

Banquets, Grant-Eaters and the Red Intelligentsia in Post-Soviet Georgia

In many societies banquets are powerful tools for expressing, attributing and manipulating national identity. Additionally, they often function as social markers of individual passages like birth, baptism and marriage. Banquets are ruled by etiquette and force participants to subordinate to a collective code of behavior.

In post-Soviet Georgia, the *supra*, a highly formalized banquet, is a core element of national culture and a crucial part of both festivities and daily life. The *supra* is structured by toasts and ruled by a toastmaster [*tamada*]. The toasts follow a generally uniform, yet not entirely fixed, structure. Certain topics are obligatory, such as toasts to the family and the deceased, and a certain pattern is prescribed, such as following a toast to the deceased by proposing a toast to life, often presented as a toast to children. In addition to this, toasts to attributed identity (e.g., family, gender) are most commonly proposed before toasts to acquired identity (e.g., profession, hobbies) (Chatwin 1997).

Some toasts reinforce national values (especially the toast to the motherland, but also more subtly expressed in toasts to culture, song, and history), gender identity (particularly the obligatory toast to women), family values, and peer group identity. Generally the toasts should express honor to the addressee or the topic in hand and should not contain any colloquial expressions, let alone swearwords, gossip, or criticism. The language used is itself characterized by the use of certain formulas (e.g., *gaumarjos* ["May victory be with you!"] at the end of each toast) and a high, grammatically complex, level of speaking (note especially the frequent use of the third subjunctive).

A good toastmaster is generally defined as a person with an extensive knowledge of history, poems, songs and traditions. He (or, in very rare cases, she) should not merely repeat formulas — that would be considered a bad performance. It is very important that the toastmaster is able to improvise and propose toasts in an original, personalized way. Thus, the topics of the main toasts and the general structure are given, but the transmitted factors, or "tradition," have to be acquired and integrated into personal, intentional behavior to complete the performance and make it successful. Consequently, a "correct" performance of the *supra* is not based on a faithful reproduction of an "authentic" or "true" procedure, but on the willingness and ability of the performers to integrate the formulas into their personal habitus.

At a Georgian banquet it is impossible to drink alcohol without relating it to a toast. Sipping wine is a deadly sin. The ritual consumption of wine and its connection to food bears obvious parallels in the Christian Holy Communion. But wine in the context of the Georgian banquet is not exclusively attributed to the blood of Christ. As many Georgians believe that Georgia is to be the birthplace of wine, and as there are many traces in Georgian culture that indicate the prior importance of wine for Georgian identity, wine becomes a metaphor for Georgian blood, and those who share wine at a *supra* become virtual kinsmen.

The rules of etiquette at the *supra* are very strict and function as a formalized system for distributing honor. Everybody should be included in this process of distribution, but a certain hierarchy based on social structure is reinforced. Who is addressed by the *tamada*, when and how, who speaks after whom and for how long, who drinks when and how much — all these facts can be considered to be part of a performance of status. Boys show that they have become men when they stand up during a toast to women or the deceased, while women and children remain seated. Men who have stopped actively participating in the process of drinking and toasting are most likely no longer considered the head of their family.¹ Generally, toasting encompasses both competition and solidarity.

Both, in Georgian scholarly and popular discourse, the *supra* is considered to be an essential part of the Georgian tradition, too old to be dated accurately. Historical sources would suggest, however, that the *supra* in its current form is a product of the 19th century, closely related to the rise of the national movement. Western

¹ In some cases I could relate the refusal to drink wine at a *supra* by men in their 50s to the loss of a prestigious job after Georgia acquired independence.

travelogues from the 15th–18th century (such as Contarini (1873), Busbeck (1926), Chardin (1668), and Lamberti (1654)) indicate the long and vivid history of ritualized drinking, but the Georgian words for toastmaster and toast cannot be found in these sources, nor can the description of cultural practices comparable to these concepts. Additionally, according to the travelogues wine was frequently drunk without any ritual framing.

These observations are backed by Georgian literature and historiography. Since the “Golden Age” in the 11th–13th century the description of feasts has been a common topic in Georgian sources, but no hint of toasting or toastmastership can be found. Even in the 19th century the poet Ak'ak'i C'ereteli (1989: 25) noticed in his writings that “the ancestors” did not propose toasts at a table and would be ashamed if they witnessed the present-day phenomenon. In the famous and extensive dictionary from the 18th century by Sulxan Saba Orbeliani (1991), the words for toastmaster and toast are absent, an omission that would be difficult to explain if the Georgian banquet at that time were structurally the same as today's. Consequently, the Georgian banquet is an example of an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and fulfills the function of creating and reinforcing national identity.

The Georgian word for toast first appears in a cycle of poems by the Georgian aristocrat Grigol Orbeliani (1800-1883), often considered to be one of the “fathers” of the national movement (e.g., Suny 1994: 125).² The poems are written in the form of toasts and remember national heroes, and their deeds. This genre quickly became popular at banquets. Remembering the past as a toast became a form of national education after the Russian annexation of Georgia in 1801 and the consequent suppression of national sovereignty. In this context the verbal evocation of the past becomes a patriotic mission at the table.

There is another closely related explanation as to why the supra spread so quickly and extensively in 19th century Georgia. Unlike former occupiers of Georgia, the Russians shared the same religion as Georgians. Consequently, religion could no longer be a distinguishing factor between “us” and “them.” The “othering” of the Georgian nation had to be based on something else — folk culture. Despite its aristocratic origin, the supra, as a distinct way of feasting and as a manifestation of “Georgian” hospitality, soon became a symbol of cultural otherness.

In Soviet times the supra continued to be a sign of national identity and aroused suspicion from the authorities. In a law adopted in 1975 in Soviet Georgia, large banquets associated with crucial events like births, marriages, or deaths, were dismissed as a public display of a traditional attitude opposed to the ideal of the *homo soveticus*. The supra became a “harmful custom.”³ Additionally, for ethnic Georgians it was a privileged place for creating networks, reinforcing alliances and trading information — important factors for coping with Soviet life.

Those Georgian intellectuals who considered defending Georgian culture to be their main task, but were well established in the Soviet academic or administrative systems, saw the supra as an important means of education. Historians like Shota Meskhia presented a completely different version of Georgian history at a supra than the one he taught at the university. For “orthodox nationalism” the supra was a “true academy,” as a popular saying from this time states. The representatives of “unorthodox nationalism” used the socially acceptable form of the supra to disguise their meetings.³

In post-Soviet Georgia the supra lost its function as a permanent reassurance of cultural authenticity — at least inside the Republic of Georgia. For the many Georgians who left Georgia in recent years, due to political and economic instability, the supra continues to be a marker of national identity. In the setting of a diaspora, the table is a central place for socializing with fellow Georgians, and the rules of the supra often serve as a way of

² The Georgian literature journalist Levan Bregadze argues that Orbeliani copied the style of the Russian author Zhukovskii in his poem. This would present the possibility that the Georgians adopted the art of toasting from Russian aristocratic circles (who themselves imported this practice from Britain).

³ compare the decision of the Central Committee of the KPG from November 15, 1975 on “Measures to increase the fight against harmful traditions and customs”; in: Gerber 1997: 261 [German].

⁴ The concept of “orthodox” and “unorthodox nationalism” is used and has been popularized by Suny in his monograph, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (1994: 307).

explaining Georgian culture to foreigners. Special dishes like *tqemali* sauce represent the “taste” of Georgia and can be missed, just like home.

For the last few years the age and origins of the supra have been hotly and publicly debated subjects in Georgia. This discussion was initiated by a local NGO publication in 2000 (Nodia, ed. 2000). In this publication, two authors from non-academic fields stated in separate articles that the supra originated as late as the 19th century. Another author in the same publication described the supra as a sublimated expression of male homosexuality. As a response to this publication a couple of anthropologists and historians from official academic institutions dismissed the three authors as incompetent amateurs (e.g., Gociridze 2001).

The public debate over the supra reflects the emergence of a new intellectual elite consisting of young, well educated people who prefer to work for NGOs instead of choosing an academic career. As these people are dependent on money from western institutions, they are sometimes referred to as “grant-eaters.” The mostly older representatives of the academic system are called the “red intelligentsia” in return, in order to stress their ties to the Soviet past.

One of the most popular arguments of the “red intelligentsia” against the “grant-eaters” is that the latter are trying to destroy the national culture in order to integrate Georgia into a global market. In this context, denying the “ancient tradition” of the supra is seen as a conscious attempt to extract one of the roots of Georgian culture. Against this background, the discourse on the supra has a strong normative power. Any attitude on this topic invariably leads to an association with the old or the new elite. Whoever wins the fight for prestige and influence in present-day Georgia will significantly shape the representation of national identity. For the “red intelligentsia,” the supra will remain a favorite means of symbolizing cultural distinctness. For the “grant-eaters,” the supra will become a synonym for cultural backwardness, and be replaced by western-style parties or banquets *à la fourchette*.

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