Rural Families in Soviet Georgia

A Case Study in Ratcha Province

Tamara Dragadze

London and New York

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I dedicate this to my husband, Ramaz Klimiashvili, and to the people of Abari village

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Preface

This work has taken an inordinately long time to complete; so many people have helped me along the way, and it is impossible to thank them all.

The original version of this book was presented as a thesis to the University of Oxford, for which I was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

First and foremost, my thanks go to my supervisor, Dr Godfrey Lienhardt, without whose encouragement the thesis could not have been written.

In Georgia the late Professor Vera Bardavelidze and Academician Giorgi Chitaia, Heads of the Departments of Ethnography in the University and Academy of Sciences Institute, helped me in every way. The Dean of the Faculty of History, the late Professor Shota Meskhia, and the specialist in Georgian kinship and marriage studies, Dr Ilia Tchqonia, are owed my thanks. Countless are the other scholars who taught and helped me in Georgia. I must especially, however, mention Professor Sergo Jorbenadze, pro-Rector of Tbilisi University, who helped me invaluably, not least in obtaining permission to do the fieldwork.

In Oxford, when I returned to Britain, I was able to continue my research at the Institute of Social Anthropology and St Antony's College, thanks to the efforts of the late Professors E.Evans-Pritchard and Maurice Freedman and Dr John K.Campbell. The Georgian Cultural Circle and the Marjory Wardrop Fund made a contribution to my expenses for which I am grateful. I was given a further grant from the Marjory Wardrop Fund for typing, and I thank Mr C.H.Lloyd, its Secretary, and the University of Oxford for assistance with the cost of maps and illustrations. I would also like to thank June Anderson at the Library of the Institute of Social Anthropology and Pamela Vandermin and Jill Flitter at St Antony's College for their help.

I have quoted in chapter six from the unpublished thesis of S.F. Jones (see Bibliography), and I thank him for permission to refer to it.

At times I have drawn from material published in an article (Dragadze, T. (1988), see Bibliography), and I thank the publishers, Croom Helm Ltd, for allowing me to use it.

I doubt that I could have continued with this long work over the years had it not been for the kind encouragement received from colleagues and friends, in particular Juliet Blair, the late Professor M.Fortes, Dr Doris Mayer, John H.Goldthorpe, Peter Riviere, Shirley Ardener, the late Edwin Ardener, Professor Ernest Gellner and Margart Kenna. It would be appropriate to mention here, too, the importance to me of the memory of the late Vaso Tsuladze who from my childhood days in France had encouraged me to study Georgian society.

Although all errors remain mine, the actual text has benefited from the remarks of the members of the Anthropology Researchers Support Group (ARSTAG), and of Professor Paul Stirling, Sybille van der Sprenkel, Judith Pallot and Katharine Vivian. My special thanks go to H.T.Willetts for his comments. My thesis examiners, Professor David Marshall Lang and Dr John K.Campbell made helpful suggestions which have been incorporated as much as possible into the present publication.

At the London School of Economics I am grateful to its librarians and to Pandora Geddes and Sue Kirkbridge in the Department of Economics who did the original typing.

Finally, I would like to thank Jane Leresche and all the members of my family who have never ceased to support me during the preparation of this work.

The people of Abari are proud of their village and their region— and rightly so, since there can be few places of such sweeping natural beauty. In tribute to this sentiment and to their pride in what they see as their honest ways, I have not used pseudonyms, either for the places or the surnames referred to, since I think that this is what they would prefer. The small number of case studies necessary for illustrating the main tendencies in their society, to which this work is devoted, would be unlikely to embarrass them. I have taken care, of course, that precise personal identities should not be revealed. I hope, however, that one day some of the villagers will be able to read this book and continue to teach me and correct me in their patient and endearing way.

Note on Transliteration

For Russian I have used the Library of Congress rules, except that capping and underlining joined vowels and consonants are omitted.

For Georgian I have followed Charachidze (Charachidze, G. 1968) but I have modified his usage for the sake of ease of typing and pronouncing in English and to conform more with the conventions used in the British Library Georgian catalogue. I distinguish the soft and hard consonants with an apostrophe for soft consonants. They are not used with proper names; e.g. Tbilisi, Rustaveli instead of T'bilisi, Rust'aveli. Only modern Georgian is used in the text.

Russian

Аа=a	Рр=r
Бб=b	Сс=s
Вв=v	Тт=t
Гг=g	Уу=u
Дд=d	Фф=f
Ее=e	Хх=kh
Жж=zh	Цц=ts
Зз=z	Чч=ch
Ии=ee	Шш=sh
Йй=i	Щщ=shch
Кк=k	Ыы=y
Лл=l	Ьь='(soft sign)
Мм=m	Ээ=ė
Нн=n	Юю=iu
Оо=o	Яя=ia
Пп=p	

Georgian

ა=a	ს=s
ბ=b	ტ=t
გ=g	უ=u
დ=d	ფ=p'(soft)
ე=e	ქ=k'(soft)
ვ=v	ღ=gh
ზ=z	ყ=q
თ=t'(soft)	შ=sh
ი=i	ჩ=ch(soft)
კ=k	ც=ts'(soft)
ლ=1	ძ=dz
მ=m	წ=ts
ნ=n	ჭ=tch
ო=o	ხ=kh
პ=p	ჯ=j (as in James)
ჟ=zh	ჰ=h
რ=r	

Introduction

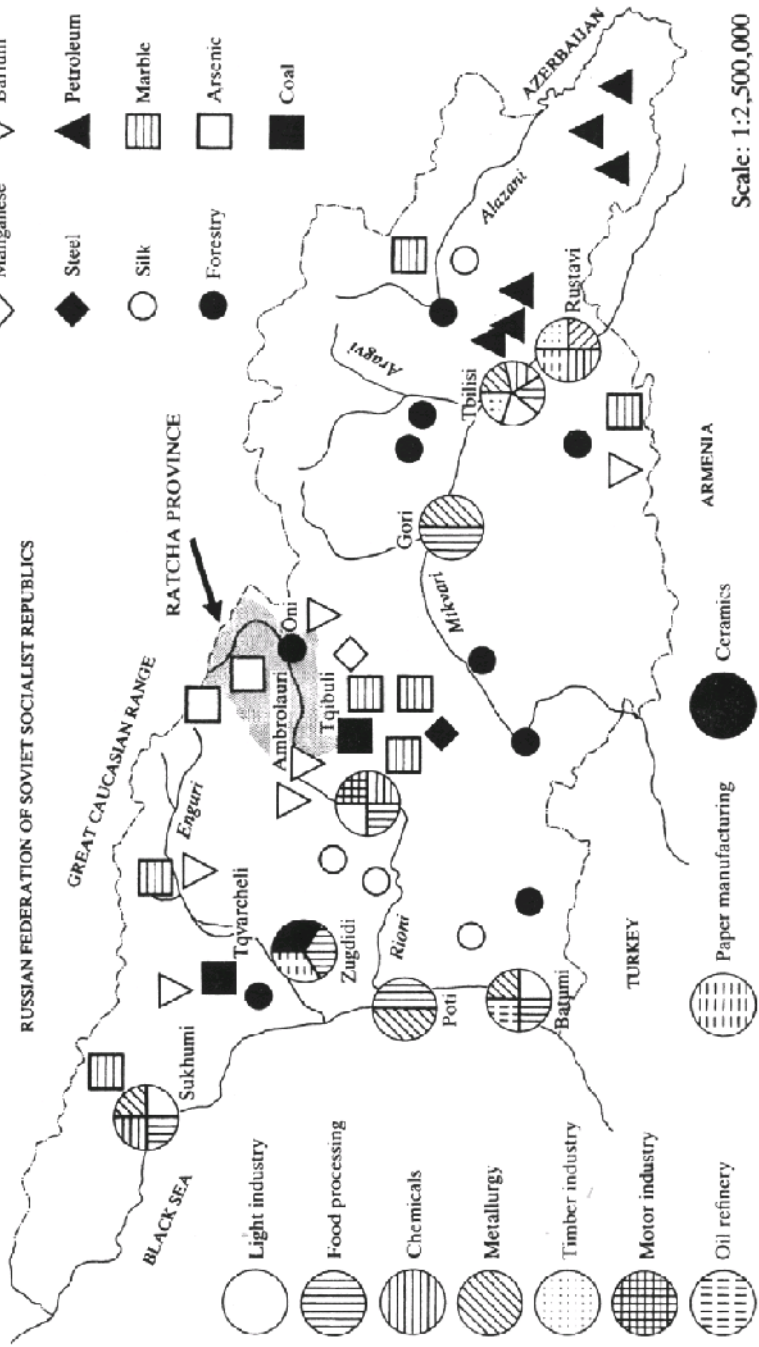
This is a case study of a regional enclave of traditional culture which has retained its character despite the impact of the ideology, economics and politics of the Soviet Union of which it is a part. To understand even partially how such a rural society persists in the face of the pressures of a Soviet socialist, modernizing regime, a description of the domestic unit is important. Whatever changes might be about to take place under the reforming policies of the Soviet Government while led by Mikhail Gorbachev, the value of this work is to see the background, established in well over half a century of Soviet rule, into which reforms would have to be implanted.

This Introduction is in three parts. Firstly, I locate the people studied in their village setting, in their province and in Soviet Georgia. Secondly, I note some of the problems in the literature and in certain views on ethnicity to which this thesis addresses itself. I also outline my main arguments. Thirdly, I describe the circumstances of my fieldwork, which spanned several years.

(I)
The area

1
Abari Village

Abari Village, where the present study was carried out, is located in Ratcha Province in north-western Georgia (see Map 1). Abari is a small village set about 700 metres from the banks of the Lukhuni River up the slopes of hills which eventually join the high mountain range separating Ratcha from Svanetia. Some relatively flat land, on less than 10 degrees inclination, surrounds the village and belongs to the collective farm. Beyond, on steeper slopes, are the plots allocated to each household. Over the years the soil has been cleared of stones; it has little clay content and is relatively fertile when compared with other parts of Ratcha.



Soviet Georgia, showing Ratcha Province and location of some principal industries

Households	*Inhabitants (komli)*	
Likheti	*312*	*1284*
Abari	*85*	*263*
Uravi	*209*	*925 (of whom 104 were temporary residents)*

Source: Registry Office, Ambrolauri

The main road which goes from the regional capital, Ambrolauri, to Uravi village 3 km further from Abari, was tarmacked in 1974 and is 18 km long. After each severe rainfall or snowfall, heavy repairs have to be done, and in winter the road continues to be as difficult as it was when only a dirt road, so that Abari is somewhat isolated for several months a year. This is typical for many areas in hillside Georgia and, given the general state of rural roads, one can expect that other areas of the Soviet Union which are at a high altitude with hills and mountains, would have similarly isolated villages in winter.

There has been electricity since 1962 and a tap in each garden for running water since 1964. There are no telephones, although the doctor still has the makeshift telephone installed in 1971 when I lived in her house. There is a library and a nursery school open during the morning, a cooperative shop which is open twice a week, and a communal hall where films are shown once a month. All other facilities have to be found in the other two villages of the Lukhuni River valley: Likheti and Uravi.

Historically the valley is supposed to have belonged originally to the Svans but was ceded to Ratcha in the fifteenth century. The present village of Abari, it is believed locally, was founded by one of three Lobjanidze brothers who left Ghebi village in the northernmost part of Ratcha in the eighteenth century, during the time of the renowned feudal prince of Ratcha, Rostom Eristavi, to whom many significant events are linked and who embodied Ratcha's aspirations to regional autonomy.

Villagers either work on the collective farm which is shared with Likheti or work in Uravi, where there is an arsenic mine nearby and an arsenic processing factory, which together provide employment for up to 1,000 people.

Abari is relatively small, only eighty households or so. In 1970 the population of the three villages was said to be the following:
These statistics have to be treated with caution since the Soviet system of residence permits, inheritance and labour are such that a person legally registered in one place may in reality live elsewhere (see Chapter 1).

The overall size of the collective farm of Likheti-Abari is officially recorded as 6578 ha., of which 383 ha. are ploughing land *(sakhnavi);* 2292 ha. are pasture *(sadzovari),* and 2550 ha. are forest (*source:* Likheti

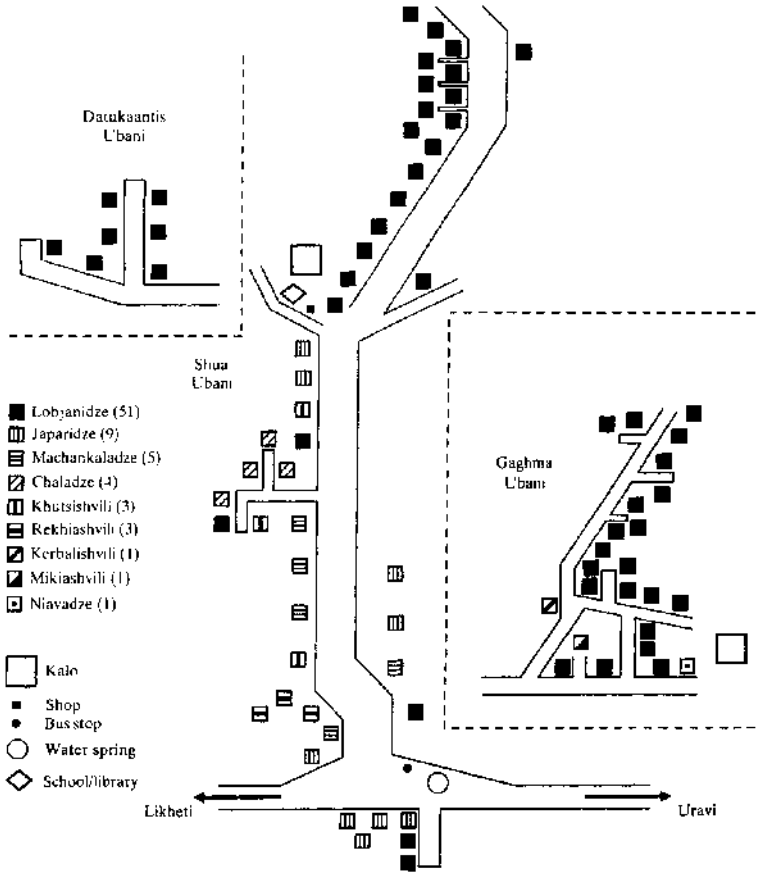
collective farm office, 1970). The workforce for the farm was recorded as 107 able workers *(Shromis unari),* of whom 48 were men and 59 women; 116 elderly people were registered as farm members too (s*ource:* Likheti collective farm office, 1970). I was told unofficially that Abari contributed 5 full-time and 15 parttime able workers.

In 1970 I counted 78 households by recording all the houses which were regularly inhabited. Of them, 51 were Lobjanidzes and 18 had the surnames of men who had all married Lobjanidze women. They all considered one another to be kin (see Chapter 3) and acknowledged themselves to be descendants of the section of pre-Soviet society known as 'peasants' *(glekhi).* The remaining 9 households were all Japaridze, who were of gentry origin, descendants of Giorgi Japaridze, 'the Priest' sent to Abari in the nineteenth century. The Japaridzes and Lobjanidzes have never intermarried in Abari village. Since the Khrushchev era the Japaridzes have frequently been chosen as godparents for Lobjanidze families, which creates a special bond of kinship (see Chapter 3). Although the Japaridzes have invariably gone for higher education and joined the professions or tertiary services, which places them high on the prestige scale, many of the Lobjanidze skilled workers command higher salaries. Few Lobjanidzes have been to university but some have gained power through political activity, although none was prominent in the Ratcha regional Communist Party organs. Particular deference is shown to Aliosha Japaridze and his wife Tamara, but that is of a personal nature, since he is a well-known local historian and writer and is director of the school in Uravi and she is the local doctor. In the winter months in particular, when travel is not easy, all the villagers depend on one another for the loan of various items and help in emergencies. Gates and doors are never locked, and whenever the opportunity arises, the villagers invariably talk of their loyalty to one another. Furthermore, I noticed a marked absence of what could be called sectional antagonism either between the Japaridzes and Lobjanidzes or between the wealthier and poorer villagers.

Abari is divided into three parts, Shua Ubani (literally 'Middle quarter/neighbourhood'), in the lower half of which all the Japaridzes live; Gaghma Ubani (literally, 'opposite riverbank quarter'); and Datukaantis Ubani, where the descendants of Datuka Lobjanidze live (see Figure 1). Shua Ubani and Gaghma Ubani each have a *kalo,* an open space for threshing and where some collective farm produce and machinery is kept. The open space of the *kalo* is also a traditional place for gathering, especially on summer evenings, to dance and to chat. A small stream runs through the village. The residents of each Ubani, however, usually live closest to their immediate agnatic kin, with more distant kin living further away (see Chapter 3).

The villagers have a strong sense of common identity reinforced by kinship ties and interdependence in their everyday lives; the village is

Figure 1 Abari Village



bounded by physical and social forces. In pre-Soviet times Abari fought other villages over pasture rights; today they compete for 'a good name', for their village's reputation (see Chapter 2).

2
Ratcha Province

The villagers are also assertive about being Ratchuelian. Their sense of 'localness' (Cohen, A.P., 1982) is largely perceived in terms of belonging to Ratcha Province. In Georgia at large, fellow Ratchuelians are always sought out as marriage partners, for example, wherever they may be living. They believe they share particular characteristics such as honesty and straightforwardness (although outsiders make jokes about Ratchuelians being slow-witted), particular habits in cooking and polite behaviour, and they are confident that their land is more picturesque than anywhere else.

Ratcha Province, located at 41 to 42 degrees of longitude East of Greenwich, and 42 to 43 degrees of latitude North, enjoyed some periods of autonomy as a province in feudal times; it came under the jurisdiction of the Imeretian kingdom in the eighteenth century when Rostom Eristavi's resistance was defeated. After Russian annexation of Georgia in the early nineteenth century it eventually became part of the Kutaisi *gubernia*. In Soviet times it has been divided into two *raions* (regions), Oni and Ambrolauri, named after the main town in each, and it is in the latter that this study was mostly carried out. Ambrolauri Region is recorded as having 1142 sq km and Oni Region as 1326.3 sq km *(Sakartvelos SSR administratsiuli—territoriuli daqopa, 1966).* In 1970 the population for Ambrolauri and Oni Regions was given as 24,100 and 19,200 respectively (*Sakartvelos SSR respublikuri dak'vemdebarebis k'alak'ebisa da administrats'iuli raionebis ts'nobari,* 1974, 35 and 98).[1]

The terrain in Ratcha is hilly and mountainous throughout, with only a few stretches of relatively flat valleys, none less than 400 metres above sea-level, and most above 1000 m. (see Table 1).

The soil on the slopes is of poor quality and stony, where mechanized agriculture is impractical except for the use of tractors on small tracts of land along the riverbanks and a few valleys. Winter is cold (reaching—17° C) and long, with snow often lying from October or November till April or May. The summer is mild and damp, with the sun shining for a few days at a time. Yearly rainfall is 130 cm on average and snowfall 100 cm. Average temperatures vary between-6°C and +22°C. Ratcha therefore contrasts sharply with some of the most fertile valley provinces in Georgia by lacking large cash crops or an agricultural market economy of any significance. It has a comparatively low standard of living and only the setting up of light industry has ensured that those who have remained in the area have reasonable livelihood and work prospects.

Table 1 Altitude of Ratcha-Lechkumi territory

Height above sea level (metres)	*Size of territory (sq km)*
400–600	128.53
600–800	214.91
800–1000	316.18
1000–1200	397.33
1200–1400	391.54
1400–1600	352.28
1600–1800	316.73
1800–2000	252.79
	Total: 2370.29*

Source: V.Jaoshvili, 1961, 91.
Note: * Mention is not made of the high mountain peaks above 2000 m.

Small power stations have been set up which supplied 60,056 kw of electricity in 1974 (*Sakartvelos SSR respublikuri dak'vemdebarebis k'alak'ebisa de administrate'iuli raionebis ts'nobari* 1974, 34). Forests cover the hills over a surface of 120,000 ha. (Oni Museum text, prepared for me on request in 1971) which provide a modest but viable timber industry. The arsenic mine and factory in Uravi provide employment, as do some lesser enterprises such as a mineral water bottling plant in Utsera in Oni Region. Oni Region has a spa and also a modest tourist trade there and in Shovi.

The best-known export from Ratcha is Khvanchkara wine, harvested from exceptional grapes grown and distilled in Khvanchkara, which is near Ambrolauri Town. Allegedly one-third of the annual output is sent in barrels straight to the Kremlin in Moscow. The collective farmers growing Khvanchkara grapes are markedly prosperous, obtaining from the state 1 rouble (100 kopeks) per kilo of grapes from their private plots, when in the same year, 1970, in eastern Georgia only 57 kopeks per kilo were offered for grapes from private plots (*source:* oral communication). The differentials have continued over the years, according to many oral sources. A subsidiary activity is the distilling and bottling of an inferior white wine. When the collective farms are unable to fulfil the annual targets of production set in the capital, Tbilisi, for the white wine, the state requisitions grapes from all villagers in the region to make up the deficit. Reportedly, people try when possible to purchase inferior-quality grapes in neighbouring provinces which they pass off as their own rather than part with those from their own vineyards.[2]

As elsewhere in the country people in Ratcha are allocated 1000 sq metre plots of land per household. Nearly all the produce grown there is used for

their own consumption. Even the produce from the collective farms, except for grapes and some dairy products, is by and large redistributed among the collective farm members. There is only a small market in Ambrolauri and Oni Towns and nowhere else in the province. Few people travel to Kutaisi, 96 km away, or to Tbilisi, 317 km distant, to sell their produce. An informal exchange network exists between villagers and between some villages, where, for example, potatoes grown in Ghebi village are traded for tomatoes and cucumbers grown in villages at lower altitudes. All villagers (around the year 1970) were allowed to own two sows and their piglets per household, although there were few real controls on the number kept or the amount of poultry. Collective farm members were allowed to own up to three cows per family and other people one cow per family. In 1987, there were signs of fewer restrictions and this will be an area of research interest, should this tendency prevail. Everyone grew fruit and vegetables, maize and *lobio* (red beans for which Ratchuelians are renowned throughout Georgia), for their own consumption in the land surrounding their houses and on their plots. Although the ibex and other game are plentiful in the forests and fish abound in the rivers, subject to few government controls, hunting and fishing are only pursued sporadically.

As in other parts of rural Georgia, the people's main economic strategies revolve around ensuring that, through allocating members of their families to different sectors of the economy, they can achieve the best balance between having access to enough food in a system where little can ever be purchased in shops or markets, and enough cash from salaries necessary for all other requirements. To this end, however, there has been a very high rate of migration away from Ratcha. Admittedly, in the late 1930s and from 1944–1946 the populations of whole villages were forcibly resettled in other parts of Georgia by the government, although by the late 1950s all restrictions were lifted and some returned to their homelands. Individual migration, as noted by Jaoshvili, has accounted for the majority

Table 2 Population trends in Ratcha, 1886–1970

	1886	*1926*	*1939*	*1959*	*1970**
Oni Region	30,200	28,270	28,654	21,800	19,200
Ambrolauri Region	34,055	40,170	38,191	26,800	24,100
All Georgia	1,697,700	2,677,200	3,542,300	4,048,600	4,878,000*†

Source: V. Jaoshvili, 1961, 82.
Notes: *1970 figures from 'Sakartvelos SSR dak'vemdebarebis . . . 1974', op cit.
† P. Hodges, 1977, 68.

of the population decreases (see Table 2). Ties of kinship and of solidarity with fellow Ratchuelians are nevertheless staunchly maintained throughout the country and over the years.

3

Soviet Georgia

In order to sustain their particular way of life *vis-à-vis* the more 'official' version of similarity between all Soviet citizens, rural Georgians such as the Abari villagers invoke the argument that, as, Georgians, they had an unparalleled history and so could not be like others.

During fieldwork, constant reference was made by the villagers to their past, about which they have learned through universal education in school and through a body of 'received knowledge' within the community. For example, a collective farmer once showed me a collection of flint arrows which he kept wrapped in newspaper behind a cupboard in order to explain that 'We have always been here in this territory, from the beginning'. Likewise, people refer to Georgia's ancient links with the civilizations of Greece and Rome and their early conversion to Christianity, around AD 337 (Lang, D.M., 1968) to demonstrate their overall superiority to other Soviet nationalities, the Russians in particular. A high level of literacy and the intense interest in history sustain a continuing debate in the villages of reports in the media of discussions among scholars in the capital Tbilisi and even abroad, to confirm many popular beliefs. For example, some know that, when summarizing the works of recent Georgian scholars, D.M.Lang acknowledged unwittingly the view of the villager with the flint arrows when he wrote:

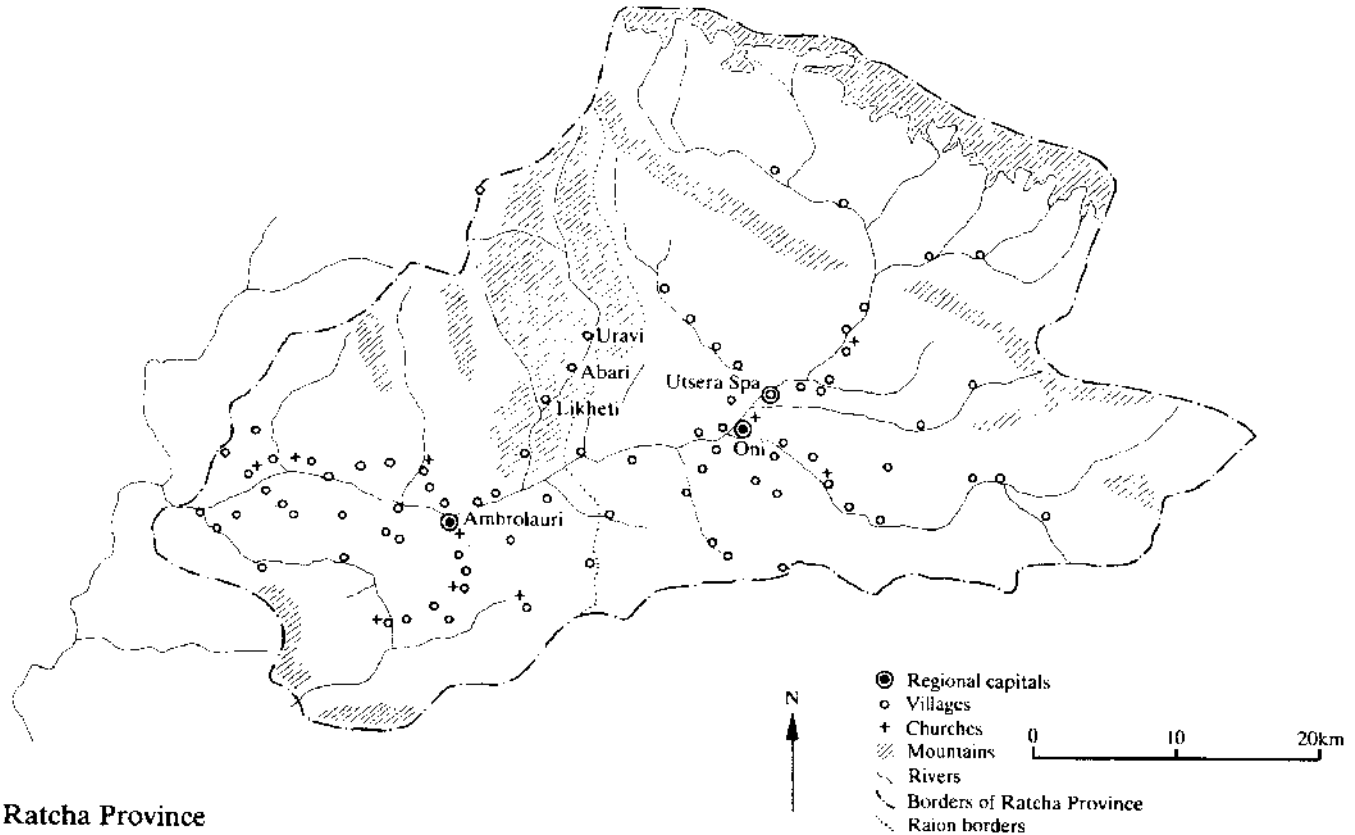
> It is no longer possible to conceive, as some earlier scholars tended to do, of a 'proto-Georgian' civilization created entirely outside the

> historical boundaries of Georgia and then imported in the course of some *Volkerwanderung* or mass migration of peoples into a land virtually vacant and uninhabited. Today archaeological evidence points rather to Georgia being among those lands which witnessed the birth of human life on our planet. The habitation and evolution of mankind and man's productive techniques and social organization continued within the territory of Georgia throughout the major epochs of prehistory and recorded time. Whatever role extraneous influences, races and cultures—and there were many—played in forming the Georgian nature and its ancient civilization, these elements must have been superimposed upon ancient, autochthonous populations and cultural patterns existing in the Caucausus since the dawn of human life itself. (Lang, D.M., 1968, 29.)

There are two further themes which the people derive from their history. Firstly, the 'Golden Age' in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, notably during the reigns of David the Builder (AD 1089–1125) and Queen Tamar (1184–1212), provided the apotheosis of Georgian culture and 'the great Georgian tradition' to which people make constant reference in their daily lives. Secondly, since the conversion of the Georgians to Christianity, continuously throughout its history Georgia has had to choose its allies either among its Christian neighbours or its Persian and, later, all Muslim neighbours, with the constant risk of being overrun by the latter. Today, Soviet Russian domination is discussed in this context, as part of Georgia's continuing dilemma and as the result of the advantage of being free from Turkey and Iran, which are still feared.

Soviet Georgia now occupies a territory of about 70,000 sq km (Zardiashvili, G., 1970) and has a population of around 4.8 million, of whom over 1 million live in Tbilisi alone and 700,000 in other town centres. Not only is there a variety of industries and types of cultivation (see Map 2 for distribution) but each of the regions varies sharply from the rest in climate, soil and standard of living. For example, along the Black Sea coast where 99 per cent of all citrus fruits in the USSR are grown and 94 per cent of all highquality tea (Zardiashvili, 1970, 141; figure for 1967) farmers earn a relatively high income, as do the grape growers of eastern Georgia. At the other end of the scale, in the mountainous Kazbegi region, with only 6 per cent of its land inhabited (Zardiashivili, 1970, 222), animal husbandry and agriculture at meagre levels of production provide a low income indeed.

According to 1970 figures, 96.5 per cent of all Georgians live in Georgia, a higher proportion than any other Soviet nationality (Hodges, P., 1977), but they form only 66.8 per cent of the republic's population (Klimiashvili, R., 1974).[3] Some of the consequences are discussed in this work.



Ratcha Province

Source: Based on a large- scale map (inaccessible to foriegn scholars), reduced in scale at Tbilisi State University and reproduced here by Mr Graham Reed