

Autonomous Political Economies: winemakers, national heritage, and the ethnographic mapping of geopolitics in the Republic of Georgia

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INTRODUCTION

Every November, the American Georgian Business Council and the Georgian Wine National Agency host an annual Ghvino Forum, “celebrat[ing] 8000 years of GEORGIAN wine culture” (American Georgian Business Council, 2021 emphasis in original). The event brings in hundreds of wine professionals, connoisseurs, and academics – tastemakers who then disseminate these narratives to the general public through tastings, books, journal articles, academic papers, or simply oral recollections over a bottle of Georgian wine with family and friends. During the 2021 Forum, held on Zoom, the well-known Georgian archaeologist David Lortkipanidze stated:

Wine has always had this important role: from wine as a product of exchange, to royal beverage, and then ritual drinking. And from Christianity, this was an important part of our identity, you know? When we had invasion, they were keeping cellars not just for wine but also an altar; so keeping wine was more than just a tradition.

Lortkipanidze traces wine into the foundation of Georgian culture, but more importantly, he creates a link between wine, social traditions, economic trajectories, and histories of invasion. He shows the polyvocality (Mankekar, 2002) of wine in the fabric of Georgianness and why it remains so important to be protected and uplifted in projects that assert Georgian national identity.

In the 2021 Forum, Lortkipandize and Minister of Agriculture Levan Davitashvili emphasized not only the nationalistic sentiment connecting Georgia and wine, but also spoke about the autonomy of Georgian markets and the increase of wine quality after the Russian embargo in 2006. These claims to an expressly Georgian market have been reified by supra-organizations,

such as UNESCO. The recognition of Georgian *qvevri* winemaking as intangible cultural heritage exemplifies how this association defines certain practices as distinctly Georgian: *qvevri* coming from Georgian clay and affiliated with particular geological locations builds an explicit connection between place and material substance. Winemaking in clay *qvevri* then implicates viticultural practices into this linkage, crafting an explicit “taste of place,” or *terroir* (Trubek, 2008) of Georgian wine. Expanding outward, intangible heritage also becomes connected to narratives, advertising schemes, and tourism. Intangible heritage, therefore, becomes a marketable distinction.

In the Georgian context, I see heritage as being re-configured: Russian-led heritage regimes, wherein for centuries Russia has co-opted the heritage of its colonies as its own, continue to be taken back by Georgia (Scott, 2017). The fact that Georgians continue to claim an older and more mature history, Bruce Grant suggests, prompts the question: “Who then, was to civilize whom?” (2009 p. 137).¹

In contemporary day, these same foundations of intangible heritage – *qvevri* winemaking – establish new autonomous national identities, despite contentious

¹ An interesting anecdote from Grant’s work speaks to the tenaciousness of historical claims. During fieldwork in one Armenian village, a farmer complained to Grant that he would dig up “earthenware pots of significant vintage, once used for storing grains or wine in another age” and Georgian archeologists would buy them off the farmers. The same pots would show up later in a museum, in Tbilisi and labeled Georgian. Armenians would make similar arguments about food dishes that they claim as theirs. Grant concludes: “That is to say, how people assert their differences can indeed follow remarkable patterns, especially among peoples whose geographies and histories have left long legacies of borrowings, stealing, and sharing” (2009 p. 65).

historical trajectories. Under the frame of intangible heritage, food is also used to safeguard these autonomous connections amidst uncertain geopolitical power dynamics. Georgian viticultural heritage exemplifies this phenomenon in that Georgians are using claims of intangible heritage to legitimize Georgian wine as expressly theirs. Returning to Lortkipanidze's quotation above, Georgian wine and viticultural practices have been secured from occupation and invasion through purely Georgian materiality: wine presses, *qvevri*, and the secret preservation of indigenous varieties represent Georgian autonomies in contested territory. Yet, the irony is that many Georgian winemakers still rely on Russian markets to sustain their business. At Zero Compromise in May 2022, I spoke to a Rachian winemaker, who said their biggest market remains Russia, even given the war in Ukraine. When I asked her about the implications of the war, she shrugged her shoulders: they were still “exporting” to Russia, though these supply chain route find new ways of transporting wine across a precarious border.

In this paper, I historical analysis to examine how historic cartographic practices implicated Georgia in imperial expansion projects, and how Georgians simultaneously used mapping as claims to autonomy. I juxtapose this analysis with a conversation of contemporary forms of distinction in the Georgian wine economy. By utilizing cartography and ethnographic methods, I argue that historical mapping practices and current day political tensions continue to play out in the Georgia's wine economy. I show that Georgians have contested imperial practices to control the land, and these tendencies are emulated in current economic trends within the framework of ongoing Russian occupation.

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS

This paper builds on an analysis of historical maps of Georgia to explore contestations of empire throughout Georgian history. I ethnographically assess these maps in their historical context, pulling from literature and contemporary understandings of Georgian claims to autonomy and territory. Mapping positions wine practices in political and cultural realities and visualizes local “geographies of self-reliance” (Saffri, 2015; Reese, 2018). By situating my discussion in historical mapping projects, I use cartography in a contemporary sense to understand the overall landscape of the wine economy and how it “engage[s] a cultural politics of the different global value attributed to wine production” (Wilmott, 2019). This approach emulates geopolitics in the political-economic sphere by considering how winemakers express their geopolitical views. Further, mapping visualizes how regional

identities might be enacted, such as *terroir*, and what these distinctions provide to the winemaker.

I couple my cartographic analysis with ethnographic data from twelve months of fieldwork in the Republic of Georgia, and online during the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2019-2021. Through participant observation at wine festivals, apprenticeship at local wineries primarily in the Imereti region of Georgia, and informal interviews with winemakers, consumers, and others in the wine industry, I explore how historical tensions are mediated in intimate spaces. I make use of what Ramona Lee Pérez (2017) calls “deliberate listening” and permission to “sift through memories” (p. 47). Food and wine provide a space where people tend to open up about challenging topics, such as imperial histories, current Russian occupation, and the struggles around economic autonomy. Further, I use these methodologies to understand how domestic and foreign wine connoisseurs and tastemakers who help bring Georgian wines into international markets establish a Georgian *terroir* (Trubek, 2008; Colman, 2008; Jung, 2014; Feiring, 2016).

IMPERIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF SOIL INTO CONTEMPORARY CONSIDERATIONS OF TERROIR

This section backgrounds some of the cartographic initiatives of the Russian Empire and their implications in the conception of a Georgian national state and identity. I show how these projects provide the foundations for contemporary claims to Georgian *terroir*, appellation demarcations, and a broader national identity in winemaking. Historical mapping projects show the tensions in geopolitics that continue into present day. An exploration of old Georgian maps and mapping project, further exemplifies how Georgians have been contesting imperialism and fighting for their sovereignty for centuries.

Mapping as a Russian state project dates to the start of the Russian Empire. As far back as the sixteenth century, Siberian cartographer Semen Remezov created maps that highlighted the ethnodiversity of Siberia, a project utilized by the Russian state to expand its territory (Kivelson, 2006). At time time, Remezov was illustrating and embracing ethnofederalism by acknowledging the cultural nuances of peripheral regions. An ethnographic approach would become a major facet of later imperial state building throughout the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (Jones, 2014; Hirsch, 2014).² Under Peter the Great (1694-1725),

² Charles King (2008) also argues similarly about Russian imperial expansion projects in the Caucasus, in that Russian imperialist recognized they could not change the ethnodi-

cartographers composed *The Book of the Great Map* (*Kinga bol'shomu chertezhu*), with maps that “were of increasing significance to rising states, a key instrument in the control and defense of territory in the stable world of early modernity” (Shaw, 2005 p. 423). On a local level, scholars show how cadastral maps were utilized to reorganize the agricultural and environment formations within state territories as a way for imperial authorities to bundle local power (Scott, 1998). However, these mapping practices also created a means for peasants to negotiate their relationship with the state, determine their property lines, and recraft their realities (Kivelson, 1995). Thus, local mapping projects placed the state in a contradictory position between establishing an exterior territorial rule and simultaneously managing its internal power dynamics, while more expansive mapping projects provided the bases for imperial expansion.

In the same time frame, Georgian cartographer, geographer, and historian Vakhushti Bagrationi (1696-1757) contributed to a body of knowledge that would constitute an autonomous geographical and topological placemaking of Georgianness. Also known as Vakhushti³ of Kartli, Bagrationi was a royal prince and the son of King Vakhtang VI. Bagrationi’s ancestors established a Georgian cultural life in the Tao-Klarjeti region in the ninth century when fighting off the Arab occupation and are known to have settled Georgians there. Vakhushti Bagrationi’s most famous map is “Description of the Kingdom of Georgia” (1735); a reproduction is shown in Figure 1. In this map, Bagrationi divided up the country into five botanical-agricultural zones. The reproduction does not explain these designations; however, the abridged text at the top states:

Vahushti had done great services to his country and his merits outstand from the fact, that he generalized previous cartographic works, analysed them, made strict evaluation, he himself directed cartographic works in Georgia and was their permanent participant and on this basis he prepared a volume of maps consisting of the two atlases.

In his time highly skilled in the field of cartography Vahushti was capable of making the maps of Georgia and Caucasia according to the high scientific level, his maps by their meaning and by decorative design were scientifically perfect in its time, during the whole century formed the basis of Georgian cartography they played prominent role in studying Georgia and Caucasia.

Unfortunately, the lack of descriptive information about this reproduction limits understanding its context. However, the text clearly shows a connection in Georgian intellectual and public circles between Bagrationi and the establishment of cartography as a scientific body of knowledge, alongside a strong nationalistic pride of Bagrationi and his publications. Bagrationi’s map would become the basis for later distinctions in Georgian soil studies and establish an affiliation between soil and Georgianness (Matchavariani, 2019). This explicit connection was reified by Prince Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani, a writer and diplomat who composed a Georgian dictionary in 1754, heavy in soil terminology (Matchavariani and Kalandadze, 2019).

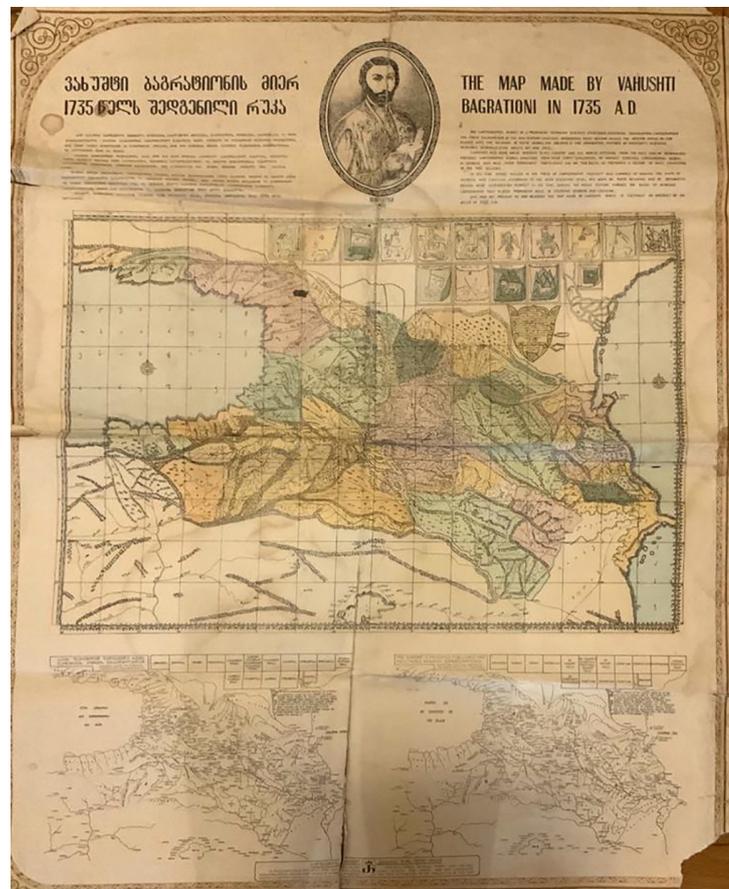


Figure 1. A reproduction of Vakhushti’s original map of Georgia dated 1735. Text above is the text on the map itself. Date of republication unknown. Map obtained in Georgia by author, October 2021.

verse nuances of Caucasian peoples and instead shifted their methodologies to absorbing these peripheries as they were.

³ The transliteration of Bagrationi’s first name varies. Most likely, the spelling Vakhushti is correct but probably appeared in later decades. Thus, the reproduced map spells his name without the -k-.

Nineteenth-century Geologist Vasily Dokuchaev (1846-1903) capitalized on Bagrationi's botanical-agricultural regions for imperial economic gain. The Free Economic Society of Russia commissioned Dokuchaev to conduct agricultural research in Georgia and "find a model that could predict the 'regularities' of an ideal soil pattern" (Johnson and Schaetzel, 2015 p. 179).⁴ His main research question was: "How can we predict where good agricultural land can be found for mapping, classification, yield, and taxation purposes?" (Johnson and Schaetzel, 2015 p. 182). Thus, Bagrationi and Dokuchaev paved the way for cartographic endeavors of imperial expansion into Georgia: where could imperialists potentially find land and plant foodstuffs?

Even though imperial projects attempted to extract resources from the land, Georgians found ways to respond and protect their land and foodstuffs. When the Soviet Union absorbed Georgia, it also obtained its local knowledge, vineyards, wineries, and agricultural experts (Scott, 2017 p 164). Under Stalin's collectivization plans, the state sought to industrialize the vineyard land for wine production. However, they continued to choose Georgian indigenous varieties to plant because party leaders "may have been Bolsheviks, but they were still Georgian; one cannot discount the Georgians' deserved pride in their native grapes" (Granik, 2020 p. 28). Georgian peasants then found ways to work around the state and make their own wines, part of the so-called "shadow economy" (Walker and Manning, 2013). Before state-regulated harvests, they would often pick the best plots the night prior and make homemade wines from secretly harvested grapes (Granik, 2020 p. 31). Further, in emphasizing wine production, by extension, the state provided winemakers with cultural and social capital and access to a scarce commodity.

In the current day, much of these tensions play out in the wine market through *terroir*. The multivocality of *terroir* shows how it can provide information about the taste of place, and thus is implicated in place-making practices, or the winemaking process that create that place (Basso, 1996). "*Terroir* talk" (Prudham and MacDonald, 2020) lends insight into how place is made while also creating a hegemonic discourse around what wine should be to participate in global markets (Jung, 2014). For Georgians, *terroir* might be a form of Bourdieuan (1986) "distinction" that can drive the social value of their wine in global markets. Yet, distinction lends to *habitus*, which is a form of culinary power, in that it creates a hegemony that is normalized and regulated (Avieli, 2018). Further, distinction does not account for the broader public; instead, removing assumptions of class consumption, "discernment"

establishes new ways of judging and evaluating the quality of foodstuff and considers the temporality of space and place (Weiss, 2016 p. 80). Thus, the consumer gains the power to recraft the meaning of foodstuff (cf. Bowen, 2015; Besky, 2014).

For *terroir*, this becomes a reality through "tastemakers," who determine a wine's potential to succeed in global markets (Trubek, 2008). *Terroir* is complicated by the idea that materials are connected to the land, when in fact consumers are often determining *terroir* distinctions. Nevertheless, what *terroir* does allow for is the recrafting of meaning in the land. If we take Brad Weiss's point of view that place and space are temporal, then we can follow with the question Heather Paxson (2013) asks, in thinking about *terroir* distinction in cheese: "what might *terroir* become" (p. 210)? Wine's potentiality for becoming something different, makes it an "unfinished commodity," leaving space for producers to recraft value (Paxson, 2013 p. 13). The instability of an unfinished commodity opens up possibilities to explore the land, derive old and new meanings from it, and create sustainable futures for ecologies of production.

To bring the discussion of *terroir* back to mapping practices, we see the contested nature of boundaries and demarcations through histories of empire. Though I accept the Georgian movement to distinguish their *terroir*, I question the assumption from Western tastemakers and some Georgian winemakers that *terroir* is necessary to define Georgian winemaking practices and economic values (Teil, 2012). Comprehending a Georgian notion of *terroir* is also murky: with over dozens of different soil types throughout Georgia, and microclimates, the idea of a Georgia *terroir* seems hegemonic and disadvantageous for considering regional, even micro-regional differences in wine production and grape growing. As I have shown above, mapping Georgian regions and their soil composition have been utilized in imperial projects, thus reifying their hegemonic nature. In addition, a distinction of *terroir* fails to account for viticulture techniques: how does one account for the use of *qvevri* when speaking about *terroir*? Although *qvevri* comes from the soil itself, for most winemakers, the *qvevri*'s clay is not the clay from their soil, but that of the *qvevri* maker.

And yet, these distinctions between *terroir* and its heritage of *qvevri* winemaking continue to interact with one another, in often unlikely ways. As one winemaker discussed with me, as we walked through the vineyards, she is kind of opposed to using *qvevri*, "if it was up to me, I'd just make wines in stainless steel because it would be a real expression of *terroir*. With *qvevri*, the *terroir* isn't really there, you know. But my co-winemakers really like *qvevri* and that it's important for us to keep using it." I was struck by this comment, as I had taken it for granted that *qvevri* was sim-

⁴ The Free Economic Society of Russia was supposedly "liberal" but was founded and carefully monitored by Catherine the Great

ply part of their winemaking; moments like this call attention to the performance of identity and the tension within winemaking conglomerates about what being a distinctive Georgian winemaker truly entails.

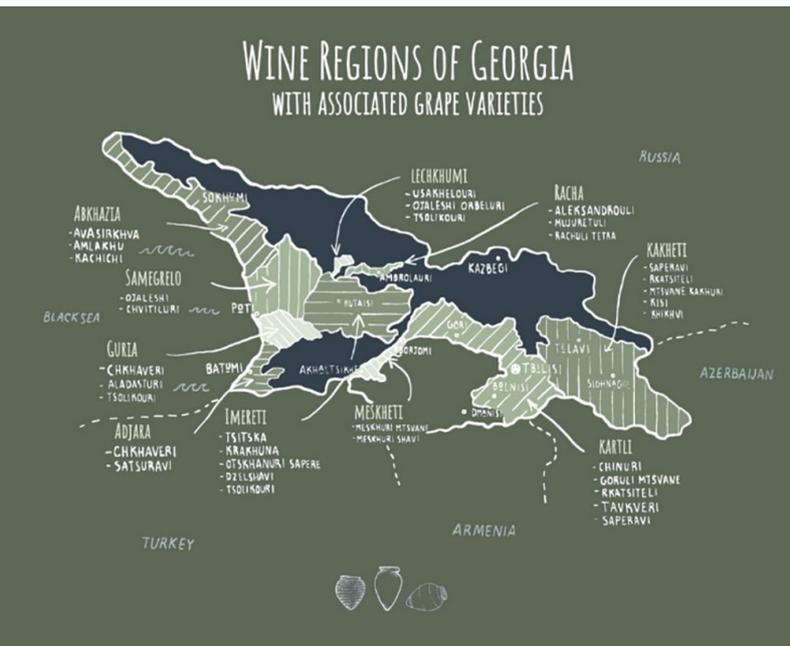


Figure 2. Wine Regions of Georgia, taken from *Wines Georgia* (winesgeorgia.com).

Further, the relationship between *terroir*, *qvevri* and the land is still not clear in labeling distinctions. Considering the shifting of private property lines throughout, and after, the Soviet Union (Bruisch, 2015; Granik, 2020), notions of ownership of particular plots does not seem to translate well into labeling practices. Georgian Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) have been around since 1998, they do not seem to be common practice and are rarely denoted on small production labels; however, the winery's location is always listed on the label's back material.⁵ Similar to my questions above, how can PDOs account for the use of material heritage, such as *qvevri* in winemaking? Further, labeling practices are in and of themselves, hegemonic: gate-keeping industries, regulating practices, and often overlooking the producers, or laborers, themselves (Guthman, 2007; Bowen, 2015; Besky, 2014). In Georgia, the Kakheti region has significantly

⁵ The Natural Wine Agency (NWA) in Georgia is tasked with regulating wine quality and labels; however, it is not entirely clear what the processes are or the extent to which they are implemented. An NWA employee has told me that they do quality tastings for the exportation of wines. Lisa Granik (2020) also states that an intellectual property organization named Sakpatenti (Georgian patents) oversees the PDO appellation system; however, I have rarely heard my interlocutors speak about this designation, nor this institutional body. Further research will explore these agencies and their role in the Georgian wine economy.

more PDOs than other parts of Georgia, though why this might be the case is unclear. Instead, this trend might only reify the idea of Kakhetian wine as Georgian, where in actuality, other regions are making stunning representations of their indigenous grapes that should deserve similar recognition. Rather, as these mapping projects have shown, Georgians historically contested their geographical placement on the periphery of the empire(s) through establishing their own internal systems of regulation and identification. Thus, instead I ask what *terroir* does for Georgians to help them craft their national narratives and how *terroir* might be more geopolitical than pedological (cf. Matchavariani, 2019).

This discussion also extends into non-regulated categorizations. On the global scale, Georgian wine is frequently referred to as "orange," a derivative of the natural wine categorization. Yet, "amber" better evokes the characteristics of wine given by fermentation in *qvevri*. With other Western terminologies, I noticed my interlocutors frequently intermix organic, biodynamic, and natural, mainly utilizing the term "natural" to describe their viticulture, such as "natural winemaking techniques." However, these terms are often used to gate-keep elite niches in the Georgian wine market. The Zero Compromise wine festival has often prohibited certain wine makers from participating, stating that they spray their vines with copper and add sulfites to their wines to export. In 2019, one of my interlocutors frustratingly told me about the conflict: "We *have* to use them [sprays and sulfites]," she said, "I just don't understand how winemakers

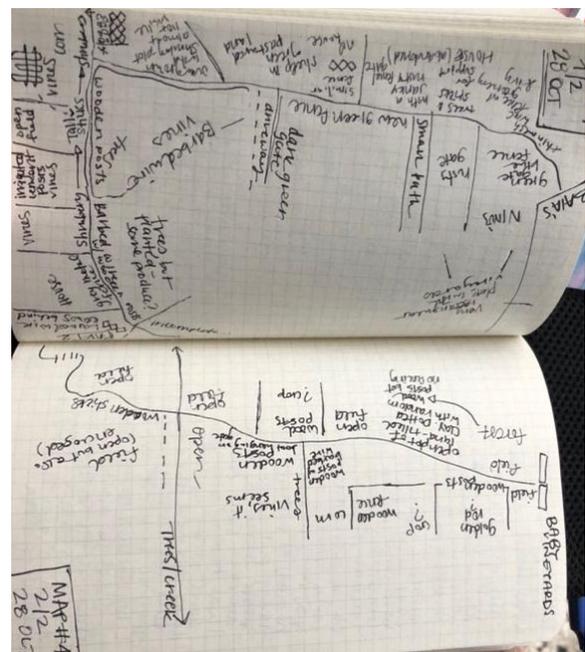


Figure 3. My attempt to sketch private property demarcations in the village of Obcha, Imereti. Sketched by author October 2021.



can claim they are bad or harm plants, they help to protect our baby vines and make our wines are safe during export.” As with *terroir*, the categorization of wine tends to reduce winemakers’ practices, claims to heritage winemaking, and the processes through which they build associations of place and space. Thus, perhaps, the choices to document or market PDO, or which characteristic distinctions winemakers emphasize, express views that are not solely based on soil, but rather show a more complicated picture of how winemakers construct their identities Georgian wine markets.

APPEALS AGAINST IMPERIAL TERRITORIALITY

Shifting back to historical mapping analysis sheds light on another facet of identity formation within the Georgian wine market: that of religion and geopolitical tensions. Bagrationi’s impact on mapping practices was not solely agricultural. A map titled “Christian Georgia,” printed in 1990 (figure 4), shows how the region where Bagrationi’s family first inhabited and established Georgianness becomes contested territory throughout centuries. The text on this map tells the history of the Georgian Orthodox church, which the authors date back to the fourth century. The map demarcates different religious monuments around the country, mainly cathedrals, patriarchal residences, Episcopal residences, and Diocese boundaries. The

fascinating part is some added pen notations that suggest an intimate connection between the church and boundary demarcations and is ridden with nationalism. In the text on the top right, someone crossed out *metauri*, translated as “commander of the Church” and wrote *mmartveli*, “manager” or “ruler.”⁶ In the bottom left of the map, in what is current-day Turkey, the person demarcated an additional region using the same lines that the key designates as “Diocese boundaries.” The crafted boundary would fall in modern-day Turkey, and they labeled the region *T’ao-Klarjetis Diocese*.⁷

Religion in Georgia became the defining factor for many imperial projects from the Khanates to Ottoman, then Russian. Georgia, being home to Christians and Muslims, amongst other religious factions, made

⁶ All translations are my own.
⁷ In Georgian, ტაო-კლარჯეთის ეპარქია. Not only is Tao-Klarjeti where Bagrationi’s family protected Georgia from early Arab occupation, but the region contains monuments of Georgian Orthodox heritage that date back to the ninth century. The Ottomans conquered Tao-Klarjeti in 1551 converting Christian churches into mosques. After the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878, Tao-Klarjeti was returned to the Russian empire and again associated with Georgian orthodoxy. However, in 1918, the Turks once again acquired this province. During World War I, Georgia regained this territory, and then yet, once again, in 1921 the Soviet Union gave Tao-Klarjeti back to Turkey, where it has remained since (Suny, 1994). I illustrate the history of Tao-Klarjeti to show how complicated this region is and why it remains so influential in Georgian religious discourses.

these projects more challenging. Political scientist Charles King (2008) defines this as the “ethnodiversity” of the Caucasus. However, as King argues, ethnically diverse groups reacted differently to the infiltration of imperial powers. King recounts how the Christian regions of Georgia, mainly the regions of Kakheti and Kartli, would be the first to happily acquiesce to Russian imperial rule in 1801. Other regions near the Black Sea, which were more heavily Muslim, required the Russian empire to create local allies and attempt to garner power in the region.

The “Christian Georgia” map, printed in 1990, was crafted just before the fall of the Soviet Union when Georgians were already actively constructing national identities outside of imperial borders. The additions to this map speak to an underlying nationalism that emphasizes the Patriarch as the ultimate ruler while also highlighting an orthodox diocese in historically predominate Muslim spaces. The complications of Georgia’s geographic, cultural, and linguistic diversity are present in this representation and persisted throughout decades of imperial rule.



Figure 5. A closed *qvevri* in Kakheti, Georgia.

Photo by author, November 2021.

This persistence is also paralleled in the wine economy. In the Kakheti region, archeological findings date the Alaverdi Monastery to the sixth century, and material artifacts identify that winemaking took place as early as 1011 (Granik, 2020). Under the Soviets, the monastery was reconstructed to store agricultural equipment, and the *qvevri* were filled with gas and farming chemicals. After the fall of the Soviet Union,

Alaverdi resumed operation and winemaking. In 2006, a large-scale Georgian winery renovated the monastery and equipped the cellar with Italian technology and new *qvevri* for winemaking. The monk who was making wine at the time became a “visionary” for the Georgian wine industry (Granik, 2020 p. 155). My fieldwork has shown that monasteries throughout Georgia continue to make wine in *qvevri*, and many of these wines are characteristic of the distinction of “amber” wine.⁸ Thus, monasteries call attention to the historical practices of winemaking and how they relate to formations of identity in the past and present. Many of the traditional practices that current winemakers rely on have been preserved and passed between generations through these monasteries (figure 5). When Georgians speak about wine, the narratives often include ties to the Church, and contemporary wine making practices continue to include Orthodox traditions.

Other maps tell us that even early in Soviet rule, Georgians were crafting cartographic appeals to imperial sovereignty. Figure 6 shows an early depiction of the Republic of Georgia’s boundaries. Likely dated around 1920 or shortly after (there is no production date on the map), the map is theorized to appeal to the League of Nations for recognizing what they claimed as Georgian borders (Gzoyan, 2018).⁹ The map legend includes labels for the “Russian-Turkish Occupation Zone” but highlights that this does not include any border shifts consequential from the 1918-1920 (Georgian-Ossetian) conflict. Regardless, from this it can be deduced that imperial rule, and the establishment of borders, was not always assumed or constricted to imperial rule, but that Georgians from early on were invested in establishing their autonomy and laying claim to territo-

⁸ The Georgian Orthodox Church also played a crucial role in the makings of the Russian Empire, as the primarily Orthodox regions of Kartli and Kakheti (historically part of current-day Tbilisi) became part of the Empire in 1801. During the 2008 war with Russia, leading to the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Orthodox Christianity became one of Georgia’s claims for the territories (King, 2008). The current relationship between the Orthodox Church and the state is also political. Many who oppose Georgia’s current political regime also claim that the ruling party’s strong ties to Russia have infiltrated the Church, especially during the 2019 political incident I discussed above (Menabde, 2019).

⁹ It was very hard to gather any additional information about the lineage of this map. I sleuthed around Google for quite some time and could only unearth a few op-eds on questionable sources that discussed Georgia’s relationship with the League of Nations, and most of these pieces attempted to un-do the Russian claim to Georgian territories. The best recount I was able to find is this article from Gzoyan, which still fails to truly bring together the events of the time or make any inferences to the production of a specific map.

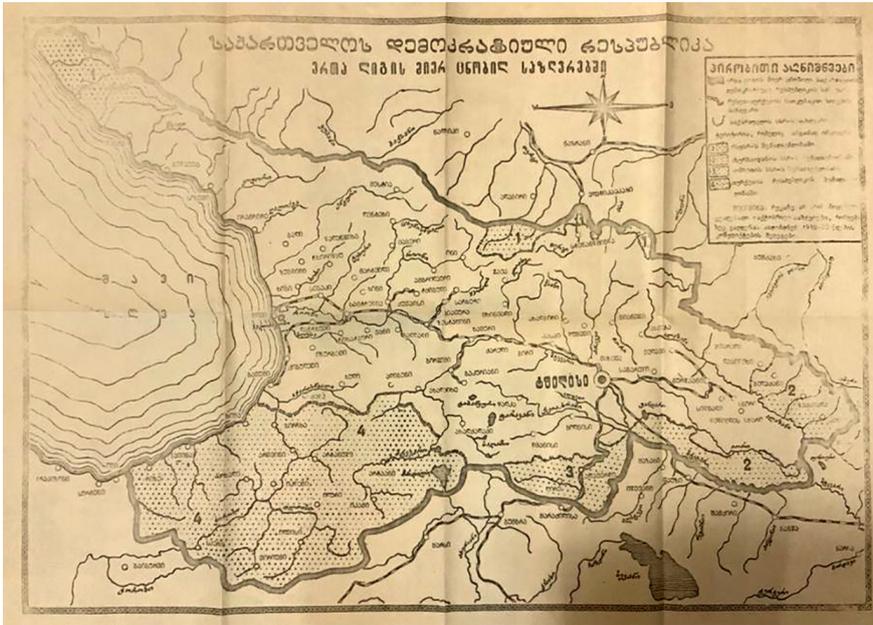


Figure 6. Map titled “Georgian Democratic Republic: As Recognized by the League of Nations,” date of publication unknown. Map obtained by author in Tbilisi, Georgia, October 2021.

ries they believed were culturally historically theirs. In doing so, Georgians tend to flip the narratives of the center-civilizing-the-periphery that perpetuated Russian political and social discourses.

These historical tensions have also existed for centuries in the Russian wine market. After the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) and well into the Russian Empire, Russia was one of the French producer, Clicquot’s top markets for champagne (Guy, 2003). French champagne became emblematic of a peaceful transition between violent pasts and post-war presents. Clicquot utilized official biographies of producers, the land, and the wine to market a distinct taste in the French and Russian social imaginaries. However, under Stalin’s regime in the early 1930s, the state quickly destroyed plots of “inferior” French varieties growing in the Black Sea region of Russia. It replaced them with their own “indigenous” varieties extracted from Georgia - Rkatsiteli, Saperavi, and Mtsvane – to mass-produce a Soviet Champagne that they marketed as vastly superior to the French version (Gronow, 2003). Yet, the state relied on the appropriation of Georgian grapes and French viticultural knowledge and techniques. To fulfill champagne production quotas under Stalin’s five-year-plans, the state built “wine factories,” or large-scale wineries, which made wine according to orders from Moscow and labeled all their products under the state-owned monopoly Samtrest (Самтрест) (Granik, 2020 p. 30-31; Gronow, 2003 p. 153).¹⁰ Thus, in 1936 after destroying agricul-

tural land, creating class tensions, establishing public campaigns of Soviet superiority, Soviet Champagne was born and marketed as a product of a Soviet “good times” (cf. Klumbytė, 2010). As the detailed history of champagne and its relationship to Russia shows, for centuries, foodstuff has been playing a crucial role in identity creation and has been used in periods of political turmoil when the state needed to reify a national identity.



Figure 7. Photo of winemaker Keto Nindize during a protest. Taken from Facebook with permission

In the current day, winemakers are now using their wine as a way to continue to contest imperial endeav-

and distributed wine and spirits; Samtrest was Georgia’s designation (Gronow 2003, 21-22). My fieldwork this spring will start with an Open Research Library Associateship at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where I hope to find more primary sources on Samtrest and wine distribution in the Soviet Union.

¹⁰ The “wine factory” is related to the Georgian word for winery, marani (მარანი), though this is not a direct translation as Georgian does not have a word for winery. Various “trusts” throughout the Soviet Union produced, regulated,

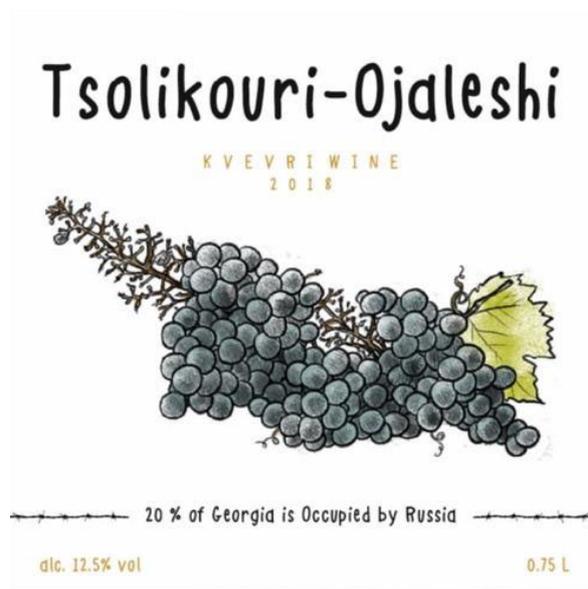


Figure 8. A wine label of Keto Ninidze in production from 2018 – present. The occupied territories are represented by the “dead” sections of the grape bunch, label collected by the author.

ors. After Russia embargoed Georgian wine in 2006, the local wine market shifted significantly. Many call the 2006 embargo period a “golden era” for Georgian wine, wherein winemakers could not rely on the Russian market and, in turn, were able to make the styles of wine they desired (Figure 7). However, the embargo ended in 2013 and exports to Russia returned: over 60% of Georgian wine was sent to Russia that year (Granik, 2020). Nevertheless, the wine economy shifted considerably during the embargo, providing a new space for smaller wine producers to make wine in more traditional viticultural styles. These same winemakers have also been speaking up against the Russian occupation of Georgia and utilizing their own form of mapping to visualize occupation through their wine (Figure 8).

Imperial histories of cartography help understand the shift in meaning as empires expand, transition, and collapse. These histories then become implicated in foodstuffs: where remembrances of the past are contested, reformulated, and utilized in economic markets. All of this is bundled into the power of the land (Aistara, 2018), a power that is transferred into material objects and shapes how they move through global markets and contemporary supply chains.

Figure 8 – A wine label of Keto Ninidze in production from 2018 – present. The occupied territories are represented by the “dead” sections of the grape bunch, label collected by the author.

CONCLUSION

As the accounts above show, Georgia’s complicated history with occupation continues into the present day and has led Georgians to proactively reconstruct their nation and identity (Batiashvili, 2018). After periods of Russian and Soviet imperial influence, claims to Georgian autonomy, sovereignty, and distinctive national identity are being blended into contemporary formations of what it means to be Georgian – as a human, a state, and a player in geo-economic markets. Wine, for Georgians, is more than just a beverage, but an economic source of national identity-formation and market outlet to express autonomy from Russia. Georgian heritage tourism and the wine industry are interconnected markets through which Georgians formulate national identity and seek independence from imperial pasts. Wine becomes a conduit for independent heritage-making and a platform for negotiating sovereign identities in the complicated context of imperial territoriality. Yet, this Georgian nationalism is imagined constructed through historical claims to winemaking and land ownership, and I inquire how *qvevri* winemaking has been co-opted for this identity, how it interacts with the larger political economy, and what this means to consumers as this identity is performed throughout supply chains.

These considerations have led to further outlets of exploration and mapping: What types of identities are being created and associated with Georgian winemaking practices? Specifically, what makes these identities “distinctive” and how do Georgians incorporate viticultural and vinicultural practices into building these distinctions? As I expand this project into mapping Georgia’s “Wine Route” and analyzing wine labels from Georgian winemakers, I intend to ask how identities are applied to products such as wine and wine-related commodities. Examining the Georgian wine supply chain will bring about an understanding the different ways that Georgian winemakers distinguish themselves, how this is translated to consumers, and what that means for the relationship between Georgia’s autonomous political economy and its geopolitical tensions with Russia

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