

## **The *supra* reconsidered.**

The Georgian banquet (*supra*) is a highly formalised festive meal structured by toasts and ruled by a toastmaster (*tamada*). It is considered to be, both in Georgian scholarly and popular discourse, an essential part of the Georgian tradition. This opinion is based on an understanding of tradition as a relatively stable corpus, which is passed on through time in an almost unchanging way. Tradition simply exists; it was invented by our forefathers or delivered to us by divine command.

This understanding implies a certain duty for those who consider it to be of primary importance to be Georgian. Being Georgian then implies performing traditional rituals like the *supra* on a regular basis and in the proper way, paying special attention to the “correct” application of the rules.

In this paper I will argue that the *supra* should not be regarded as a performance of a pre-coded structure. The participants are not mere agents or victims of “something out there”, of a certain force unrelated to their emotions and intentions. It takes a certain decision to accept the rules of the game and the profound meaning of the actions performed. And it takes a certain mode of performance to indicate that the actions undertaken are not part of the ordinary social world.

In order to distinguish a ritual like the *supra* from ordinary experience (or the “Sacred” from the “Profane”, as an earlier generation of scholars would have it) special codes are used during the performance: The language tends to be highly formalised, using standardised patterns and formulas. The performance is ruled by etiquette. And special artefacts loaded with a specific semantic meaning (e.g. “holy”) are displayed and used.

What kind of codes are used in the *supra* to distinguish ritual from ordinary experience? Firstly, the use of a specific kind of language. The whole event is structured by language, articulated in the form of toasts. The toasts follow a generally uniform, yet not entirely fixed structure. Certain topics are obligatory (like a toast to the family and the deceased), and a certain pattern should be followed (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 1998) Some toasts reinforce national values (especially the toast to the fatherland, but also more subtly expressed in toasts to culture, song, or history), gender identity (particularly the obligatory toast to women), family values and peer group identity. Generally the toasts should express honour 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 characterised by the use of certain formulas (e.g. *gaumardžos* at the end of each toast) and a high, grammatically complex level of speaking (note especially the frequent use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> subjunctive).

Secondly, the use of certain artefacts such as drinking-horns and other ritual drinking-vessels distinguishes the *supra* from ordinary social actions connected to eating and drinking. In addition to this food and drink function as semantic markers. Special dishes like *sacivi* (chicken or turkey in a walnut sauce) are generally considered to be festive food and will almost exclusively be served at a *supra* (or the more informal version of the *supra* called *keipi*). Furthermore food marks special kinds of *supras*. At the *kelexi*, for example (a *supra* for the deceased) a sweet porridge with almonds and raisins (*k'olio*) has to be served and will not be found at any other kind of *supra*. Additionally, regional dishes like *ghomi* act as semantic markers of regional identity (here: *imereti*, *samegrelo*) as well.

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 Georgia 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.

Thirdly, the rules of etiquette at the *supra* are very strict and function as a formalised system of distributing honour. Everybody should be included in this process of distribution, but a certain hierarchy based on the 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 for 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. (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.) Generally, toasting encompasses both competition and solidarity.

A good toastmaster is generally defined as a person with an extensive knowledge of history, poems, songs and traditions. But he (or in very rare cases, she) should not only repeat formulas; that would be considered a bad performance. It is very important that the toastmaster is able to improvise, and propose the toast 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, integrated in personal, intentional behaviour, 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 in their personal habitus.

The British anthropologists Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) consider the “ritual attitude” of the participants to be the most important feature for defining rituals. This attitude is based on the acceptance (or illusion) of not being the “author” of ones actions; the meaning of the actions performed is not derived from the intentions of the performing individual, as in every-day interaction. The performed actions are “non-intentional”. As for the *supra*, the performed actions are personalised and “intentionalised” during the performance. Like monks in the Middle Ages, who copied the Bible in such a way, that the ornamentation became an integral element of the content, the performers of toasts intentionally use ceremonial language in an auctorial way. The speaker makes himself the author of messages from the past, in this way connecting past and present. Speaking becomes acting and a way of “doing” tradition and history.

Generally, the art of speaking ranks among the most important social and cultural competences in Georgia. As in Soviet times, rhetorical skills (and personal contacts) are more important than written laws, and in every-day conflicts the “right” way of speaking has more impact on conflict-management than, for example, the threat of physical violence (Koehler 2000: 63). This “right” way of speaking is based on the use of certain codes that indicate group affiliation. Following the classification of Koehler (2000: 70) the proper use of a language or semiotic system he calls *k'acurad* – the language of men – is a respected and efficient way of managing conflicts.<sup>1</sup> *k'acurad* is based on a polite, yet straightforward way of expression and a reference to socially accepted honour-codes, mostly stemming from the sphere of the family. Gestures used in this context are expansive, resolute, determined, and mostly slow.

These criteria of speaking, including body language, classify the language taught and performed at a *supra* very well. The figure of the *tamada* is an expert of *k'acurad*. Moreover, he is a cultural ideal of male virtues, as the definitions for a “good” man and a “good” *tamada* are very similar, throughout all social strata.

On rare occasion it is possible for a woman to speak *k'acurad*, although the *supra* is an almost exclusively male institution and Georgian public society is dominated by values attributed to

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<sup>1</sup> Although *k'acurad* is an adverb, Koehler uses the term as a noun. This is grammatically incorrect.

males. A woman who performs male values in a convincing way, including body language, is often said to act *važk'acurad* (literary: “real” man-like), without any derogatory meaning. For a man, though, to be considered *kalurad* (literary: women-like) would be a real insult. Consequently, there are culturally accepted – but limited – ways for a woman to perform the prestigious “real-man” behaviour, often reflecting her outstanding social position, based on her profession or the reputation of her family. But there is no culturally acceptable way leading from men to women.

The prestige a man gains when brilliantly performing *k'acurad* at a *supra* or on the streets is accumulated in his family name (*gvare*). In Georgian literature the quest for honouring one's *gvare* through noble deeds is a common topic (see e.g. Shota Rustaveli or Vazha Pshavela). The *gvare* is transmitted patrilineally, and in modern Georgia ranks among the main criteria for defining Georgian and regional identity. Thus, gender identity and national identity are closely interwoven and reinforce one another. The *supra* is a central cultural institution for defining, strengthening, performing and semantically associating these identities.

quoted literature:

**Chatwin, Mary Ellen 1997:** *Foodways and Sociocultural Transformation in the Republic of Georgia, 1989-1994*. Tbilisi.

**Humphrey, C./Laidlaw, J. 1994:** *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual – A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship*. Oxford u.a.

**Koehler, Jan 2000:** *Die Zeit der Jungs – Zur Organisation von Gewalt und der Austragung von Konflikten in Georgien*. Münster.

P.S. This paper is intended to be an essay, presenting a couple of hypothesis developed during my fieldwork in Georgia 2002 and 2003 on “The True Academy: Georgian Banquets and the Construction of National Identity” (Ph.D. thesis). Besides participant observation, which remains an important social research technique for anthropologist, I gathered data from interviews, free listings, pile sorts, and rankings. My main tools for analysing my data are discourse and performance analysis. The theoretical framework of my approach is based on contemporary Western scholarly debates on ritual, performance and discourse. My approach does not imply looking at the *supra* from a superior position. My fascination for the art of collective self-entertainment is still alive, even after dozens and dozens of *supras*. I would like to thank the countless number of people in Georgia who have invited me to sit at their table and shared their ideas (and wine) with me!