

The Gendered Feast: Experiencing a Georgian Supra

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Abstract:

The supra is a traditionalized feast in post-Soviet Georgia characterized by abundant food and ritualized drinking. It is extremely common in social life, especially in rural Georgia. Secular rituals, social occasions, national and religious holidays and life cycle transitions are accompanied by the ubiquitous supra. The supra has been examined by anthropologists as a site for macro level analyses that put forward structural or cultural theories for the underlying meaning of this ritual-for-all-occasions. Women's experiences of and roles in the supra have often been overlooked or misrepresented in these studies. In this thesis I investigate women's varied roles at a supra and problematize the idea that the supra demonstrates a model of society, with a paragon of masculinity at the center. I question the static image of an idealized supra that is only capable of reproducing a particular cultural model and argue that the supra is flexibly employed with a great deal of social life being oriented around preparing and participating in supras. Women's experiences of the supra (like men's) is different depending on the type of supra, the other participants involved, the age of the woman, her class and her particular geographical location.

Keywords: post-Soviet, Georgia (Republic), cultural anthropology, feast, banquet, ritual, gender

Introduction

The supra was the worst and best experience I had in Georgia. Georgians have supras about 3 times a week to celebrate different things, whether it be a wedding, holiday, etc. In this case, the supra was for us. There were about 10 people at this supra; my sister's host parents, her host father's boss, Kakha¹, her host mother's sister and brother in law, a couple work friends, and the director of the school my sister works at (and maybe a few others). On the table there was a veritable orgy of food. Types of food on the table: tomato and cucumber salad, suckled pig, lines of beef, spicy green beans, potato/meat pie, baklava, khajchapuri (Georgian cheese bread and 1 of 2 national dishes), grape gelatin, rice and meat filled crepes, bread, potato salad, pickled vegetables, eggplant, chicken, chocolate coconut cake, smoked and regular cheese, grit-esque white substance, fatty pork, pizza, shish-kebobs, and lots and lots of homemade wine.

There were three or four plates of each type of food. They filled up our wine glasses and we picked food for ourselves and it was underway.

Here's the thing about supras: they're celebrations, and because of that everyone toasts to different things often. The most important word at these supras is "Gaumarjos" which is the Georgian word for cheers. What would happen is this: someone would cheer to something, say Gaumarjos, and pound² their wine. The next person would cheer to the same thing, etc., until everyone had cheered to it. We cheered to families, relationships, friends, Georgia, American visitors, safe travel, peace and harmony, etc. etc. etc.

After a short while I started taking sips of the wine instead of pounding it. If you thought college was filled with peer pressure, you have no idea what it was like to be at one of those supras. Every time your plate was empty, people demanded you re-fill it. Every time you took a sip of wine, people demanded you finish it. It was very stressful and harrowing. My sister had

told me about the pressure, but I didn't imagine it would be that bad in my wildest dreams. After a little while longer, a couple of the guys brought out a drinking contraption which was a straw like hose put into a cup full of wine and lifted above your head. There, with the hose pinched between your index and middle finger, you were expected to drink the whole cup (~12-15 oz.). Now, here's the problem -- I had had 2 hours of sleep the night before and my body was wracked with jet lag. That mixture, coupled with already having drunk lots and lots of wine, led to me feeling weirder than I ever have before. I was not in the right state of mind. I really wanted to supra to end (it had lasted 2.5 hours already) but there is never a set time for these things. My sister said they can last from 2 to 10 hours, and there's no way to predict how long they'll last. An hour later, I was so out of it that I almost lost it. But I surprised myself and kept my composure and politely asked my sister if I could go to bed (which she said was ok, and the Georgians would understand because I had been traveling so much). Thankfully, I finally was able to go to sleep.

--Lee Linderman, September 2006

This colorful description of a supra is from my 19 year old brother, Lee. Lee's trip to Georgia in the summer of 2006 was his first time abroad. I included the description here to give a sense of what an unsuspecting, young American male experienced at his first supra. While he did not understand the ritualized facets of a supra or its greater social and political meaning in Georgia, the sensory and emotional aspects come through quite clearly. Ask any non-Georgian who has spent time in Georgia to describe his or her experiences there and without fail the supra will appear at or near the top of the list.

There was one important aspect of the supra my brother did not comment on, the gendered nature of the supra. We are left wondering how the food got prepared and who prepared it. Were there servers at the table? Who was pressuring Lee to drink and who decided it was acceptable to dismiss him from the table? Were men and women drinking equally? He says a couple of guys brought out a drinking contraption; did any women take part in this drinking feat? This paper seeks to address questions about the roles men and women play at the supra and the way gender is portrayed in scholarly and popular accounts of the supra.

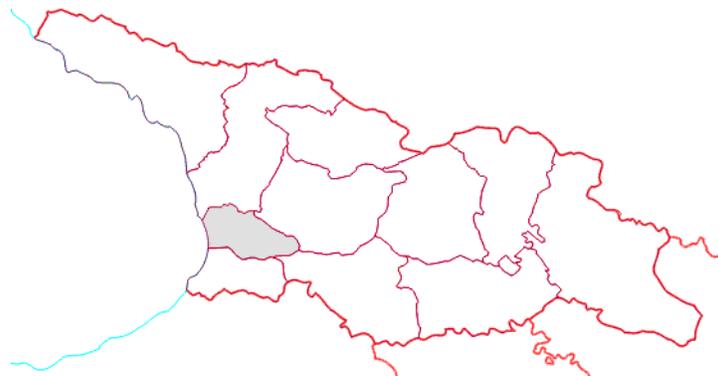
Anthropological and ethnographic studies that deal specifically with Georgia are relatively few; however, within this marginal field the supra is a topic that has gotten quite a bit of ethnographic attention. This occurs for obvious reasons: ethnographers or any visitors to Georgia are always subjected to it; its rule governed and consistent form is compelling to anthropologists analyzing ritual; and its ubiquitous nature makes it a ready site for macro level analyses that put forward structural or cultural theories for the underlying meaning of this ritual-for-all-occasions. A brief review of ethnographic examinations of the supra includes several sociolinguistic studies by Helga Kotthoff (1995, 1999), who focuses primarily on the speech act of the supra toast. Florian Mühlfried has written on gender attributes of the toastmaster (tamada) in a cognitive anthropological study and on supra-ing as a means to preserve nationhood (2006, 2007). Paul Manning has written about the supra as a metaphor for consumption in the private sphere under the Soviets (2007b) and more broadly on the way wine mediates between the spheres of the political and the everyday in Georgian life in a forthcoming book (Manning N.D.: Intro, 19-20)³. Kevin Tuite investigates the social and political attitudes which the supra is said to encapsulate, focusing on the way civil society and public space is understood (2005b). So why attempt another study of the supra? Because women's experiences of and roles in the supra have been overlooked or woefully misrepresented. There are anthropological studies of gendered aspects of the supra, which explore the supra as a site for the reproduction of masculinity

(Mühlfried 2006, 2007; Tuite 2005b, Jgerenaia 2000). However, there are no studies that focus specifically on women. If women are mentioned in the analyses, they are dismissed as the workhorses, relegated to the kitchen where they prepare the meal (Tuite 2005b, Kotthoff 1995) and certainly never considered to embrace or enjoy the supra. An investigation of women's roles in the supra is also useful as a means by which to investigate gender roles in Georgia more broadly, as there is also a lack of scholarly studies on the topic.

In this study I will review the main components of the supra ritual beginning with food preparation and presentation. Next I will examine the role of the toastmaster and toasting, including a description of specialized toasting procedures. I will then include a brief study that examines the supra as a site for (re)producing political messages. The bulk of the rest of the paper will be a close reading of aspects and perspectives that are missing in contemporary examinations of the supra, namely women's roles and experiences of the supra. In order to investigate the gendered aspects of the supra I will situate the discussion by providing a brief and broad examination of work done on gendered attitudes in Georgia today.

The basis for this study was fieldwork done in Ozurgeti, Georgia from 2005-2006, when I was a Peace Corps Volunteer at the Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College. Additional fieldwork was completed in the summer of 2009. Having had previous fieldwork experience and having been to Georgia before, I approached my time in Georgia as a Peace Corps Volunteer from an ethnographic perspective, integrating myself as much as possible into local networks.

Ozurgeti is the capital of the western Georgian region of Guria. Guria was one of the wealthiest regions in Georgia under the Soviets but now is one of the poorest.⁴ It is a rural area located in the South Caucasian Mountain range and its boggy lower valleys (see Fig. 1). The population of Ozurgeti is between 10,000 and 15,000 and it is the capital of the region. Studies of the supra have generally been geographically located in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi or nearby villages. Manning and Tuite have both investigated the ritual in the Mtskheta-Mtianeti region located high in the North Caucasus Mountains to the north east of Tbilisi (Manning and Upliashvili 2007, Manning 2007b, Tuite 2002, 2004). However there do not seem to be any studies of the way the ritual functions in western Georgia.



Political map of Georgia. Shaded portion is Guria (Fig. 1)

Most of the employees at the Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College were women, including the director, and so most of the supras I attended were heavily dominated by women. Unsurprisingly, this is rather a different case from representations of the standard or idealized supra. Commentaries on the macro processes and structural meanings behind a supra are important and valuable and I will give an in-depth review of the work that has been done thus far. However, I hope to add a fuller ethnographic perspective, which situates theoretical analyses

in daily experiences. While I will engage with some generalizable commentary on the supra and the way the ritual works, I will also focus heavily on the lived experience of the supra, noting that this experience will be different depending on individual perspectives on the ritual. The ethnographic material comes from my journals, letters and emails to friends back home. Written accounts from other American Peace Corps volunteers about the supra are included as supplementary materials. Finally, I draw on observations from my visit to Ozurgeti during the summer of 2009. These observations are not part of formal fieldwork and I do not claim that they represent the same type of rich material that I would have obtained through that process. However, the experiences I had during this time are still salient and provide a starting point from which to expand the current anthropological work on and analyses of the supra.

The Supra: A Ritual Feast for All Occasions

Before we can ask about gender in the supra, we must first ask: What is the *supra*? Broadly, it is a traditionalized feast or meal. Paul Manning describes it as a feast ideally characterized by extremely abundant display of traditional foodstuffs (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 7). The supra is also an occasion for ritualized imbibing. Drinking wine or liquor at a supra is accompanied by ritual toasts, which are directed by the tamada (toastmaster), who combines the consumption of alcohol with specialized, emotional and articulate spoken word (Manning N.D.: Chap. 1, 8). The term supra means tablecloth in Georgian. It is from the Arabic *sufuratun*, which is the cloth spread on the floor for eating (Chatwin1997:181). Supras include formal and festive meals. All secular rituals, social occasions, national and religious holidays and life cycle transitions are accompanied by the ubiquitous supra (Manning N.D.: Chap. 1, 9). Every supra follows the same set of rules, but the level of formality depends on the occasion. Supras can be held almost anywhere, including restaurants, gardens, schools, graveyards and, perhaps most commonly, at homes. Most often, guests sit at a table, which is covered with small plates of food that continue to be brought out and refreshed as the supra continues (see Fig. 2).



A supra table in Ozurgeti, Georgia (Fig. 2)

As Florian Mühlfried says, “No major step in the life of a Georgian would be complete without a banquet. On the macro scale, then, the *supra* functions as a rite of passage” (Mühlfried 2007:2). The ubiquity of the *supra* makes it a powerful synecdoche for Georgian society and thus favorable for meta-level commentary. Manning writes that Georgian social life presents itself as an endless series of *supras* (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 10). The *supra* expresses the image the Georgians believe is especially characteristic of themselves, which is that of carefree lovers of wine and the wine ritual (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 19).

A close investigation of the *supra* is useful in order to examine how this ritual reproduces norms, values and conceptual schemes for the participants. As Durkheim theorized, societies maintain their coherence through independent and objective “social facts” (Durkheim 1982). This emphasis on social facts made the examination of ritual particularly important. Individuals come to embody the values and norms of their culture through rituals. The focus is similar to practice theory that succeeds this earlier form; however the Durkheim group focused on specific instances or highly intentionalized moments of practice (Ortner 1984:157)—such as ritual or festival. Ritual became one of the primary matrices for the reproduction of consciousness (Ortner 1984:157). In this paper, I am interested in the *supra* ritual as a form of practice, something people do and a way to reproduce and transform consciousness. However, I am cautious about upholding a strict boundary between “the ritual” and the “everyday” in the case of the *supra*. Bourdieu, for example, emphasized not just ritual, but ordinary habits and practices as ways to reproduce the system or social forms (Bourdieu 1977). Ortner points out that “to study the reproduction of consciousness, mystified or otherwise, in the processes of ritual behavior is to study at least one way in which practice reproduces the system” (Ortner 1984:66).

The *supra* is both ubiquitous and flexibly employed, with a great deal of social life being oriented around preparing and participating in *supras*. While one can say that a particular *supra* is over, there is leftover food that is often prepared the next day in a kind of smaller, less formal *supra*. Similarly, at any given *supra* the majority of guests may leave after the formal toasting procedure has finished, but other guests may stay on, continuing to eat, talk and toast in a more intimate and free setting. Therefore it becomes difficult to find a definitive place where the ritual ends and the everyday begins. The *supra* ritual form itself is highly visible and certainly reproduces habits, making it “good to think” as a representation of Georgian society (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 12).

Manning argues that the *supra* is conceived of as having a strictly determined structure that does not leave anything to chance and thus produces moments when the normative categories for everyday life are performed (Manning N.D.:Chap.1, 10). “The *supra* is a traditionalizing form of discourse, it performatively creates that which it presupposes to be immutable. Because it is a traditionalizing and yet very visible aspect of the social life, it presents itself as an ideal and idealized reduced model of the social available for meta commentary on the broader social totality of which it is a part” (Manning N.D.:Chap.1, 11). Similarly, Beverly Stoeltje argues that performing grief at Asante funerals (re)constructs cultural identity and political hegemony. She notes that “the practices of culture offer an opportunity to glimpse the performance of symbolic acts of political import” (Stoeltje 2009:3). She then thoroughly dissects the ways in which power is “displayed, claimed, challenged, and negotiated” in Ghanaian popular culture and specifically the funeral (Stoeltje 2009:18). Funeral rites, like *supras*, are sites from which to examine the cultural and political phenomena that undergird powerful ideological formations and cultural logics (Stoeltje 2009:8).

Here, I will investigate the lived experiences of the *supra* that are left out of popular

reproductions of this meta commentary. What do women's experiences of supras performatively create and what does that say about Georgian cultural logics?

The Culinary Art of the Supra: Preparing, Displaying and Consuming Food

After a cursory reading of many academic texts on the supra, one might assume that food preparation and consumption is the informal and rule-free zone of the supra ritual. Often the food and presentation has been glossed over in descriptions of the supra in order to give more time for intricate descriptions of oral performance. European writer Alexandre Dumas deemed food to be a "very minor consideration" in his early description of a Georgian supra, claiming that the ability to drink large amounts is instead far more important (Manning N.D.:Chap.1, 19). Unsurprisingly, many anthropologists have been the honored guests at supras and therefore have not had much experience in the behind-the-scenes aspects of the ritual, such as food preparation and display. Also, food serving and preparation is almost exclusively the province of women, so male anthropologists may not have had the chance to investigate this realm.

Examination of the food of the supra often is limited to saying that supra guests serve themselves and pass dishes around the table, similar to what might be called "family style" dining in the US. While this statement is not inaccurate, it does not present the full picture. Manning makes the argument that food consumption is the "democratic" aspect of the supra, in stark contrast to the "autocracy" of the formal rules governing toasting and wine consumption in the supra (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 25). This is a useful binary in Manning's nuanced examination of the "metapragmatic" commentary on the supra (Manning N.D.: Chap1, 31). However, when examining the lived experience of the supra, especially from the women's perspective, one needs to reconsider such a clear cut dualism.

At first glance the set up of the supra table may seem chaotic (see Fig. 3) but the service is actually designed both to be visually impressive and to pique the palate through contrasting colors, textures, and flavors (Goldstein 1999:27). As figure five demonstrates, much of the table is already laid out with food dishes before guests even arrive. Many of these foods have been prepared well in advance and are served at room temperature. Often vegetable dishes, bread, beverages and place settings are set out ahead of time and meticulously placed on the table. Even though I participated in preparing for many supras, I was not allowed to place dishes on the table because of my perceived lack of understanding of the aesthetics of dish and food placement. Instead, I was relegated to rinsing and drying the dishes that my host aunts, Elza and Tamar, placed on the table.



A supra table in Western Georgia (Fig. 3)

The preparations for a supra are time intensive. Food processors and other kitchen aids are still extremely rare. Peace Corps Volunteer Jennifer McFann describes the intense effort and creative resources that are put into cooking for a village wedding:

When I came downstairs yesterday evening...there was cake everywhere [see Fig. 4 and Fig. 5]. Cake covering the sink, the washing machine, the counter space, the woodstove, and the fridge. I count 24 layers in all, and considering that a) There's only enough space in the oven to make one layer at a time, and b) They don't have baking powder here so they have to churn air and fluffiness into every batch of batter with raw arm strength [this is an insanely impressive feat]. Few expressions stick in my mind like the stare of intense concentration and strain on my host aunt's sweat-beaded face as she mixed cake batter for New Year's...[In order to speed up preparations] someone had the inspiration to jam a blender fork into a drill. Since it was clearly jammed in and not part of some new line of culinary power drill accessories, I steered clear, but my host mom took the opportunity to drill her cake icing like nobody's business.

Large groups of women will come together to prepare for larger supras. For example, wedding supras are often prepared with the aid of neighbors and relatives, as in McFann's example. Neighborhood families are expected to contribute money, foodstuffs and labor to the preparations for a wedding supra. Female neighbors, friends and family members get together to cook for several days in advance. During one particularly large wedding supra preparation period, I grated carrots for 8 hours and was only able to go home hours before other women because I was considered a guest and a fragile foreigner.



Cakes being stored in the laundry room and on the counter (Fig. 4 and 5)

The visual appeal of individual dishes is also very important. On another occasion, I was allowed to cube a boiled potato for *salat olivie*. However, my cubes were not quite square enough and the salad I had prepared was relegated to emergency backup so that no one would be subjected to my visual disaster. It took six more months of peeling potatoes before I was allowed another chance at cubing tubers.

This attention to detail and perfectionism remains despite the copious amount of food that is prepared for a *supra*. *Supras* can easily last eight hours and are sometimes prepared for hundreds of people. The *supra* must seem “eternally fresh and young,” so no dish may be allowed to run out. The task of refreshing and refilling dishes is generally performed by women, who constantly bring out new dishes and clean plates for guests. In addition, as the evening progresses, new foods are brought out to supplement, not replace, the old (Goldstein 1999: 27). By the end of the evening, the table is covered with plates on top of plates (see Fig. 6 and 7). The hostesses of the *supra* also continually refresh individual plates to keep different flavors of food from mixing and to get rid of uneaten pieces of food.



Supra table with many plates (Fig. 6)



Supra table with plates (Fig. 7)

There is an unspoken rule against finishing the end of a dish unless a hostess specifically gives it to you. Because the supra must continually be in the full and fresh state, one does not want to risk finishing off a dish in case the hostess does not have another one to bring out. This practice has become more common after the economic hardships that Georgia experienced following the break up of the Soviet Union. Restraint in eating is of critical importance. New dishes, such as the important “national dish” khinkali, are brought out as the evening progresses. Given the time and effort that the cooks put into preparing the food, not sampling a dish is offensive. Respectful and savvy guests at a supra show restraint and pace themselves, ideally praising specific dishes that are particularly savory.

Drinking and Poetry: The Tamada and Toasting Rituals

From the under-discussed and feminized arena of food, we move on to the investigation of the heavily researched and masculine realm of toasting, alcohol and poetry (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 8). The institution of the tamada, or toastmaster, is critical to the definition of a supra. Wine is not consumed at a supra (or in general in Georgia) unless as toast has first been pronounced by the drinker. These toasts are directed, proposed, and presented by the tamada. Tuite states that, “In principle, at every occasion where wine is to be consumed, even if only two men are present, one of them is selected to be *tamada*” (Tuite 2005b: 2). Each round of drinking begins with a toast on a particular topic, introduced by the tamada, after which only he drinks. After the tamada finishes, the other guests, one after the other, give toasts on the same topic and then each of them drinks. After everyone drinks, the merikipe (assistant to the tamada), who is responsible for keeping glasses of wine filled, will refill everyone’s wine glass. At particularly large supras more than one person will be named merikipe. If someone does not drink a toast or has abstained from drinking several toasts, the merikipe will still symbolically place one or two drops of wine into their already filled glass before each new toast. It is bad form to make a toast with a half-empty glass.

If the tamada decides to drink all of the wine in his glass after a toast, then the rest of the guests attempt to follow his lead. This action is called drinking *bolomde*, which literally means “until the end.” Once the tamada proposes a toast and drinks all the wine in his glass, he must continue to drink *bolomde* after each subsequent toast. It is bad form for the tamada to drink a toast *bolomde* and then go back to drinking only half glasses of wine for subsequent toasts. The decision to begin to drink *bolomde* is therefore an important and strategic move on the part of the tamada. Drinking a toast *bolomde* symbolically represents the drinker’s strong affirmation for the subject of the toast. Not drinking *bolomde* to certain, especially emotional, important or powerful toasts is looked down upon.

Although the tamada leads the toast for each round, he does not have free reign in choosing his toasts. He is governed by a strict sequence of toasts that depend on the occasion and the region of Georgia where the supra takes place (for a review of toasting sequences see Holisky 1989). The minimum amount of toasting rounds for a supra is three, although this is uncommon. Three dozen or more rounds of toasts may occur in a single supra (Tuite 2005b: 25). A typical evening supra in a private home might go on for three or four hours, though supras lasting much longer are not at all rare (Tuite 2005b: 25).

The tamada has a preeminent role in controlling the direction of the drinking occasions. The role is taken very seriously and only certain people are qualified for it. Tamadas should be knowledgeable and witty, able to recite poetry, sing and tell stories. The tamada must also be able to drink large amounts of wine without showing any signs of drunkenness. Mühlfried writes,

“The tamada must have excellent rhetorical skills. This implies fluency in the language of humour (so as to entertain the guests and make them feel at home) and the language of honour (to rekindle traditionalised notions of education and pride)” (Mühlfried 2008:2).

Leading the supra as a tamada is difficult, requiring the ability to improvise, understand the mood of the table and entertain. It is simply a matter of memorizing a bunch of toasts and reproducing them in order. There are certain toasts that must come at the beginning of the supra, after which is a period of fairly free toasting and then several toasts at the end of the supra that signify it is finishing up. Manning explains that the early toasts might be conceived of as a block of obligations that must be paid by those present before they are free to engage in “free toasts” or “personal toasts” (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 34). During the period of free toasting in the middle, the tamada shows his true genius. He uses these special moments to propose emotional and bonding toasts. Often participants will drink “vaktangurad,” where participants lock arms, drink wine from special drinking vessels, drink the wine bolomde and kiss three times on the cheeks.

Other qualities of a good tamada include eloquence and poeticalness. He must speak loudly, clearly and with good diction and also must be articulate. A certain poetic cadence should be evident in his tone and his presentation of toasts. Additionally, he must be receptive to the rhythm of the table, proposing toasts in a timely and appropriate manor. He must be sensitive to the mood of the table, trying to get everyone involved and slow down or speed up the toasts according to the level of inebriation. In general, the speed of toasts is faster at the beginning and slows down towards the middle of the supra as people become tipsy. The tamada also needs to keep people interested in the toasting. He must be able to drink large amounts of wine or liquor while still maintaining control over his faculties. By remaining at least somewhat sober, the tamada maintains his position and is able to direct the flow of the evening.

The Manly Tamada: An Introduction to Gender and Toasting

We have not yet directly examined gendered aspects of the tamada, other than to use the pronoun “he” when discussing the ideal form. Mühlfried examines how gendered aspects of the institution of the tamada serve to construct concepts of masculinity. Using quantitative and linguistic methods, he considers the themes of toasts, their sequences and the words uttered by participants. Mühlfried is particularly interested in the semantic fields that surround the terms tamada and vazkacoba (manliness), arguing that an ideal tamada represents and presents particular masculine virtues. He writes, “Some of these [virtues] are visible in the toastmaster’s performance, in the form of eloquence, sense of humor, drinking capacity, singing ability, and knowledge of Georgian history, poetry and lore. Other virtues are not so much seen as presumed: expected to instantiate, simply by being who they are, a certain essence of Georgianness” (Mühlfried 2006:2).

Mühlfried does not ignore women in his analysis. He notes that women are sometimes tamadas, though this is rare. Mühlfried mentions that the public performance of pride and honor via the institution of the tamada is normally attributed to men. However, “in the post-Soviet urban context of Tbilisi a few women are famous tamada too” (Mühlfried 2006:5). The famous female tamadas in Tbilisi share certain characteristics. They are well educated, well known and seen as manly women (vazhkacuri kali or kacuri kali) (Mühlfried 2006:8). It is acceptable for women to perform a man’s role during a supra, but it is “unthinkable for a man to perform the cultural role of a women” (Mühlfried 2006:3). Mühlfried explains that calling a woman “manly” is complimentary. However, calling a man “womanly” is an insult (Mühlfried 2006:8).

According to Mühlfried, this is how the supra enforces and demonstrates the characteristics of Georgian gender relations.

I concur with some of Mühlfried's conclusions about gender relations in Georgian society. However, his analysis and experience of gender relations in the supra does not provide a full picture. Mühlfried, a man, would have only rarely experienced female-led supras. It is unsurprising, then, that Mühlfried underestimates the ubiquity of the "women-only" supra. Similarly, as a young female I was not involved in much of the manly bonding rituals of the traditional male-dominated supra, so I would not be well equipped to analyze them in depth. While the women-only supra does not get much attention in popular reproductions of Georgian "cultural" traditions, female-dominated supras in my experience were quite common. I attended many women-only supras or supras where the majority of guests were women. While I have not done in-depth analysis on the enacting of so-called "manly" virtues during these supras, in my experience, they are not merely reproductions of the male-dominated supra, but instead are modified in interesting ways. I will examine women's experiences of and roles in supras in the second half of this paper as way to deepen the scope and understanding of previous studies of the supra.

Special Toasting Procedures: Alaverdi and Tamadobit

Before discussing gender, however, there are a few more features of the idealized supra procedure that should be mentioned. There are two types of special toasting procedures, alaverdi and tamadobit. Alaverdi is derived from Turkish and means "if God wills." In some cases, it designates a toasting competition and in other cases it is simply a form of toasting. The second type of special toasting procedure is called tamadobit. Tamadobit is used when a general toast, for example, "to children," is made into a personal toast recognizing a particular child. Manning explains, "The two metapragmatically opposed kinds of toasts, general and personal, can be combined, linking the type of other recognized in the general toast to a specific token of that type who is present at the supra" (Manning N.D.: Chap. 1, 46).

Manning likens the role of the tamada to that of a dictator. He explains that, according to a Georgian proverb, the toastmaster (tamada) who leads the feast (supra) is "the dictator of the table" (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 1). This notion is reproduced in literary texts, such as Fazil Iskander's novels about Abkhaz Sandro of Chegem. Sandro's legendary abilities as a tamada at the table are frequently compared to Stalin's abilities as leader of the USSR (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 1). Unsurprisingly, both the current government and Western-funded, non-governmental organizations see the institution of the tamada as representing the source of Georgia's political backwardness. Manning explains that these groups argue that the key to reforming Georgian politics is to reform everyday life, by abolishing the supra (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 4). Indeed, we see less rigid conformity to supra norms in the capital. I went out for a birthday celebration with friends who work for the government and powerful non-governmental organizations in Tbilisi. I was surprised when we went out to eat and did not have a supra or any formal toasts. In fact we did not consume alcohol at all. Instead, we had Chinese food and chatted. This type of birthday celebration would be unheard of in Ozurgeti. Clearly class, geographical and perhaps even political differences play an important role in when and where the supra occurs.

Performing the Supra: Political and Social Identity in Ritual

Several authors have argued that the ritual of the supra serves to cement Georgia's political identity because the country so long been dominated by powerful invaders. In the face

of globalization, the supra is a reassuring example of true Georgianness. First, as the participants repeat the particular toasts and actions that the supra requires, they are affirming the ritual and historic aspects of the performance. This is where tradition and continuity emerge (Mühlfried 2006:5). However, the specific toasts and actions are intentionally modified. The supra must combine improvised (modified) forms of each of the toasts in order to make this particular supra (moment in time) meaningful. For example, the first toast in Guria is usually to peace (mshvidobis gaumarjos), but the following statements about the importance of peace and the recitation of poetry related to peace contained in the longer toast must be improvised. Mühlfried argues that this intentionalizing ritual process “knits individual and collective identities together so closely that they can no longer be held apart.” (Mühlfried 2006:6). He also explains that every supra is a performance where the speaker is on stage while speaking a toast. Through this performance, aspects of Georgianness are ritually enacted. Within the framework of shared meals like the supra, groups and identities are formed and social categories like kinship and friendship are performed. This display and performance is one important reason that the supra is so popular. It not only serves as a ritual for major rites of passage, but also is a means of preserving nationhood in a country that has been long been controlled by outsiders.

The Gendered Supra: Identity beyond Binaries

If we agree with Mühlfried that performance of the supra ritual displays not only political identity but social categories and aspects of “Georgianness,” then a close reading of the ways in which gender is understood and performed during the supra is crucial to expanding our understanding of how the supra functions on both the level of structure and the level of individual lived experience. Georgia is a rather conservative country, with firm gender roles. Gender equality, as it is understood by Western scholars, is considered an idea imported from abroad that does not connect to local concerns, especially in rural areas. Gender discourses in Georgia generally posit women as rulers of the private realm, while men are controllers of and engaged in the public sphere. Analyses of the supra usually agree with this division, as men are in control of formal toasting and public discourse. Thus only their speech is heard and reproduced; only the men have the right to speak. On the informal level of dinner conversation everyone has the right to speak. However, the formal is of higher value than the informal (the public subsumes the private) and can confine it (Kotthoff 1995:376). Supras have therefore only been explored as a site for the reproduction of masculinity. I would like to argue that, as Abu-Lughod said, by “presupposing some sort of hierarchy of significant and insignificant forms of power, we may be blocking ourselves from exploring the ways in which these forms may actually be working simultaneously, in concert or at cross purposes” (Abu-Lughod 1996:48). With a close reading of women’s roles at the supra we can expand this rather simplistic and binary view of gender roles and relations in Georgia and open ourselves to a more nuanced and expanded view of the way the supra functions.

Gender in Society: Current and Historic Discourses

Lela Khomeriki (2003), Tamar Sabedashvili (2007) and Nana Sumbadze (2008) argue that the conventional view in Georgia is that gender discrimination is not a problem or an issue. Surveys, focus groups, and investigations of media and popular discourses reflect the idea that Georgian culture offers “exceptional respect for women” (Khomeriki 2003:29). Gender discrimination is viewed as a pseudo-problem imported from the West (Khomeriki 2003, Sabedashvili 2007, Sumbadze 2008). Sumbadze interviewed over 1,000 Georgians from all over

the country for her study, *Gender in Society: Georgia*. She found that a majority (45.4%) of the surveyed people believe that men and women are equal in Georgia and 42.1 % disagreed (Sumbadze 2008:21). Fifty point nine percent of the men she surveyed and 41.1% of women believed “in the existence of equality” in Georgia. Sumbadze conducted 47 in depth interviews with scholars, government officials and business professionals from Tbilisi. One third of interviewees stated that gender equality is not a reality in Georgia, although they did not necessarily consider it a problem. For example, a male notary said, “Equality is not good. God made world by hierarchical order [sic]. The artificial equality of women and men makes women unfortunate [sic]” (Sumbadze 2008:21). Irakli Pachulia, a male director of a vocational school, problematized the terms equality and oppression:

What we call equality has different meanings, if it means that women and men have to perform the same kind of physical work, then this is not right. Even in the context of family, men and women compliment with each other [sic], and the question of equality is quite ambiguous. Men and women have their own obligations which they have to fulfill. If inequality means that women are oppressed, then in my opinion they are not (Sumbadze 2008:22).

Sumbadze concludes her study stating that “society in general views gender equality as something imposed, rather than being real or a necessity” (Sumbadze 2008:21). In general, people had a favorable view of sexually segregated realms for men and women.

According to Sabedashvili, the reason for the gender attitudes in Georgia is historically situated and directly traces back to the Soviet legacy (Sabedashvili 2007). The relationship between gender equality and the state under the communist regimes of Eastern Europe has been extensively explored (for example Ghodsee 2004, Kay 2007), with some scholars claiming that gender equality was a significant achievement of various communist systems. In the Soviet system, the constitution guaranteed equal rights for women and men in economic and social life. Discrimination was prohibited, women were encouraged to work for equal pay and retirement pensions were guaranteed. Specific policies were implemented in order to realize these constitutional provisions. For example, citizens were guaranteed a long maternity leave, childcare benefits and high minimum wages (Spehar 2008:1). Childcare was available widely and used extensively. Women’s presence in communist parliaments was ensured through a quota system (Spehar 2008:1).

Unsurprisingly, these policies were not uniformly carried out and had contradictory outcomes. Political scientist Andrea Spehar explains the situation in Eastern European state socialist systems in general: “In spite of the heavily propagandised gender equality in the sphere of paid employment, the reality of the labour market was far from gender-neutral. For example, the state socialist system did not manage to challenge gendered job segregation and wage gaps” (Spehar 2008:1). Because women’s emancipation was tied to the state’s economic interests and it was forced from the “top down” the results were highly ambiguous. Sumbadze argues that the goal of women’s equality was imposed from above by the state and thus was not chosen by Georgians (Sumbadze 2008:22). Many people in the post communist era reacted by rejecting the goal of gender equality itself because the state had appropriated the political project of women’s equality and forced citizens to deal with its uneven implementation of regulations and requirements.

Khomeriki (2003) and Sumbadze (2008) provide a compelling discussion about the general view of gender relations in Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia. Sumbadze explains the

Soviet and “traditional” functioning of the family unit. The family unit “was of a patriarchal character, where [an] extended family with three or even four generations living together was the most wide-spread type of family” (Sumbadze 2008:79). This situation remains common today, especially outside of the capital. After marriage, a wife moves into her husband’s house, where the eldest male is considered the head of the family and has “undisputed authority” (Sumbadze 2008:79). The wife of the head of the family has direct influence over her daughter-in-law, who is supposed to follow her directives (Sumbadze 2008:79).

The transition to an independent post-Soviet Georgia and a subsequent series of civil wars caused massive unemployment in the country and changed the traditional functioning of the family. During the years of hardship, “Women happened to be more flexible and better adapted to the new economic conditions” (Khomeriki 2003:32). In particular, they were able to utilize economic opportunities offered by the trade and service sectors, which are considered particularly difficult and non-prestigious domains to work in. Thus, women began to support their families financially, usurping the bread-winner role normally occupied by men. Men increasingly turned to alcohol and drugs as a means to relieve their depression at being unable to care for their families (Khomeriki 2003:32).

The new economic conditions did not, however, lead to the sharing of duties related to family affairs and the raising of children. The state scaled back social services, which had disproportionately been utilized by women as a means to relieve their double burden, so post-Soviet Georgia saw a dramatic increase in the work women undertook (see Rivkin Fish N.D., Gal and Klingman 2000, Phillips 2008). Women had to raise children and complete housework as well as work to provide for the family. According to a sociological studies of young families carried out in Georgia, Russia, Poland and the USA, the Georgian couple showed the most negative attitude to the view that if both spouses work they should share family responsibilities equally (Khomeriki 2003:33).

The transition to a free market, neoliberal and capitalist economy has aggravated gender inequalities in Eastern Europe (see Gal and Kligman 2000). Tatiana Zhurzhenko writes in “Free Market Ideology and New Women’s Identities in Post-Socialist Ukraine” that “the essence of the problem of women’s social and economic marginalization in transitional society is that free market ideology perfectly corresponds with the patriarchal gender ideology construction of women as marginal and the conviction that this socio economic marginality is due to a ‘natural’ division of labour between the sexes” (Zhurzhenko 2001:35).

In the case of Georgia, it is unclear how much of what we see regarding gender dynamics and roles is unique to the post-Soviet period. Tamar Dragadze’s study of “Rural Families in Soviet Georgia” from 1988 suggests that rural Georgians were less affected by Soviet equality policies than those in the capital or in other places in the Soviet Union (Dragadze 1988). Dragadze argues that rural Georgians have powerful discourses about innate and immutable gender attributes and corresponding sex roles for men and women and they did not alter their daily patterns or division of labor based on Soviet mandates (Dragadze 1988:156-160, 203). Thus it is difficult to argue Zhurzhenko’s point that the free market has greatly contributed to women’s social and economic marginalization in post-Soviet Georgia because powerful discourses about “natural” divisions of labor functioned throughout the Soviet period. However, Georgia’s difficult recent history, characterized by civil wars, economic turmoil and massive numbers of internally displaced people, does seem to have had some effect on gender discourses and roles (see Buck et.al 2000, Doliashvili and Buckley 2008). More research is needed to understand how gender discourses functioned in the past and how they may have changed over

time in order to say something definitive about the effect of the market on gendered divisions of labor in Georgia.

A dominating discourse in Georgia values women's roles as mothers and wives, who should ideally not have to work or have a career (Khomeriki 2003:32). Khomeriki continues, "Women are constrained by the mentality in which freedom, power, independence, success and the right to choose are regarded as prerogatives of men" (Khomeriki 2003:32). The popular ideal in Georgia is that of a traditional family, where the man is the head of the household and inheritor of family property and wealth and the woman takes care of children and the household (Khomeriki 2003:32). Gender discourses in Georgia today, especially from conservative groups, often argue that the way forward would be to liberate women from their "forced" participation in the labor market and allow them to retreat to domesticity (Spehar 2008:1). Improving economic conditions will enable men to return to work and their bread-winner role. Social problems heavily afflicting men, such as drug addiction and alcoholism, will naturally lessen when men and women can return to their traditional roles.

The notion of specific and strict gender roles is reproduced through a public/private dichotomy as well. Sumbadze argues that in Georgia overall the attitude "supports the division of male and female domains, assigning men to public and women to private domains" (Sumbadze 2008:77). She includes quotations from her in-depth interviews on the topic. Member of Parliament Kakha Kukava says, "There should be biological and psychological characteristics, at least in our culture determining that women should look after the family and men see to the country. Women in our culture are not asked to defend the country and fight enemies" (Sumbadze 2008:78). Another participant in a focus group said, "Woman is a pillar of the house [sic], she should defend the sanctity of the family, men do not have so many responsibilities in this regard" (Sumbadze 2008:77).

Women in the "Idealized" and the "Real" Supra

The supra reproduces and challenges gender divisions and discourses in Georgia in interesting ways. Representations and analyses of idealized or standard supras miss a discussion and close reading of women's voices and experiences. Furthermore, analyzing and describing only idealized supras ignores the variety of ways that the supra actually functions in society. The supra form is easily recognizable and describable with clear, definable rules. These easily reproducible aspects of the supra may obscure the important point that while the supra is a ubiquitous form, used for secular rites, social occasions, national and religious holidays and all life cycle transitions, it has different meanings in each context. So if we talk about a "standard" Georgian supra and analyze how it reproduces ideological frameworks and cultural logics, we are analyzing merely a particular version or type of supra. I will show how this particular version of the supra privileges the male perspective and when it includes women's perspectives it only asks about women's perspectives in a particular type of supra, a male-dominated supra. This version of the supra also reduces the symbolic categories of "woman" and "man" to two homogeneous groups.

In representations and reproductions of idealized supras (meaning male dominated supras) by Kotthoff, Manning, Mühlfried, and Tuite, women are portrayed as preferring to remain exclusively in the kitchen. The space of the kitchen is considered a gendered female space and issues around food preparation, presentation and consumption are governed by women. Manning writes that women's participation in the supra is irrelevant after the food is served (Manning N.D.: Chap. 1, 21). He also claims that the supra can be separated into the

visible masculine realm of toasting, drinking and poetry and the private feminized realm of the food (Manning N.D.: Chap. 1, 8). Manning argues that “The aspects of the supra that are normatively salient for Georgian men may be of little interest to Georgian women” (Manning N.D.: Chap. 1, 18) but discusses only the aspects that are of interest to Georgian men, essentially marginalizing Georgian women’s experiences.

The segregated gender spaces in an idealized supra are an important reason for the lack of research on the female sphere; four of the five anthropologists who studied the supra were men, so they would not have access to this female arena. Abu-Lughod argues that women often embrace prohibitions and restrictions and that in their support for a system of segregation, “they fiercely protect the inviolability of their separate sphere” (Abu-Lughod 1996:43). As a young woman, I learned about the bonding time women spend in the kitchen, the importance of pacing oneself when at a supra and the painstaking effort that is put into the food at a supra. The following is an excerpt from a letter I wrote my mother about one of the first supras I ever attended, a birthday supra in Surami for a friend of my host family. Please keep in mind that I was 22 at the time of the writing and very hungry. The events in question occurred when I had only been learning Georgian for 3 weeks, so my understanding of what was going on was very limited, since the people at the supra spoke only Georgian (and perhaps Russian). I will call this supra “Supra in honor of Ketī” to have a convenient way of referring back to it.

Supra in honor of Ketī:

So we finally make it and say Hi to Nino [supra hostess and birthday girl’s mother] and the birthday girl, Ketī, [who is turning 10] and her small siblings and we chat awhile. I’m enjoying myself but I’m getting a little hungry and wondering when she is going to offer us tea or snacks or something. Then Nino’s daughter, the birthday girl, and son get dressed up in traditional Georgian dance outfits, so then I think we must be getting some performance from them and then we’ll eat cake, but instead the kids just leave. I guess they were going to actual dance class... So Nino excuses herself from conversation and is away for like 20 minutes and I am sure she must be fixing some tea. After awhile Tea [my host sister] asks me if I would like to see how a cake is made. I’m bored and starving so I say “Sure.” She leads me to Nino in the kitchen who has just pulled out a monster pound cake from the oven. So I’m looking at this cake and wondering if we are going to get any of this cake. But then I remember that the birthday girl just left for dance class so we certainly won’t be getting any cake until she gets back—would we? Would they serve the cake without her? How long is dance class? Are we going to get any food at all? Nino proceeds to take 25 minutes whipping up frosting – REALLY?! I timed it, then she obsessively cuts the cake in half and slowly puts strawberry juice in the middle, then a tad bit of frosting, I mean talk about being obsessively slow with the frickin cake, then she pulls out the decorative frosting dispenser machine and spends 30 minutes fiddling with it and decorating the cake. I seriously am trying not to watch or to think about food at all because I’m so hungry and over an hour has passed messing with the f***ing cake—that I’m not even sure I’m going to get to eat because the child is NOT THERE....I wonder if we are going to go home so my host dad and brother can go to work, it is already 3:30... the cake certainly isn’t finished, for all I know we need to spend another 2 hours obsessively adding sprinkles. So I figure we could

leave at any time, really I have no clue what is going on. At 4:10 the cake is finally finished (yes they obsessively added chocolate sprinkles) and the birthday girl is not around and I forlornly watch as Nino moves the cake to the corner of the kitchen, “out of the way” certainly not to the position of “ready to be served at any moment because Laura is gonna pass out from starvation.” So now the Grandmother brings out some bread dough and starts kneading it and says she is gonna make some khajchapuri. I’m like g*****, do I have to watch more food be prepared? My second thought is, “this better not take as long to make as that cake” because the cake took OVER 2 HOURS TO BE FROSTED—that doesn’t include baking time. But the Grandma making khajchapuri gives me like a sliver of hope that they’re gonna serve us food food, like dinner and then cake. But that thought also worries me because I don’t really see much dinner food around and so who knows how many more hours it will take for dinner to be prepared. At this point I’m like, it would just be better to leave and eat at “home” because my host mother is certainly faster at preparing meals. We could be served dinner at 9pm if we keep up this rate. We all spend the rest of the hour watching grandma make khajchapuri and Nino clean up. At 5pm birthday girl comes home and dad moves a table into the dining room. Laura is unable to stand and has a pounding headache but is finally seeing a light at the end of the tunnel- at least now there is a TABLE, a CAKE and some KHAJCHAPURI. Maybe Laura will get to eat at least one of these items. By six pm, somehow more food has magically appeared on the table and there are chairs. We sit down and Dude!! what a feast, cheese, bread, cheese bread, pickles, tomatoes, cucumbers, chicken, pickled salad, peach soda etc. I eat a great deal and feel very good finally. In Georgian tradition I give some toasts. I am definitely stuffed. Well then Grandma comes out with a hot, fresh plate of khajchapuri and tells me to eat it. I am stuffed but I want to be polite, so I take the smallest piece and eat it. Now, of course, when I’m full Nino brings out the cake and gives me the biggest piece, I mean Mom, I have NEVER IN MY LIFE eaten a piece of cake as large as the piece she cut me. I just looked at it in shock, dumbfounded for several minutes. Somehow, in some great feat of will power, I finished the cake. I don’t know how I did, then, unfortunately for me, the birthday girl brought out chocolates and picked out one for me to eat, well I obliged her because she is turning only 10 and I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. Nino served coffee with the cake, so I had that too because I love cofffeeee and was very tired. But as I almost burst, Nino brought out cherries and peaches. I WAS NOT gonna eat any more because I seriously was gonna puke, the grandma and Nino kept putting cherries on my plate, so I ate one cherry. Then awkwardly they kept handing me knives and peaches and yelling at me to eat. I kept refusing for fear of vomiting, but yeah, it was awkward.

Note how more and more food continued to be brought out as the supra progressed, something I had no idea was going to occur. Also, most of the food had been prepared ahead of time and only the cake and the khajchapuri was prepared the day of the supra. Food for supras is often prepared beforehand and stored in cupboards or the refrigerator until the day of the supra. For this fairly small supra, probably only Nino and her mother joined together to cook the food. In the above example, the painstaking time and attention to detail that is put into preparing supra food comes across quite clearly. Nino spent almost two hours frosting and decorating the cake.

What may not come across in my letter is that the time we spent in the kitchen before the beginning of the supra was heavily gendered. Only my host mother, Aza, Tea, Nino, Nino's mother and I were there. As I learned later from spending time in the kitchen before supras, women often discuss recipes and baking techniques as well as the menu and food placement or, in the case of Eka's mother in an upcoming example, "Supra in honor of Eka," thoroughly criticize and critique the supra preparations. Sometimes the perfectionism involved in the culinary art of supra food preparation is taken to frustrating levels, as is demonstrated by the cake frosting in "Supra in honor of Ket'i," as well as in the previous examples of cubing potatoes and dicing carrots. In these situations, I was being socialized to join the women's sphere in the kitchen before the supra. European writer Alexandre Dumas could not have been more wrong when he deemed food a "very minor consideration" in his description of the supra (Manning N.D.:Chap.1, 19). He would have been far closer to the reality of the situation if he had instead deemed it a "very gendered consideration."

Another, perhaps gendered, pressure I felt during this supra was to sample all of the food. I had not anticipated that it would be considered bad form if I did not try all the dishes and comment positively on the taste. This expectation was complicated by the language barrier. Many authors have commented on the intense pressure that is put on men to drink heavily (see Manning N.D., Muhlfrid 2003, Tuite 2008) and this comes across quite clearly in Lee's description of the supra at the beginning of the paper. However, there has not been as much attention paid to the related pressure exerted on guests to partake from food dishes and whether or not this pressure is gendered. The issue of forcing food and drink on people is certainly related to discourses about host and guest relationships, but it may also have a gendered component. Discussing the taste and presentation of food is something that women spend much time engaging in, because they are the ones that spent hours preparing and presenting the food. Thus the hostess often encourages people to eat. Manning explains, "The presentation of the food is absolutely presupposed... and its consumption, unlike wine, is theoretically unregulated (just as the tamada orders his guests to drink, the hostess will sometimes enjoin a guest to eat more)" (Manning, N.D.: Chap.1, 25).

The relationship to food more generally may also be gendered. David Sutton describes returning to Greece for fieldwork writing, "[My] visits to Kalymnos always were accompanied by mentioning [my] dislikes and likes, the were not only noted...but...remembered...and brought up again on return trips" (Sutton, 2001:2). My experience in Georgia was similar. Eka would often brag to the professors at the college, saying, "I know what food Laura likes," and was sure to prepare my particular favorites for supras. By saying this, she was not only making a statement about my food preferences but also about our relationship. She would emphasize that I was part of the family, an adopted daughter. Sutton remarks that when Kalymnians urge him to eat, they are also telling him to "Eat in order to remember Kalymnos" (Sutton 2001:2). I quickly realized that emphasizing my love for Georgian food and hospitality endeared me to my host family and allowed for a quicker adoption into village life. Being interested in and paying attention to food taste, presentation and culinary arts baptized me into the "invisible women's world" that seems so elusive to supra scholars. More generally, my love of Georgian food and supra rituals was equated with a love for Georgia.

Utilizing binaries in examinations of the "metapragmatic" supra (the kind of supra described when people talk about supras in general) can be fruitful. However, authors who utilize these binaries, which often posit separate spheres for men and women, have often ignored or under analyzed the female sphere. I have described a number of sites where further investigation

of women's roles and experiences would be useful in order to expand these types of analyses. These examples illustrate that gender is a salient category of analysis and allow us to glimpse what a female experience of a supra in certain contexts might be like, which broadens our understanding of the way in which supras function in general.

I want to move now to the lived experience of a person at a supra, paying particular attention to what gets left out of popular analyses of the supra and noting also that the experience of the supra will be different depending on the perspective it comes from. Undertaking an examination of the lived experience of the supra entails unsettling various binaries, strict dualisms and structuralist arguments that are often used in analyses of the supra. Even the notion of separate spheres for men and women will be questioned and deconstructed. By looking at an idealized version of the supra that reproduces standard cultural logics and gender roles, we are neglecting the reality and complexity of actual practices and confining ourselves to a static image of an unchanging supra reproducing unchanging cultural mores.

Before I begin I want to clarify the categories of my analysis. Women-only supras or supras dominated by women occur within specific groups, not as some generalized resistance to male domination by a united voice shared by all women. Gal explains:

If we understand women's everyday talk and linguistic genres as forms of resistance, we hear, in any culture, not so much a clear, autonomous and heretofore neglected 'women's voice', or separate culture, but more ambiguous, often contradictory linguistic practices, differing among women of different classes and ethnic groups and ranging from accommodation to opposition, subversion, rejection or reconstruction of reigning cultural definitions (Gal, 1989: 4).

Two salient categories of women engage in women dominated and women-only supras: young, unmarried women in the capital and middle age to older women in the regions. I have not experienced any of the first case, but Mühlfried alludes to them in a footnote, "there are exceptions [to male dominated toasting], most notably young unmarried women in Tbilisi who use the ritual of toasting to reinforce the peer group identity of their female 'posse'" (Mühlfried 2007:10). In my experience, in rural Guria, middle aged and older women engaged heavily in toasting and drinking at supras. Here is an excerpt from a journal entry that demonstrates this quite clearly. Mzia, Etuna and Nino were all younger teachers with school aged children at home:

2/22/06

I was at the college for Tika's birthday party and I was at the table that was being lame and not drinking, with Mzia and Etuna and Nino. And the other table was full of Marina and Eteri and Tsiuri, Tsatsa and Sonja, all of my old friends and they were totally having a great time. Eka had left to talk to her sisters and I had no one to talk to and I'm not good friends with the other women who were sitting there, I really wanted to be at the other table. Finally I moved over there and told them that it was better at their table. Tsatsa thought that was great and hysterical. She was really trashed so she was pushing food in my face and hugging me and making me say toasts (or shushing everyone and making her own toasts).

I have no doubt that there are many other categories of women that have experienced or engage in women dominated supras. More research is needed into this particular aspect of women

dominated supras in order for us to understand how significant this category of analysis is, to understand its historic specificity and to investigate any other constitutive reasons for its being.

I will closely examine Kotthoff's reproduction of supra gender divisions in order to expose what is missing in her analysis, the complexity of actual practices. Kotthoff, like Manning, argues that women are universally relegated to the kitchen during supras. She writes,

Whereas to be a *tamada* is a great honor for a Georgian man, it is the women's job to prepare and serve the meal. Most Georgian men and women regard this division of labor as unproblematic. As for the women, it gives them the opportunity to retreat from the formal dinner atmosphere into the kitchen, where they immerse themselves in their own informal talk (Kotthoff 1995:375).

Kotthoff's reproduction of supra gender divisions does not convey the entire picture, much like the discourses that assign men and women to binary, opposed realms such as public and private. Gal and Klingman (2000) have pointed out that the private/public dichotomy works more like a fractal distinction that constantly reframes aspects of the public as private and vice versa. They write:

Activities, identities, and interactions can be split into private and public parts, and each of these parts can be split again, by the same public/private distinction. The result is that within any public one can always create a private; within any private one can create a public.... Another way to say this is that everyday public and private distinctions—whether of activities, spaces or social groups—are subject to reframing and subdivisions in which some part of the public is redefined as private, and vice versa (Gal and Klingman 2000:41).

This idea is more comprehensive because it can account for diverse experiences and discourses. Gal and Klingman, like Bourdieu and other researchers, stress the dynamic nature of the relationship between the public and the private. We can use this insight to see that a close examination of any particular supra reveals that masculine and feminine roles are not simply reducible to two unchanging and distinct realms, just as public and private are not separate and bounded.

While it is true that women prepare and serve the meal and do not generally regard the division of labor as problematic, there are complex social rules that govern which women prepare and serve the food. Women do not simply retreat from the "formal" dinner to the "informal" kitchen whenever they feel like it, leaving men to continue toasting and eating without them. It is important to know the reason for the supra and the particular social make up of participants in order to understand who serves and prepares the meal and who is able to leave the supra table and join the women in the kitchen. There are many instances when it would be highly inappropriate for women to leave a supra.

For example, in December of 2005 Eka prepared a supra at her home, in celebration of her birthday. I will call this supra, "Supra in honor of Eka." I was asked by the family to be tamada for several reasons. First, I am a close friend of hers as well as a foreign guest who had participated in many supras at the college where we were colleagues. Secondly, I am considered a member of the household where the supra was being held. Third, I had memorized several Georgian poems and the family wanted to show off my Georgian language skills. During this supra, Eka was the host, so she did not sit at the table for the

majority of the formal part of the supra. Eka's sisters and mother arrived from a nearby village to help serve the supra and prepare the meal. Eka and her sisters were constantly refreshing plates and bringing out new dishes. Her colleagues and friends from the college, the majority of whom were women, attended the supra and sat through the entire meal, without getting up to join Eka in the kitchen. Several men were also present at the supra: Eka's husband Giga, Giga's brother-in-law and Eka's uncle. All of the participants in the supra toasted, regardless of gender. While there were no toasting or drinking competitions, the supra replicated all of the ritual aspects described earlier. The ritual speech of both women and men was reproduced at this supra. After the formal part of the supra and the usual cycle of toasts finished, Eka's colleagues from the college left. At this point there was a freer toasting and conversing and the supra became more intimate. Here are excerpts from my journal entries regarding this supra.

Supra in honor of Eka

12/2/05

Well the concert is finally over – it went off quite well, the English students' section was almost flawless and I didn't mess up the technical at all. I left the dancing a bit early [we had a supra followed by dancing after the concert] and I hope I didn't hurt my students' feelings ... the supra was sort of okay... I was ½ glad I got to leave early to help Eka at the bazaar [open air market] and later... like for four hours, grinding nuts.... Tomorrow is her birthday supra and I am so excited!

12/4/05

So yesterday was Eka's birthday. I was tamada. I got up at the normal time and had a small breakfast, later Tamar [Eka's sister, who arrived a day early to help with supra preparations] got up and we did a bit of cleaning and cooking, finally she and Nino [host sister] left for the bazaar to get last minute supplies.... Then we did a lot more cooking, but basically I was sitting around a lot. No one would let me help too much, probably because my carrot slices aren't symmetrical enough... Elza came over and Eka's mom too, who seems to be one of those people who has serious perfectionism issues. Anyhoo they came over and my mood continued to sour... all that bickering... about not having enough food, the placement of the plates, the cilantro and everything else about the supra! I blame Grandma's perfectionism, easy for her to criticize... I don't see her putting on any supras! Then when the supra time finally arrived... Eka, Elza and Tamar kept jumping up and down the whole time (getting things). I can't remember the last time they were so jumpy, rushing around, back and forth to the kitchen. Thankfully, later things improved, when the ladies from the college left and Tamriko arrived and then Asmat showed up and Eka was able to talk with us. She sat down and ate and drank a bit. Then things were much cozier, I felt more included and Eka's uncle was chatting me up about the farm and our ostriches back home.

Similarly, in the summer of 2009, there was a small supra in honor of my return to Georgia. This supra will be called "Supra in honor of Laura." Eka again hosted the supra, assisted by her sisters. Eka no longer works as assistant director of the college, but instead works as assistant

manager of a private company. Attending the supra was Giga, Erekle and his wife Tamuna (Erekle is Eka's current boss), Davit (the current director of the college and friend of the family) and Asmat (Eka's best friend and Erekle's sister). Giga was tamada because he is the male head of the household. During this supra, only Eka got up to refresh plates and bring out new foods, with occasional help from her sisters who did not sit at the table. It would be completely inappropriate for Tamuna to attempt to help out in the kitchen as she is not close with Eka. Under different circumstances it would be acceptable for Asmat to help with refreshing the supra, but on this occasion, since the supra was in my honor, she stayed at the table to enjoy the meal and pay her respects to Eka's family and me in the form of ritual toasts. This was a smaller, more intimate supra so there was more free conversation between toasts. Eka felt less like she had to constantly be bringing out new foods to preserve the supra's "eternally fresh and young" form. The supra was in my honor, so my closer friends, Eka and Asmat, made sure to drink and toast to me as a way of showing friendship and love.

Thus in the cases described above, "Supra in honor of Eka" and "Supra in honor of Laura," the binary of the public realm of male toasting and the private realm of the women in the kitchen was disturbed. We could rethink these two examples using Gal and Klingman's fractal distinctions (Gal and Klingman 2000:41). The supras were at Eka's home and thus she and her sisters performed the role of the "private," preparing and serving food and mostly hanging out in the kitchen. The public orators in the above examples were generally women, although there were a few men.

Kotthoff might argue that the supras I describe above are somehow less public and formal. In her study, she argues that having women tamadas or frequent poetical toasts by women deformalizes the context (Kotthoff 1995:355). Formal speaking, she explains, is in the domain of men and toasting is a ceremonial way of privileging male speech by placing it in the realm of oratorical, public and admired talk and assigning women's speech to the realm of private talk (Kotthoff 1995:355). Women stay in the kitchen during supras to "talk about private matters" (Kotthoff 1995:376). Their speech thus remains situated in the background, in the private, informal realm (Kotthoff 1995:376). Women's activities remain screened from outsiders and inaccessible to foreigners (Kotthoff 1995:376) and are overlooked in anthropological studies of the supra. I find Kotthoff's analysis adequate in terms of standard reproductions of the "ideal" supra, the stereotypical supra image that is "good to think" and dominated by men (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 12).

What Kotthoff's neat structuralist argument obscures is the actual way that supras unfold. It ignores the plethora and variety of women's speech acts that occur in ritualized supras that only women or a majority of women attend. But most importantly, Kotthoff's argument ignores the point that the supra is a ubiquitous ritual form and therefore is extremely flexible in order to fit a multitude of occasions. Any time groups of people share a meal together and consume wine or spirits (toasting with beer is forbidden), a supra takes place. Even if the gathering is simply two friends who "share a bottle of vodka and nibble nuts," the participants will still elect a tamada and structure their conversation around a series of toasts (Mühlfried 2007:7). Women's experiences of and use of the supra ritual form changes depending on the occasion, the age of the person, and even their geographical location. By dismissing women's talk at supras as informal, private and inaccessible, we overlook a large swath of supra experiences.

Another supra I will call "Supra with Kakha" demonstrates Mühlfried's description of a small gathering of friends who will still structure their conversation around toasts. In this example Eka, Kakha and I sat down to eat food that had been prepared earlier by Eka's mother-

in-law, Lamara. We decided to have a drink and thus began a “supra.” Here again the public/private dichotomy breaks down.

Supra with Kakha

11/10/05

Yesterday Eka, Kakha [Eka’s husband’s male cousin] and I sat down at 2:30pm to eat. We started drinking and at lots of points we thought about stopping but we didn’t. We kept on toasting; eventually Kakha said that I should be tamada. Well I did the whole official series of toasts, beginning with the toast to peace and then some; I really got creative with the free toasting part. Eka was definitely beyond tipsy and she commented many times how I was a magari gogo [strong girl] because we had done the same amount of toasts and I wasn’t as toasted as her. Eventually Giga and his sister Rusiko and her husband Elguja all came and joined the supra. And then even Kelly came by (I think just to chat) but she ended up joining the supra. I was feeling overwhelmed with my job as Tamada and thinking of new and innovative toasts, luckily Kelly helped me out and I did alright. Eka and I continued a friendly banter throughout the night and ... I was the beloved center of attention and doing well with my Georgian and toasting. The night was really great. I was pretty happy and by the time I stood up six hours later I was in a great mood... I joined the masses later to clean up and just enjoy their company. At the supra Kakha told my favorite poem, the one that begins with “hoi da nana, oh hoi nana.” That poem has great cadences that just sound unbelievably beautiful when spoken. I want to learn at least part of it. ... So today Eka told everyone at the college how I was tamada and bragged about my great poetic abilities.

In the examples above, I describe three supras that do not conform to Kotthoff’s dichotomy. The “Supra in honor of Eka” was populated primarily by women and could be considered a “standard” birthday supra, with all the traditional foodstuffs and traditional toasts. Does the fact that the tamada was a woman and a foreigner automatically disqualify the supra from analysis? In the second case, “Supra in honor of Laura,” the tamada was Giga, a rather unexceptional orator and a lukewarm tamada. Asmat’s toasts to me and our friendship were far more poetical. She used toasting as a way to show our closeness and her respect and love for me, in exactly the same way male tamadas are said to confer honor in idealized supras. In the third example “Supra with Kakha,” I was again tamada and neither Eka nor I was involved in any sort of food serving role. Are all these supras merely more exceptions to the rule?

I wrote a letter to my mother in 2005 where I described two different supras that occurred in one day. These supras were differently gendered. It illustrates the point that if we talk about a “standard” Georgian supra and analyze how it reproduces ideological frameworks and cultural logics, we are unwittingly analyzing merely a particular version of the supra that privileges the male perspective.

Speaking of supras, the other day I finished class as usual and went down to the teachers’ lounge where there was a huge supra in progress (now this in itself isn’t unusual because we have a supra maybe once a week at the college, cause it is always someone’s birthday or someone’s kid just got married or someone died or it

is some Georgian orthodox holiday or something). This supra was for the marriage of one of the teacher's daughters. The old ladies were toasted! Boy can they drink! They were toasting and partying it up and I was just not able to keep up. After enjoying myself for about 3 hours, I was ready to go home. I made some excuse and got out of sitting there for much longer and returned home, how many more toasts Tika⁵ had left in her no one knows. Well it turns out that my host mom's uncle was walking home when he ran into a friend of his from his youth whom he hadn't seen in several years--so of course that means SUPRA. Since he lives in a nearby village he came to our house and ordered huge slabs of meat and bought some bread and cheese and we all [women of the house] had to frantically prepare all the food while 30 of his friends descended on our house. They feasted from about 5pm until 12pm and yes, it was a weeknight, and no, I wasn't invited because it was all men. All I got to do was try to hide or refill the wine jugs or the food plates... not my favorite night ever.

By investigating women's varied roles at a supra we have opened ourselves to a more nuanced and expanded view of the way gender roles are performed in Georgia. If the supra is to be "good to think" as an image of Georgian society, then it must reflect all of Georgian society, women included (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 12). Instead of claiming, like Kotthoff, Manning or Mühlfried that the supra demonstrates a model of society, with a paragon of masculinity at the center, representing the pinnacle of significant power and public representation (Manning N.D.: Chap.1, 29), we should question the static image of the idealized supra that is only capable of reproducing a particular cultural model. The supra is both a ubiquitous ritual and flexibly employed, with a great deal of social life being oriented around preparing and participating in supras. We should not ask how the supra uses participants, forcing them into strict gender roles and bounded categories, but instead ask how participants use the supra. By assuming that all women or all men experience the supra in similar ways, we assume that these symbolic categories are homogenous. As I have shown, a woman's experience of the supra is different depending on the type of supra, the other participants involved, the age of the woman, her class and her particular geographical location.

In order to further the work of this thesis, the particular gendered history in Georgia or Guria more specifically must be investigated. Where and why have these particular types of women's supras arisen and how do they relate to and interact with masculine histories of toasting and feasting? Stoeltje's analysis of gender representations in the rodeo has undertaken this charge (Stoeltje 1998) by examining the history and transformation of the barrel race and how the race interacts with the circulation of power as it operates in the rodeo more generally. She shows that through the acting of the barrel race "ritual" and its subsequent transformation, women acted upon their positionality (Stoeltje 1988:237). Using this type of historical inquiry to study the supra will elucidate power structures and bring forth changing concepts of gender as they are salient for women and men of certain ages and social classes, situated in particular geographical locations.

Appendix 1

List of People

Giga: The author's host father in Ozurgeti. Eka's husband

Aza: The author's host mother in Surami

Elguja: Rusiko's husband. Giga's brother-in-law
Elza: Eka's sister
Eteri: Professor at Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College
Etuna: Professor at Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College
Erekle: Eka's boss from 2007-present. Asmat's brother
Kakha: Giga's cousin and next door neighbor
Kelly: Peace Corps Volunteer living next door in Ozurgeti
Keti: (I) Nino's daughter from Surami. The birthday girl
Jennifer: Peace Corps Volunteer
John: Peace Corps Volunteer
Mayvala: Giga's mother
Laura: The author
Lee: Author's brother
Tea: The author's host sister in Surami
Marina: Professor at Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College
Lamara: Eka's mother
Davit: Director of Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College (Fall 2006-present)
Mzia: Professor at Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College
Nana: Professor of English at Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College
(I) Nino: Keti's mother. Hostess of "Supra in honor of Keti."
(II) Nino: Professor at Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College
Asmat: Erekle's sister. Eka's best friend.
Rusiko: Giga's sister. Elguja's wife
Sonja: Professor at Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College
Eka: The author's host mother in Ozurgeti. Giga's wife. Assistant director of Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College (1994-Fall 2007)
(I) Tamuna: Professor at Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College
(II) Tamuna: Erekle's wife. Asmat's sister-in-law
Tamriko: Next door neighbor in Ozurgeti. Kelly's host mother
Tsatsa: Professor at Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College
Tika: Director of Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College (1980's-Fall 2006)
Tamar: Eka's sister
Tsiuri: Professor at Ozurgeti Pedagogical Industrial College

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Fig. 7 Reprinted with permission. Photograph by Hans Heiner Buhr

¹ See Appendix 1 for a list of people mentioned in the paper

² From the Urban Dictionary: To pound. v : To drink vigorously or "throw back" beverages. Usually implies cumulative drinking. Example, "I was driving for 26 hours straight, listening to 'The Hobbit' on tape and pounding Redbulls." www.urbandictionary.com/to_pound

³ Manning's book is forthcoming. It is accessible here: <http://www.dangerserviceagency.org/drinking.html>, downloadable by individual chapters. Therefore I give the chapter and page number in my citations.

⁴ <http://www.eurasianet.org/georgia/guria/>

⁵ Female director of the college at the time and the usual tamada at supras at the college.