of their national identity, what we may call a *Georgian orientation*. This can be interpreted as a way to formulate a specific idea of

citizenship and membership in what they consider the ancestral homeland. Not unlike other Georgian groups (e.g., Pankisi Kists, balancing Chechen *ethnic* identity and recognition of Georgia as *homeland* (Tsulaia 2011: 132); Laz people across the Georgian-Turkish frontier, Muslim Adjarians, or recent converts to Christianity (Pelkmans 2006: 60-139; 2010: 116; 2005: 19), they make sense of citizenship by recurring to *hyphenated images.* Their plight is not expressed in a vacuum, but rather draws on, and confronts, a repertoire of notions and imaginaries that have specific places in the history of Georgian nation-building. Whether expressed with inclusivist or exclusivist undertones, this repertoire asserts the centrality of certain elements, in particular language and religion, and by doing so also offers the subjects with experiential and symbolic boundaries, which can be recognized, challenged or reassembled.

The association of Georgian national identity with Orthodox Christianity is certainly widespread in the country's population (Shurgaia 2008: 250-300): it has been regularly conveyed by its political leaderships, is enshrined in the country's Constitution and, for some analysts, it contributes to raising questions about potential inter-religious conflict (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2014: 1-5). Alternatively to religion, the role of language "myths" has been taken up as the main element in the formation of the self-image of Georgians – a "highly language-conscious" society – and in the development of their national identity (Law 1998: 167-196). Despite the inconsistencies between the returnees' self-image – as Muslims and speakers of a Turkic language – and these national discourses are apparent, spaces for articulating syncretic values are indeed viable. This happens thanks to the situated and parallel fluid nature of the signs through which the "we" (and the "others") of national discourse is articulated in everyday life. By this process, even the meaning of apparently straightforward ethnic labels acquires semantic slipperiness, making room for forms of relativity in the criteria that are used to define, accept or reject others (Herzfeld 1987: 154). Muslim Meskhetians' identity is thus seen, alternatively, as tracing its lineage from that of Christians who did not *resist* Ottoman policies of Islamisation (Shurgaia 2008: 270-271). Or, by a subtle converse, it is put at the very centre of a prior flourishing of Georgian culture, through their identification with an archaic ethnonym (*mosokhs*), thus turning them into a sort of "internalized Orient" (Cherchi & Manning 2002: 32). This tendency is expressed, for example, in the intellectual edifice of notorious Georgian-born historian and linguistic Nicholas Marr (1864-1934), whose theories – part of official Soviet policies in the 1920s and 1930s – tended to essentialize groups across time, within an evolutionary framework, by a combination of race, language, culture and class (Slezkine 1996: 833).

Returnees' social knowledge and practices, as I have suggested, advance between these archaizing rhetorics – their own or those they are immersed into in the wider society – and the realities of everyday life and encounters. At the same time, the narratives associated with deportation provide a moral yardstick by which to measure, and to challenge, dominant ideologies, or to counter the very sense of dispersion that runs through their collectivity.

Coming to terms with dislocations

In its overwhelming impact over the lives of the deportees, deportation represented a liminal event, experienced phenomenologically as an alteration of the spatiotemporal so drastic as to preclude, along with the any trace of agency of the deportees, even the senses and perceptions normally correlated with travel and movement. de Certeau provides a well-fitting depiction of railroad travel as «something at once incarcerational and navigational» (de Certeau 1984: 113), allowing little room to the tactical positioning of individuals, «within the motionless framework of the wagon […]» (ivi: 114). Thus, unsurprisingly, the accounts – direct or mediated through the words of the elderly – show paucity of external points or reference, encasing instead the entire experience of the train journey within the walls of the cars: the crammed spaces, the lack of privacy, the deaths, the occasional stops at the stations along the route, and the increasingly cold climate as they approached their destinations in Central Asia.

Resul's and Kerim's life trajectories convey a sense of tension between movement and rootedness. On one hand they place their experiences within a *victim diaspora narrative* (Cohen 2008: 39), in terms that are far from celebratory: Deportation could only be framed as an overpowering catastrophe, allowing no resistance. On the other hand, they are busy articulating attachment to *their land* by filling up the gaps left by a seven-decades-long absence. They do so by designating historical points of reference that convey a sense of firm rootedness, such as archeological sights of old, abandoned mosques, the remnants of their family homes, or gravestones in cemeteries once utilized by the local Muslim population. They do so by actively engaging in an exploration of the region, equipped with a type of knowledge that is not immediately local, but is produced instead by familiarity with sources through which the local is filtered: memories of the deported, literate and historical texts, the questioning of residents as to where a particular site is located, where an event was witnessed, etc. Dispersion and mobility are then are part of everyday practices and strategies that underpin a reluctant cosmopolitanism.

Of the two examples of mobility I sketched through the description of the return migration of my informants, Kerim's raises matters of interest relating to shifting Soviet policies towards deported nationalities, while Resul's provides wider possibilities of analysis in the light of debates on transnationalism, if only because the last segment of his journey, from Azerbaijan to Georgia, took place in the political order of new nation states formed after the demise of the Soviet Union. The formation of international boundaries between the exiles and their home territories is indeed one of the main current obstacles to return (Martin 2001b: 333). As I mentioned previously, this also meant that his citizenship application was – at the time of my fieldwork – still hanging without resolution. He resolved to repatriate and did so by relying on a specific legal framework laid down by the Georgian government. Nevertheless, despite his official "repatriate status", the condition he found himself immersed in retained many of the attributes of illegal migration. Hi sense of vulnerability stemmed from what he perceived as unjust or arbitrary decisions taken by the state(s) upon whose regulatory systems his inclusion into the new polity depended.

In connection with the theme of a concomitant *production* of citizenship and illegality by the sovereign power, we can identify an analogy between migrant "illegality" – and deportability – and the threat of deportation confronted by denationalized citizens (De Genova 2002: 439); a parallel all the more poignant, considering the historical background of returnees who still pass on the memory of Soviet national categorization through censuses and other cultural technologies of rule (Hirsch 2005: 101-104) that had directly affected their lives.

Even when transnational stances and practices are manifest, being a *transmigrant* implies the necessity to deal with multiple settings and regulatory systems (Riccio 2007: 23; Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004: 1013). In this light, transnationalism does not simply translate into fluid identities and deterritorialized homelands, as social-constructionist approaches to culture would tend to suggest (e.g., Appadurai 1996). What James Clifford (Clifford 2013: 77-84) stresses about diaspora discourse, applies here also: Contemporary displacements can be simultaneously *rooted and routed*, articulated along a continuum of autochthony and diaspora. The returnees are able to deploy rhetorical apparatuses that combine, on one hand, an idiom of rights, and on the other, a search for historical depth, but is especially the latter they draw inspiration from. Hence, their ambition toward revitalizing relationships to *homeland* and fill the gap left by decades of exile take the form of topographical recognitions, search for evidence of their past presence in its history and landscape, and other hermeneutical enterprises that combine memory, interpretative frameworks and life projects.

Conclusions

In the previous pages I considered my informants' daily interactions, in order to interpret the practical workings of memory, history and victimhood narratives in the reconstruction of their sense of belonging and well-being. In particular, I took the lead from one informant's fascination with landscape, understood in historico-geographical terms, but also as the very soil of his *homeland*; and from another informant's defense of an emic understanding of deportation as a counter-narrative to more *normalizing* interpretations.

The parallel between Resul's and Kerim's journeys and "return home" allowed us to highlight how their ties to an ancestral homeland is experienced and reproduced, under distinct – often divergent – citizenship regimes and historical conditions. Kerim's return, despite the many obstacles he encountered, took place still within the Soviet political space. He did not cross an international border, thus his citizenry remained formally unchanged. When Georgia gained independence in 1991, he and his relatives became citizens of the newly formed state. Still, the following years would prove very difficult, and most of their peers would flee again as a result of political instability and the ensuing ethnic violence. However, he could now look back at his past, at his very deportation in 1944, and rejoice at the thought of being one of the few hundreds, among his people, to have enjoyed a full rehabilitation.

Resul's return, on the other hand, could only be understood by taking into account the new political order that remodeled the map of the region after the demise of the Soviet Union. This also meant the necessity to comply with new national migration regimes, and dwelling and moving within the interstices of shifting regulations, illegitimate constraints and – not infrequently – clear abuses. In the dialogue I sketched, he defends his recount of the historical events of the 1944 deportation, opposing a normalizing variant proposed by his Georgian acquaintance. The depth of the exchange should be set within a wider context to be thoroughly grasped: having his narrative challenged did not simply put Resul's emotions to the test, but also perturbed the fabric of his life as a deported, since it partially devalued the sense of collective victimhood at the core of his identity. The subtleties of a historical debate about the nature of Stalinist rule thus assumed a sinister air, as if his current status were not only the result of that history, but would also continue to hang on the conflicting meanings attached to it.

Surely, the theme of deportation stands out unambiguously in the narratives of the Meskhetian deportees/returnees, however diverse their individual biographies and the ways their convictions and cultural

inclinations merge with makeshift solutions and constraints, mobility and rootedness. Its historical significance is also stressed in the literature, concerning what we can loosely call the group's *ethnogenesis* (e.g., Aydıngün 2002; Trier & Khanzhin 2007: 25; Tournon 2009: 20) or, even more relevantly, the emergence of *discourses of deportability* (Levin 2013: 9), that is, counternarratives to locally hegemonic cultures, as the case of other deported peoples also illustrates (e.g., Uehling 2004: 95). Accordingly, considerations about the regimes of power that operate in the present and determine the "situatedness" of a particular group are central when we look at diasporic identities in historical perspective (Brah 1996: 179).

This approach is consistent with considering the role played, in the establishment of said identities, by the Soviet nationalities policies. These had made a "fetish" of cultural identity, employing "demographic engineering" as state policy (King 2008: 186), and adopting procedures comparable to the "cultural technologies of rule" described by Bernard Cohn in the case of British colonialism (Cohn 1996; for a parallel between British and Soviet imperial ideologies see also: Lieven 2003). Mass deportations are thus best understood in light of this paradoxical pursuit of "nation-building and nation-destroying" (Martin 2001a: 312). Francine Hirsch points out, for example, that Soviet administrators – and ethnographers – adopted nationality categories that were unfamiliar to some of the peoples being registered during censuses (Hirsch 2005: 102-103). A similar notion is popular with my Meskhetian informants who point out that, previous to deportation, their ancestors had little awareness of ethnic or national affiliations. They were instead targets of successive, and contradictory, nationality policies, until the very event of deportation "created" a sense of collective belonging[13].

During their exile years as members of a deported nationality, Resul and Kerim acquired, (or participated in the elaboration of) a peculiar, minoritarian (Trier, Tarkhan-Mouravi, & Kilimnik. 2011: 82) interpretation of their collective identity, one that would identify them as Georgian Muslims, rather than stressing their "Turkishness". Their life paths, and their return home, were carved out holding the belief that they were Georgians. Nonetheless, at the time when my fieldwork was being carried out, Resul had not been granted a Georgian citizenship yet. Kerim had instead accomplished his ambition to return, and had since then managed to regularize his position, becoming a full citizen. The legacy of deportation manifested itself in both men's narratives, first of all, as an inherent quality of their collective ethos, revolving around the imageries of victimhood evoked by the events of the 1944 forceful resettlement. On the other hand, both had clearly taken up – sometime in their past – a

distinctly affirmative attitude towards taking residence in Georgia, for their narratives of return did not look like *a posteriori* interpretations of their own journeys.

In Kerim's case, my insight of his motivations rested solely on the memories he shared with me, and on my observation of his present life, while most of his pre-return life lay back in a distant past. In Resul's case, I also had a first-hand glimpse of the sending context of the last segment of his migration, which took place about 5 years ago from Azerbaijan, and I had a chance to meet part of his kin who had not opted to return. Neither political instability, nor economic factors – to name just the two most common reasons behind Meskhetians migrations and forced resettlement in recent times[14] – had, apparently, prompted him to move: his was a deliberate, long premeditated decision, backed by eagerness to reconnect with a place and a people he considered his own. Through their own resolutions they had thus repositioned themselves around new priorities, remodeling relations within their local communities and transnational networks.

The returnees' quest for recognition within the polity could then lie more with an appraisal of their "historical condition", to go back to Ricoeur's expression (Ricoeur 2004: 86-87), rather than with a "rehabilitation", as conceptualized in institutional and political terms. That is to say, "return" is experienced through a reactualization of past events, whose meanings and legacies become entangled with the struggles and aporias of today, making it necessary to recognize spaces for more dialogical reconfigurations of memory and justice.

Note

1. Abbreviated from советское хозяйство (sovetskoe hozjajstvo), "Soviet farm": a state-owned farm, which paid peasant farmers as hired labour (Shearer 2006: 195).

2. Georgian authorities discourage independent repatriation. In 2011, the Samskhe-Javakheti Regional Association "Toleranti" set up a project, that included an "Information campaign to prevent self-repatriation" ("Toleranti," Annual Report 24).

3. During my fieldwork in 2014, Georgia adopted a new law on Legal Status of Alien and Stateless Persons, reducing the maximum stay without visa, from one year, to 90 days. Later amended, extending the maximum stay back to 360 days, the law applied to me as well as to my Meskhetian informants, who expressed their dismay at being regarded as any other foreign nationality.

4. Personal names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

5. Official documents give the figure of 92,307 people deported (Bugay 1994: 44), but the estimates vary considerably in other sources, [cf., from 115,000 (Human Rights Watch 1991: 51), to up to 300,000 (Ray 2000: 393)]. In these figures must also be included other Muslim groups (e.g., Hemshins, Batumi Kurds and Terekeme), jointly deported with the Meskhetians (Trier, Tarkhan-Mouravi & Kilimnik 2011: 22). In addition, almost 30,000 soldiers from these groups were deported as they returned to Georgia from the war (Trier & Khanzhin 2007: 2).

6. The area of Meskheti was annexed from Georgia by the Ottoman Empire in 1578. The Ottoman rule lasted for about 250 years. After the Treaty of Georgievsk (1783) established the Georgian Kingdom of Kartli as a protectorate of Russia, the Russian Empire repeatedly endeavored to extend its rule to the south (Lomsadze 2013: 107-112). In 1828, the Russian army captured the strategic fortress of Akhaltsikhe. However, the Russians did not favor the return of the local population to the Georgian cultural orbit (Sumbadze 2002; 2007: 290).

7. Soviet archives indicate the total number of deaths to be 14,895 (Bugay 1994: 19), other sources consider the number an underestimation (cf., Aydıngün 2014: 47; Bayraktar 2013: 63). Within 4 years after deportation, their population is said to have suffered a loss between 15% to 20% (Aydıngün *et al.*, 2006: 6).

8. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, debate on 27 January 1999 (4th Sitting). Available at: http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=16669&lang=en [Accessed: 20 May 2015].

9. Motion to the Assembly of the Council of Europe, Doc. 13779 04 May 2015. Available at: http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewPDF.asp?FileID=21750&Language=EN [Accessed: 20 May 2015].

10. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 2015 (2014), "The functioning of democratic institutions in Georgia", Available at: http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=21275&lang=en [20 May 2015].

11. See, for example, Moshe Lewin's definition of "impossible Stalinism" as contradictory combination of supercentralisation and centre's arbitrariness, resulting in dissipation of power and inefficiency (Lewin 1997: 69-71).

12. Stalinist nationalities policies had an essentialistic rationale: national communities were considered to be based on "primordial ethnos" that would survive even after the eventual demise of classes and of their ideologies (Slezkine 1994: 449).

13. Soviet policies of ethnic labeling produced divergent interpretations: initially upholding policies of Turkification, and allowing Meskhetians to learn Turkish at school. In 1935, they designated as 'Azerbaijanis', but the label of 'Turks' was utilized again years later, during and after deportation, together with those of "Muslim", "Caucasian" or "Uzbek" (Modebadze: 2011).

14. See Baratashvili (2005).

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Riassunto

Gli ex deportati Mescheti Musulmani, specialmente coloro che hanno scelto il rimpatrio in Georgia, si trovano oggigiorno impegnati in un processo di storicizzazione della violenza subita attraverso la deportazione. Molti sono allo stesso tempo costretti a confrontarsi con pratiche e concezioni della cittadinanza e dell'appartenenza diverse, a causa dei regimi di cittadinanza e immigrazione dei paesi in cui risiedono, o verso i quali intendono migrare. La dimensione comunitaria, attraverso la quale essi esprimono la propria appartenenza a un gruppo etno-nazionale, è al contempo esperita attraverso pratiche diasporiche e transnazionali. Un secondo livello d'analisi investe invece i regimi d'immigrazione e le pratiche di cittadinanza, in particolare l'acquisizione dello "status di rimpatriato" in Georgia. Sono quindi presentate le storie di rimpatrio di due informatori, mettendone in luce le somiglianze e le divergenze, dovute anzitutto al diverso periodo storico nel quale i soggetti hanno compiuto il rientro: il primo, che ho chiamato Resul, si è trasferito con la propria famiglia appena qualche anno fa; il secondo, Kerim, fa parte di un gruppo di deportati che è riuscito rocambolescamente a rimpatriare poco prima della dissoluzione dell'Unione Sovietica. La descrizione delle pratiche quotidiane e delle interazioni sociali dei deportati rivela quindi quanto le loro vite siano ancora sospese a ragnatele di significati in parte condivisi, ma soprattutto contesi, e quanto la violenza che ha segnato loro storia collettiva possa proiettare la propria ombra anche oggi sulle pratiche classificatorie del potere.

Parole chiave: deportazione, rimpatrio, Mescheti Musulmani, Georgia, memoria collettiva.

Abstract

Muslim Meskhetian (also known as Meskhetian/Ahiska Turks) returnees in Georgia are faced with the challenge of having to historicize the violence of deportation and accommodate their life paths and identities within multiple, often conflicting narratives: those that lie at the heart of their collective identity, and those that are promoted by their receiving societies. The essay takes its cue from the observation of two informants' experiences of transnational mobility and repatriation, and compares the different ways they pursuit a coherent narrative through practices that combine assertions of autochthony with knowledge acquired en route. In the first setting, a recently arrived returnee takes part in a dialogue about the gap separating the material conditions of deportation as outlined in official documents, and as portrayed in the accounts of the survivors. The observation of another returnee's past mobility, and dwelling in his regained homeland, gives us, by contrast, a sense of the ever-present significance of borders and of their regulatory systems. Through the observation of the returnees' personal trajectories we can understand how idioms of repatriation and reparation for past historical injustice are finely related to a quest for recognition within the polity to which they strive to belong. Traumatic memories, nostalgic connections to homeland and day-to-day occurrences and interactions all concur, for the deportees, to the construction of an ethos that neither can be

reduced within the boundaries of a fixed, collective identity, nor can be interpreted through the lens of a celebratory understanding of mobility and uprootedness: they offer instead opportunities to observe situated, contingent forms of resistance and adaptation to dominant cultures and regulatory powers.

Key words: deportation, repatriation, Muslim Meskhetians, Georgia, collective memory.

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