

Socialist *supras* and drinking democratically: changing images of the Georgian feast and Georgian society from Socialism to Post-socialism.

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Introduction

Georgia, as you can see from the map on your handout, is a small country of no more than five millions situated on the Black Sea south of the Caucasus mountains. Until recently one of the Union Republics of the USSR, Georgia is thought by its inhabitants to be the cradle of a good many firsts of civilization, most important being viniculture. Georgia is the land of wine. For all its aspirations to being a country of carefree celebrants of the gifts of the vine, this country has suffered both politically and economically since fall of the USSR. Since it declared independence in 1991, Georgia has suffered one bloody coup, two or more official wars and many unofficial ones: Georgia is the very model of a 'failed state'. In general, Georgia would seem to be characterized by a tragic opposition between its fantasies of a happy-go-lucky private life and the harsh realities of public life.

In both these respects, the private and the public, the every day and the political, no single aspect of Georgian life and culture has attracted as much attention as the Georgian feast, or *supra*. The *supra* provides an image both distinctive of utopian Georgian every day life, but also, as I will show, for the dystopian world of Georgian politics. But what is the *supra*? Moving from its most material manifestation to its most ideal, the *supra* is a feast, characterized by an extremely abundant display of traditional foodstuffs; at the same time, the *supra* is an occasion for ritualized drinking, involving the consumption of large quantities of wine (an average of one or more liters per participant); lastly, the drinking of wine at the *supra* is attended by ritual toasts, directed by the toastmaster or *tamada*, in such a way that the ability to consume large quantities of alcohol and speak eloquently are brought into alignment.

Within broader social contexts, the image of the *supra* serves as a shifting bellwether, or model, or janus-faced boundary marker, of relations between state and society. The immediate aftermath of the fall of socialism in Georgia, as elsewhere, was characterized by an 'Anti-politics'. This was a tendency to treat the categories of society, what is usually called in Georgia 'everyday life' (Georgian *qopa*), a term that includes 'daily life', 'domestic life', and connotations of ethnographic 'way of life' or 'lifestyle', as an unanalyzed moral high ground from which to criticize the manifest illegitimacy of the Russian, socialist state. The categories of state and society, everywhere overlapping in fact, were treated as bounded and opposed entities. In part this polarization is a legacy

of the socialist state's own ambiguous attitudes towards the world of every day life. Having prized production from everyday life and made it part of the socialist political economy, *qopa* remained as a private world of consumption, whose specifically Georgian form was the ritual feast or *supra*. Under socialism, I will show, the image of the *supra* was often mobilized as an image of society as opposed to the state, an image of undesirable aspects of everyday life such as immoderate consumption, obstacles to production, and political corruption, the colonization of the state bureaucracy with the personal networks and kinship. The sacralization of the *supra* ritual in the post-socialist period is, in part, merely a mirror image of its role under socialism as a shifting boundary marker between public and private life, between the state and society. The *supra* ritual is often said to have been a compensatory private locus of expression of religious values, of civic values, of personal freedoms, of Georgianness, denied a public forum under socialism. Ten years after independence, this critique of the political from the authentic perspective of every day life (symbolized by the *supra*) has been replaced in some circles by the political critique of everyday life itself, in particular the *supra*.

What is it about the *supra* that makes it 'good to think'? As a model of everyday life, the *supra* is an excellent stand-in distributionally. The *supra* is the single mold into which are poured all secular rituals, all social occasions, formal and informal, celebrations of all holidays from New Years to Christmas and all life cycle transitions from birth to death. The *supra* is as ubiquitous a social form, as it is obligatory. The ubiquity of the *supra* more than anything explains why the *supra* is 'good to think' as an image of Georgian society: the *supra* is good to think (and challenge, change, or preserve) as an image of society, because it is seemingly coterminous with Georgian society, Georgian social life presents itself as an endless series of *supras*.

In addition, the formal organization of the *supra* itself as a ritual makes it extremely visible, memorable, and easy to describe. The *supra* has all the formal properties of ritual that oppose ritual behavior to everyday life (such as conventionality, rigidity, condensation, repetition, redundancy, boundedness). Since rituals are lavishly overdetermined in structure, leaving nothing to chance, they are the visible tip of the iceberg of otherwise invisible, seen but unnoticed, imponderables of everyday life. In content too, *supras* are like most rituals in that they are exemplary moments where the normative categories of that inform everyday life are performed, rituals are performative in both senses of the word *perform*, that is, rituals both *portray* and *do*, represent and act upon everyday life. 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, it presents itself as an ideal and idealized reduced model of the social available for metacommentary on the broader social totality of which it is a part. Therefore metacommentary about Georgian 'society' tends to use the *supra* as a privileged image, both in the post-socialist Georgia of today as well as that of Socialism.

Supra versus ‘Democracy’. In contemporary Georgia, to talk about ‘society’ is to talk politics, and vice versa. Even the world of ‘civil society’ is essentially yet another variation on the highly politicized Georgian society. And by politicized, we include those demobilized political forces that remain apathetic to institutional politics, and at the very same time cast their complaints in the language of the political. The ghost of socialist paternalism haunts the discourse of everyday life. Any talk, about any problem, will inevitably come to the same conclusion, a unified source for all social ailments resides in the government: All ‘social’ problems have ‘political’ sources, society is always the dependent variable to the political. With this government, this state, how can things get any better?

In November 2001, I am sitting at a supra, a guest of my neighbors; it’s a birthday party. One of the guests seated beside me is another neighbor, Tamuna, who has heard there will be an American guest with whom she can practice her English. After verifying that her English is as good as she says it is, we talk a bit in our secret code. The conversation turns to the supra itself and she confides in me that she is not especially fond of supras. Later, in another conversation, she tells me that she has recently celebrated her birthday. Remembering that she, like most Georgian women, dislikes supras, I jokingly ask her what sort of supra she had for her birthday party. She said: ‘We didn’t have a supra, we had a ‘democracy’’. I asked her what a ‘democracy’ was, and she said in a ‘democracy’ there was no *tamada*, or toastmaster, to tell people what to do. Therefore there were no ‘stupid rules’, as she put it, and hence, people just did what they felt like doing, drank, danced, whatever. She identified this as a ‘European’ mode of behavior, like a cocktail party.

Why would the opposite of the *supra*, which, is after all, first and foremost an event of eating and drinking, be called a ‘democracy’? What is it, in the structure of this ritual, that makes it ‘good to think’ in political terms? What is it about a ritual like the *supra* that it can both be used as an image of civil society, of every day life as opposed to the state, and at the very same time be used as an image of an authoritarian discourse opposed to democracy?

In order to answer this question, we need to know some things about the ritual itself. I will show that, on the one hand, the ritual seems to create an internal political model, centering on the *tamada* or toastmaster, that is the very image of a political autocracy. At the same time the thematic progression of toasting creates a model of the social networks of individuals that under socialism allowed them to navigate this universe under socialism, a model of everyday life. When I have described these aspects of the traditional ritual, I will proceed to show how the newly emerged non-ritual of ‘drinking democratically’ as opposed to the supra is a practical implementation of the emergent political critique of the supra, part of a broader turn to the political critique of everyday. Following this I will show how this same ‘democratic’ political critique of the *supra*

emerges from state discourses under socialism, where supra was mobilized as an image of society in its manifold relations to an encompassing socialist state.

The supra and its others. As can be seen on figure one of your handout, the supra, as the dominant ritual form of alcoholic consumption in Georgia, organizes all other forms of consumption into a field of different practices, unified only by the fact that they are not supras. In Tbilisi, the capital of the land of the vine, beer gardens and cafes that offer cocktails proliferate, but one searches in vain for wine by the glass. This is because drinking beer is the opposite of drinking wine. Wine is a ritual drink, beer is an informal, non-ritual drink. According to a self-consciously urban custom, one may toast with beer, but a beer toast is always humorous and always insincere, almost always political. A beer toast is an instance of what is called socialist ‘Aesopian’ language: What is meant by a toast to beer is always the opposite of what is said. Wine toasts are always serious, always sincere, never political. ‘Here’s to President Shevardnadze’, drunk to beer, means ‘Down with President Shevardnadze!’

Another such ritual, more common amongst academics and intelligentsia, bears the French name *alapurshet*, a cocktail party reception after academic presentations. Resembling a so-called ‘democracy’, but without its revolutionary aims, the *alapurshet* is distinguished from *supra* first of all by the fact that at a supra one sits at a common table, at a *alapurshet* one stands. With this simple stipulation, the entire ritual order of the supra becomes impossible, for without a group seated at a table, there can be no dictator of the table, no *tamada*. In an *alapurshet*, the *ancien regime* of the supra is *dachekhili* ‘beheaded’. If the ‘democracy’ is a revolutionary innovation of recent years championed by, among others, young women like Tamuna, then the *alapurshet* is a ritual patiently endured by men of the older ‘*supra* generation’ as part and parcel of the public, alienated realm of work. The ‘democracy’ of drink, adopted by the younger generation, is simply another name for *alapurshet*, a borrowing from the world of work into the world of leisure. Georgians who find themselves at home in an *alapurshet* represent a new kind of Georgian, what one observer has called ‘the reception-*purshet* Georgian, the subject of the future Georgian democracy, who have washed away from their brain both *supra* toasts and sentimental details from the history of Georgia.’

The moral and material supra. It is a commonplace about feasts since the renaissance that they mediate opposed spheres of cosmology and social life, uniting talk and consumption, the moral and material, the spiritual and carnival, the individual and the social. Feasts like the supra are multidimensional, including matters of talk and comportment, drinking, and eating. For the supra, however, not all of these features are of equal importance, not all are equally recognized or ritually regulated. The aspects of the supra that are normatively salient for Georgian men may be of little interest to Georgian women, those that are salient for Georgians may pass unnoticed by foreigners.

The European writer Alexandre Dumas, for example, in his description of a Georgian *supra*, deemed food to be a ‘very minor consideration’ at a supra when

compared to the quantity of drinking, ‘The important thing is how much one can drink. Even the most moderate drinkers usually manage five or six bottles of wine, and the average is twelve or fifteen.’

‘Logic’



- Drink from this *q'ants'i*, it will do you good.
- I can't, even dumb animals have a sense of proportion!
- For precisely this reason we must drink more, so that we can be distinguished from animals.

The Georgian ideal of masculinity in the supra ritual is expressed quantitatively, both in terms of body size and drinking capacity. Correspondingly, the classic image of normative masculinity in cartoons about supras plays on the often very unequal capacities for drink of those brought together at a supra. [**‘Logic’**]. This cartoon, one of many I will be showing you from the Soviet humor magazine *Niangi*, is titled ‘logic’. In the cartoon the ‘logic’ represented is a parody of the logic of the supra: The immense man on the left (a parodic idealization of quantified masculinity) is prevailing on the smaller man to drink from a large *q'ants'i* horn. The smaller man protests with dismay that ‘even dumb animals have a sense of moderation’. The larger man parries this seeming good sense with the unassailable logic of the supra: ‘Then we must drink more, so that we can be distinguished from animals!’.

Dumas elides, along with the food, any reference to the toasting that justifies this excessive drinking. Masculinity at a supra is expressed quantitatively in equal and paired measures of word and drink. One must underline the seriousness of one’s well-chosen

words with heroic deeds, specifically drinking. The more one drinks, the more one 'means' what one is saying; but at the same time, eloquence and capacity for drink are both expressions of masculine self-mastery. The amount one drinks to the toast indicates amount of respect, the size of the glass one is offered for the toast indicates the importance of the toast. Not drinking, therefore, for men is an act of disrespect that can be sanctioned with physical violence; for women, on the other hand, it is the normal state of affairs. The two acts, drinking and speaking, are linked by their mutual resemblance. A recent guide to supra etiquette begins with this observation:

A Georgian toast should resemble a moderate sized drinking-bowl (piala) filled with good wine-- neither with long words should you tire your listener, nor should you drink like a drunk, alone, without words. (Kinkladze 2000:3)

At the same time the mutual quantitative and qualitative resemblance of drinking and speaking are underlined by their reflexive relation of contiguity; at a supra one may never drink without first completing a toast, which 'blesses' the wine. The form of the toast almost always reflexively draws attention to the co-presence of drink 'with this glass, I want to drink a toast.'

(Niangi 1983 no.1)

3 ანოლ გურამის ქე გელოზვილ
22 წლისაა, სწავლობს საქართველოს პოლიტექნიკურ
ინსტიტუტის არქიტექტურის ფაკულტეტის V კურსზე.
ვაჭვეყნებთ ნიჭიერი ახალგაზრდის სატირულ-იუმორ
ისტულ წარევსა და ნახატ-კარიკატურებს.



-- მეგობრებო! ამ განსხვავებული სასმისით...

--Friends! With these different drinking vessels...

One does not sip, one finishes one's toast and then finishes one's drink 'to the bottom', then places the cup on the table. If the drinking vessel is one that cannot stand up unaided, as for example, a *qants'i* or drinking horn, the white table cloth will be besmirched by the red wine from unfinished toast. This is shameful.

Not only does the supra poeticize the quantitative relationship of drinking to speaking, but it also poeticizes the *manner* of drinking. This is expressed by a proliferation in the realm of the *technology of drinking* that borders on a *poeticization* of the otherwise functional domain of drinking vessels. Dumas notes that 'They have a bewildering variety of drinking vessels of all shapes and sizes, even the smallest holds at least a bottleful--gourds, silver-mounted drinking horns two or three feet long, bowls with the head of a stag painted inside them in such a way that the antlers seem to move as one drinks.' Such a 'poeticization of the means of consumption' is a motif of Niangi cartoons about the supra, as this one, in which the standard toast of the form 'Friends, with this glass...' is replaced with, 'Friends, with these various drinking implements'.



But what of the food? While it is true that food, in descriptions of a supra, is *given* ‘minor consideration’, it hardly follows that it is any less essential than drink and toasts. In descriptions of the *supra*, the quintessentially male activities of the supra (talking and drinking) are presented ‘as if’ they were the main, indispensable, and indeed, independent part of the supra, just as female activities are relegated to the relatively uninteresting role of the presupposed but backgrounded ‘base’. A kind of latent masculine ‘idealism’ opposed to a feminine ‘materialism’ is detectable here. And yet the ‘formality’ of the supra depends, more than anything else on the almost theatrical display and presentation of foodstuffs, a matter assiduously attended to by an exclusively female staff.

This asymmetry of reflexive awareness between foregrounded masculine activity (drinking and toasting) and backgrounded feminine activity (food) becomes particularly ironic when the supra is in honor of the 8th of March, international womens’ day supra, for, here, the clash between the moral and material aspects of the supra come to a head. This feature is parodied in this Niangi cartoon [above], where a woman in three frames assembling a meal as her husband sits idly by, finally taking up the glass to perform the focal moment of making an 8th of March toast to praise her.



The supra ritual has very little to say about the food which it presupposes, but the supra cannot succeed as an act of hospitality without it. In a 'proper' supra the table must display an inexhaustible abundance of a wide variety of traditional dishes, so much so that the table-cloth (*supra*) from which the ritual takes its name must be invisible. There should ideally be no room on the cloth for new courses to be added. This Niangi cartoon parodies 'three-to-four storey supras' with food piled so high that only with difficulty can the toasters clink each others' glasses. The tamada is depicted as saying 'Remove these plates and suckling pigs so the guest can see me!'. The moral commentary explains that 'Frequently we greet guests with 'three-to-four-storey' supras, but with this we cannot merit the name of generous host, for at such times we convert human relationships into a competition in pigging out'.

Paradoxically, the feast must also be *ever young*, it must always appear in a state of perfection, every dish must always be full, every plate must always be clean. And yet, the very act of *consumption* destroys this state of perfection. At the intersection of these imperatives of *display* and *consumption* is generated a vast amount of bustling work, keeping plates clean, ensuring all dishes are always as full as if they had never been touched.

Fade-out among participants. [diagrams 2 and 3 at end] The supra as a ritual displays what I will call a principle of 'metapragmatic fade out' along two dimensions. By 'pragmatic' I mean the largely unreflective practices of speaking and doing from which everyday life is built up. By 'metapragmatic' I mean behavior that seeks to comment upon such pragmatic behavior, either **reflexively** to comment upon it or regulate it via stipulation, as in ritual speech, or **reportively** to describe it or characterize it, as for example in an ethnographic description. 'Metapragmatic' rules that comment reflexively upon behavior are necessary to constitute ritual behavior of drinking, eating and talking as being distinct from 'everyday' 'pragmatic' behavior. For example, the tamada will indicate what the next toast is by stating that he is giving such and so toast, as part of that toast. The toast reflexively constitutes itself as a toast metapragmatically, just as a bank robber metapragmatically constitutes a bank robbery by writing 'this is a stick up' on a piece of paper.

By 'metapragmatic fade out' I mean that the explicitness and density of such ritual rules is uneven. The ritual delineates a focal participant, which I will call the ritual point of origin or *origo*, and then a gradient pattern of fade out from that participant to non-participants. This fade out principle resembles the way that the supra is related to non-supra rituals, and also the way that the supra regulates the relationship between formal speech and drinking, but not informal talk and eating, which I have already discussed. **[figure 2]**

For example, categories of metapragmatically recognized participation in a supra are organized as a gradient opposition of masculinity, moving from the exemplar of masculinity and ritual center, the *tamada*, to men in general, to women. This fade

structure is coded redundantly in a large number of different ways, but the main opposition is always between high degrees of ritual regulation for focal participants like the *tamada* and low degrees of regulation of behavior for women. In a supra, unlike an *alapurshet*, standing is a strongly regulated behavior. At a formal supra the tamada stands for every toast, men stand for some toasts, and women never stand for any toasts. Every aspect of drinking is also ritually regulated, the tamada must drink every toast to the bottom, men must drink every toast, and must drink some toasts to the bottom, and women need not drink any toasts, nor drink any toasts to the bottom. The tamada must propose each toast, and talks longer and more eloquently than anyone else, men may propose some toasts, but may not vie with the tamada in eloquence, and women are unlikely to propose any toasts and need not say any toasts at all.



The supra is a strongly spatially bounded ritual, but the boundaries of the ritual apply differently to different participants. The *tamada* cannot leave the supra before it ends, men cannot leave without the permission of the *tamada*, and the comings and goings of women are more or less unregulated. If a woman declares that she is leaving, the tamada will prevail upon her to stay, all the while allowing that ‘we cannot force you to stay’, very unlike with men, where force can be employed in principle to prevent departure. Men are required to treat the ritual *as if* it were the only moral reality, not merely opposed to everyday practical concerns, but as if it were completely separate from them. The cartoon typifies this aspect of the supra, a mild exaggeration of the exceptionless logic of the ritual order, where the tamada will not allow a doctor to come to the aid of a dying man; he cannot fulfill his oath as doctor until he has fulfilled his first obligation to the supra as a man.

Fade out from situation to society. Turn to figures 3 and 4 at end of paper.

Not only is the supra in its occasions coterminous with society, with everyday life, since every major holiday and every major life transition is recognized in a supra, but also,

within the supra, the toasting itself produces a reduced model of society, a ritual microcosm of societal macrocosm. If the spatial organization of the supra organizes co-present persons into hierarchical categories of participation, the temporal organization of the supra, reflected in the order of toasts, produces a separate ritual fade out from focal participant to outer darkness. The spatial fade out of participation is based on relations of resemblance between participants and the *tamada*, the temporal fade out principle emanates from a single celebrant following his social network from close kin to humanity in general.

The toasts of the modern urban supra recognize only certain kinds of social relationships, ones focusing on durable kinship categories, those constitutive of the shifting category of 'society', of 'everyday life'. The ordinary Georgian supra is a reduced model of society without the state, a private world without a public, just as supras among political elites under Tsarism and Stalinism would instead replicate the state hierarchy in their supra toasts, the state without society. The supra also sacralizes the categories of everyday life, but explicit recognition of religious cosmology is rare, when compared, for example, to traditional rural toasts amongst Svan mountaineers, which follow a purely cosmological hierarchy moving downwards from *Xosha Gherbet* 'Great God' down to *Lamaria* 'Mother of God', with categories of humans only recognized through their corresponding patron divinities.

The progression of the supra and toasts within it has been memorably compared to a wound-up spring, which as it relentlessly unwinds becomes less tense and also moves outwards, from formal categories of ascribed status to informal categories of achieved status. **As shown in figure 3**, supra is divisible in indigenous terms into two blocks of toasts, the former of which are the so-called 'obligatory' toasts, the latter of which are the so-called 'personal toasts'. The obligatory toasts serve to link one focal participant of the supra to ever widening circles of kin-based sociability, drawing connections between a present participant and his absent social universe, making his otherwise invisible social networks manifest. The personal series of toasts recognize informal ties between co-present participants. The distinction between the two sets of toasts is not merely thematic, but also one of meta-awareness, descriptions and recollections of the first set of toasts is often clearer than the second.

After a toast to recognize the *tamada* that opens the ritual, 'toast zero' as a friend of mine calls it, the first toast is a toast to the person in whose honor the supra is convened, the birthday celebrant, the couple whose marriage is being celebrated, the person who died, or, in the absence of any more specific cause, the mere fact of 'our meeting here' is celebrated as the pretext of the supra.

As shown in figure 4, this person is the focal participant, the point of origin for the next block of toasts. From the focal participant the next series of toasts demarcates an expanding set of horizons of ascribed social relations, beginning with the kinship universe of the focal participant. (1) This begins with the immediate household of that

person, followed by the siblings and then the grandparents of the person. The transition within specific named kin relations calibrated to the focal participant moves from closer to further, natural to artificial kin. (2) The toasting then moves to from specific to general categories of kin others of the focal participant, in increasing social distance: relatives, friends, neighbors. (3) At this point there is another qualitative transition from egocentric categories to sociocentric categories. These include obligatory toasts to women (obligatory, this is sometimes considered to be a toast to love), as well as ancestors, and children. These latter two are very strictly ordered, the toast to children always follows the toast the ancestors, the one is a toast to the dead, the other is a toast to life. These three toasts produce a very general map of the generalized others that are relevant to a very generalized male subject, the supra-goer in general. There will also be toasts to very general categories of others, Georgia and Georgians, perhaps a toast to ‘all good people’. These toasts are conceived of as a block as obligations that must be paid by those present before they are free to engage in ‘free toasts’ or ‘personal toasts’, which do not constitute a ritual obligation as such. This block of toasts shows a fade out from the focal participant to their specific close kin, to increasingly general and increasingly distant categories of kin, to a very abstract world of generalized others relevant to a Georgian male, predecessors, successors, potential affines. In a ‘sad supra’ (a funeral wake), the main difference is that toasts to the dead (predecessors) must go through this entire cycle before toasts to the living (contemporaries).

‘Custom is stricter than law’



--Respected *tamada*, the *q'ants'i* awaits you.

-- Tell it to come by tomorrow.

Fade out from ritual order to disorder: the personal series. When the first block of toasts is terminated those present have fulfilled their ritual obligations to pay respect to society and may now toast each other. The supra as ‘ritual’ moves to the supra as an expression of mutual affection between the participants, marked by a transition to the ‘personal block of toasts’. This section of toasts follows no set order and there is comparatively lax regimentation, the only specification being that each person present must be recognized in a toast.

Here the relationships are between specific copresent persons, between the celebrants themselves, not as centers of a complex kin universe extending outwards to all humanity, but individually amongst themselves. The relations recognized are particular relations between intimates. The relaxation of the ritual at this point is marked further by changes along other dimensions. At this point in the supra mostly men are present and they are mostly somewhat tipsy if not drunk. This is generally the point in the supra where men become openly demonstrative of their emotions in the wording of their toasts, which typically include extravagant expressions of praise, but also in physical affection in the form of exchanges of hugs and kisses between men, indexes both of intimacy and absence of hierarchy which dominates the first ‘ritual’ half of the supra. **The typical emergent scene is visually presented in the above cartoon.**



This section of the supra is a gradient progression from authoritarian ritual towards complete chaos. **The cartoon above and this one** present excellent typifications of the scene created by the increasing ‘relaxation’ of the ritual aspects of the supra as it moves to the third stage, a stage which, unlike the others, has no recognized name and which is never, in general mentioned as being part of the ritual. The supra is a unity of opposites, a stadal progression, a fade out, of the from sober ritual to drunken anarchy,

from Apollonian ritual to the Dionysian bachannal, as one Georgian commentator describes it:

After the ‘personal’ stage the supra becomes confused, the tamada loses his function, all order is lost--every obligation has been discharged and the supra imperceptibly grows into a carnival or bachannal.... Thus, a supra does not always have order; [order] dominates in the ‘ritual’ stage, weakens in the [personal toast] stage, and disappears in the stage of ‘carnaval’ (Nizharadze 2000:29)

This fade out is both one of decreasing reflexive regimentation internal to the ritual, but also one of reportive meta-awareness. A typical description of a supra (elicited or drawn from an etiquette manual) will have a great deal to say about the proper organization of the first part of the ritual, the obligatory toasts, and will seldom give more than a few vague remarks about the personal series, while the last stage has no accepted name and is not even generally recognized as being part of the supra at all. The supra is, however, a contradictory ritual, moving from authoritarian structure to complete anarchy as its participants move from sobriety to drunkenness. At one end it is the locus of highly regimented behavior, insistent highly formal articulations of hierarchical relations between participants. At the other end the supra is an almost complete anarchy, giving expression to intimate personal, affective and almost erotic relationships between men.

We have seen that the *supra*, as an image rather than as a ritual, can stand on the one hand for a kind of dystopian model of the **state** as an authoritarian and patriarchal anti-democratic political orders. On the other hand it can stand as image of society, civil or otherwise, par excellence in opposition to the state. In part these two possibilities arise from different qualitative possibilities within the formal structure of the ritual itself. The *supra* as ritual order is hierarchically organized around the central figure of the *tamada*, the toastmaster, who is responsible for enforcing, sometimes violently, the ritual order of the supra. The *tamada*, the dictator of the table, is the symbol par excellence of the supra as a kind of *Stalinist mini-state*. On the other hand, the temporal structure of toasting is organized to recognize the relations of a specific individual to a world of social others, specifically not including state agents. It also can recognize the intimate and egalitarian relations between co-supra goers in the personal round of toasts. The supra produces a diagram of ‘everyday life’, of the network of social relations that each individual supra helps to create. As a result, the supra as a ritual is both ‘good to think’ as well as ‘good to drink’.

Supra and civil society. The metalanguage of the supra itself is explicitly political. The institution of the supra is the authoritarian discourse of ritual, full of ‘rules’, many of which are ‘obligatory’ (‘the twelve obligatory toasts’, for example), many things are ‘forbidden’ (discussion or debate about the content of toasts, drinking out of turn, etc.). Although the *tamada*, the toastmaster, who enforces the ritual order, is

initially ‘elected’, the election is always rigged, there being but one candidate, and the outcome of the plebiscite always unanimous. After the election, the tamada becomes ‘the dictator of the table’. The supra on first glance looks very much like a failed democratic transition in miniature. Moreover, the *tamada* has a monopoly of legitimate violence at the table, for the *tamada* (particularly in Western Georgia, it is said) or his *moadgilebi* ‘deputies, representatives’, can force people to drink (violently), sometimes having a henchman whose job is to force drinking (*ghvinis dajaleba*). In **cartoon 1**, the tamada, holding a huge *qants’i*, or drinking horn, which is emblematic of forced drinking, is saying to the terrified guests: ‘As my deputy in the branch of forcing people to drink wine I appoint my Jimsher’, a hulking bruiser of a fellow.



This threat of violence is something very real. In many rural regions of Georgia, it has been traditional to drink a toast to the Georgian native son Josef Stalin, the *uber-tamada*, so to speak. A friend of mine reports that in 1986 he had the misfortune to refuse to drink the Stalin toast in the region of Borjomi. The hosts were preparing to give him a sound beating for his impertinence, when it was observed that he had sprained his ankle the previous day. It was concluded that it wasn't proper to beat a man with a sprained ankle, and he was saved.

If the supra has become a privileged resource for talk about politics, it is also true that talk about the supra is often cast in political terms. Alternatives to the traditional supra are called ‘democracy’, as if the ‘failed’ democratic transition in public political reality can be amended by a transition effected in private life. A common Georgian saying goes that ‘We Georgians do not have as much order in the state as we do in the

supra.’ Just as Georgia has experienced, depending on whom one talks to, in the last ten years, socialism, civil war, anarchy, feudalism, and democracy, talk about the supra, informal criticisms of somewhat informal versions of the supra, will also sometimes be expressed in terms of ‘anarchy’, ‘parliamentary systems’, ‘democracies’ and so on. The supra stands, then not only as a condensed image of Georgian traditionalism standing opposed to Georgian modernity, but also as a condensed image of Georgia political society. To think about the supra is to think about the relationship of state to society, and perhaps change it.

As a result, Georgian print culture has produced in the last few years rather a lot of metadiscourse about the supra, in forms as diverse as *supra* etiquette manuals to NGO position papers entitled ‘The supra and civil society’, to new rituals to replace the *supra* with suggestive names like ‘democracy’. These discourses divide themselves into two basic recognized opposed tendencies within Georgian elite, urban culture; a traditionalizing discourse and a modernizing one. The traditionalist discourse on the supra is current among traditional socialist elites of the older generation, what is traditionally called the ‘intelligentsia’. The liberal modernist discourse on the supra is associated with new third sector elites, what are called NGOiks, or ‘intellectuals’, as well as young professionals like my neighbor Tamuna. The two discourses are lodged in disciplinary discourses that have different institutional locations, genealogies, epistemologies, and prospects for the future. The traditionalist discourse is one that grounds itself in traditional socialist period ‘intelligentsia’ disciplines like archeology, ethnography, history. The modernizing discourse is a critique emanating from NGOiks funded by western grants, young professionals and academics. Arguments between the two groups have not been cordial. Traditionalist intelligentsia criticize the ‘new intellectuals’ of the NGO world for being unpatriotic as Georgians, diletantish as scholars, and most of all, identify the world of NGOs as being a world of corruption paralleling that of the state itself, but in which *krtamich’amia*, ‘bribe-eating’ associated with state agents is replaced with *grantich’amia* ‘grant-eating’.

The hegemonic discourse of Georgian traditionalism about the supra matches very nearly the traditionalizing tendencies internal to the ritual itself. This discourse presents the supra as a ritual present in various local forms in Georgian culture since time immemorial, often going further to link the origins of the ritual variously to the Last Supper, to quasi-parliamentary tendencies and in particular oath rituals during the reign of Queen Tamar, the golden age of Georgia, or the mediterranean cult of Dionysius. Hence, the supra is not merely an image of Georgian society, but a specifically traditional society, which ethnographers and historians seek to preserve.

But all this ethnographic normativity is only possible if tradition itself is unchanging since time out of mind. The discourse of the new elites seeks to undermine such primordialism, instead presenting the supra as an ‘invented tradition’, initiated by members of the Georgian gentry of the Nineteenth century as a reaction to Russian

colonial rule. According to this thesis, for the Georgian gentry, the supra became a kind of compensatory private locus of traditional authenticity in opposition to the Russian rituals of the imperial Court Society, an ‘inner sphere’ of authentic traditional Georgian ‘society’, opposed to the ‘outer sphere’ of the Russian state. According to this argument, the supra is an indigenous Georgian form of *civil society* that grew up in opposition to the Russian dominated political sphere under colonialism. While the ‘invented tradition’ of the supra was the only Georgian institution that met the *formal definition* of ‘civil society’ during the long march from Tsarism to Socialism, at the same time the *specific content* of the supra, *now as an image of a political and not social order*, is downright Stalinist. As a recent writer on the theme of the relation of the *supra* to civil society, Gia Nodia, has commented,

The Georgian supra has many things about it that are obviously ‘uncivil’. It is characterized by the autocratic dictatorship of the (it is true, elected) tamada, unacceptability of pluralism and criticism of ideas, a predetermined routine, the obviously subordinated position of women.... In short, the supra is a model of authoritarian relationships. With its ritually-stabilized form, the supra reflected the repressive nature of its existing surrounding social life, and by creating an illusion of ‘authenticity’, it made it easy for society to accept it. Nothing could better serve to inculcate the legitimacy of the Communist order than the toast to Stalin and the ‘Stalinization’ of the institution of the tamada itself.

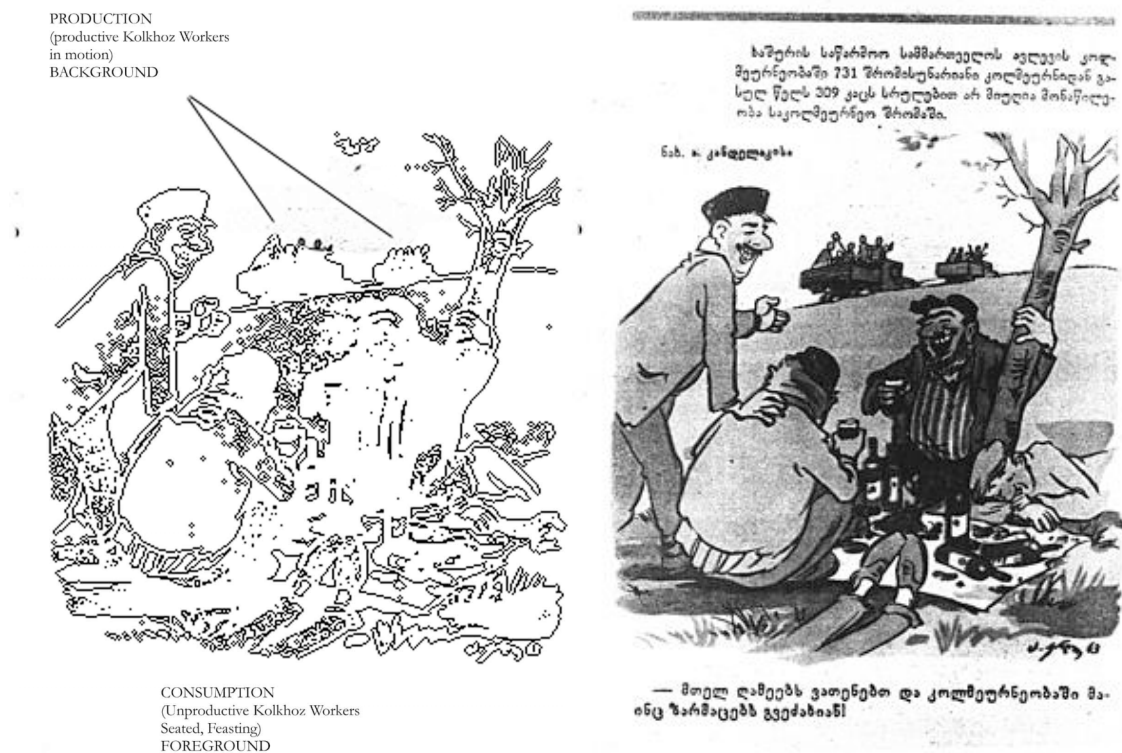
In my final section, I would like briefly to revisit the theme of ritual as image of relations of state and society, this time from the perspective of the socialist state itself, concentrating exclusively on how the *supra* is portrayed from the thirties to the present in the Soviet humor magazine *Niangi*. Under socialism the image of the supra was mobilized for the purposes of articulating the relationship of ‘society’ to the socialist state. This is partially because the supra, which Georgian nationalists like to fantasize as a traditional unchanging ‘everyday life’ *opposed at all points* to the socialist state, was *in fact* at every point a major point of articulation of everyday life to an ubiquitous socialist state. Discussing ‘everyday life’, then, without at the same time discussing the state, is impossible, because,

For *Homo Sovieticus*, the state was a central and ubiquitous presence. In the first place, it was the formal distributor of goods and near monopolistic producer of them.... In the second place, all urban citizens worked for the state.... In the third place, the state was a tireless regulator of life. (Fitzpatrick 2000:3)

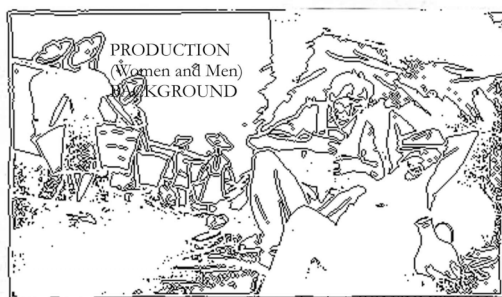
Socialist cartoons used the supra as an image to articulate the relationship of the socialist state to society along each of these dimensions. The view of the supra ‘from the state’

mirrored all of the changing ambiguities of the state's assessment of the world of *qopa*, everyday life, an intransigent, almost invisible domain that represented all that remained untheorized, unassimilated, backwards and perhaps unchangeable. The *supra* could stand, in relation to the state world of production, as consumption, both as an image of wasteful consumption, the negation or production, or as the reward of labor, socialist abundance; it could stand as a symbol of corruption, that is, the colonization of state structures by the morality of kinship and reciprocity, and it could stand as a symbol of all those other residual aspects of everyday life that the state occasionally sought to regulate.

Production versus Consumption. Under socialism, the *supra* was first and foremost an image of society as *locus of consumption*, standing opposed, in the first instance, to the sphere of *production* which was immediately identified under socialist political economy with the state. **Cartoons like those below** from the humor magazine *Niangi* throughout the socialist period routinely mobilize the *supra* as an image of negatively valued *consumption* as opposed to positively valued *production*. In the first and second cartoons, production and consumption are immediately opposed in the visual field; feasting workers, always male, in the foreground complain that their 'work' of drinking is not appreciated, while in the background anonymous cadres of male and female workers are seen going about their work.



--We stay up all night long and in the Kolkhoz they still call us lazy!' (Niangi 1963 no.6)



(Unproductive) CONSUMPTION
(Men)
FOREGROUND



— ასე ვიტყვით ამ სიტუაში, რაღაც დღეა გამოცდილი და მაინც უსაქმურებს ვხედავთ

--‘We suffer so in this heat, we drank emptied four pitchers of wine and they call us shiftless!’ (Niangi 1962 no.13)



CONSUMPTION
(‘Caretakers’ Seated, Feasting)
FOREGROUND



— გავიწყობს დროდადრო ჩვენს დროს, რომ უფრო არ ვართ და უფრო სიღატაკისაა უფრო.

‘Caretakers’

--Here’s to you, grunters! Why are you unhappy, can’t you see that we are not forgetting you and are drinking to your health!’ (Niangi 1935 no.1)

In this cartoon, toasting is considered to be a kind of ‘productive consumption’, which is made to run in ironic contrast to the neglect of truly productive labor, represented by starving animals who have not been fed real food, only paid respects in supra toasts. In this cartoon supra-goers are made to appear surprised and not a little irritated that the starving animals, to whom they are hard at work paying respect by drinking, are ungrateful for their heroic labors of toasting.



Toast

Comrades! Don't think that I arranged this feast for you because I want the party candidacy! They ejected me from the Komkavshiri [Young Communist League, *Konsomol*], but I would not be Assistant to the Director of Surami Collective School, if I did not fuck their mothers! This toast is to the good ole boy network (jma-bichobas), skill, and the power of hospitality (lit. bread and salt). (Niangi 1933, no. 10)

Corruption. All subjects of the socialist state were at once state agents and private persons; a pervasive theme of the literature on socialist political economy is the way in which private, informal kinship relations were used to colonize the socialist state. Since

the supra ritual is precisely the locus, in Georgian culture, where patron-client and friendship relations are created and sustained in private life, it is also the primary ritual locus of the colonization of public, state categories with the private morality of kinship. Quite simply, from the perspective of the state, the supra represented the moral face of corruption, a mixture of the public and private in which private consumption is used as a means for political ends. One of my earliest supra cartoons is one entitled *sadghegrjelo* ‘toast’, in which the subtext of the supra as a moralized form of corruption is rhetorically made into the explicit text. The speaker in the cartoon is stating overtly the covert political goals of personal advancement he hopes to achieve by throwing this feast, as part of a toast to the ‘power of friendship and feasting’.

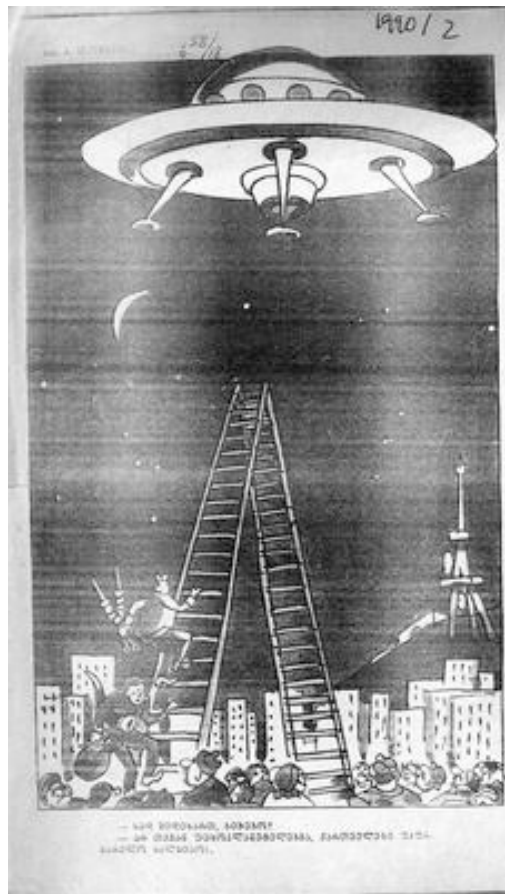


This is a truly exceptionally clever cartoon from the eighties, which presents the supra as the general means to various ends of social life under socialism that must be ‘arranged’. Georgian word meaning ‘arrange’ is *chats’q’oba*, which can mean both ‘arranging’ luggage and ‘arranging’ ones affairs by corrupt means. In this cartoon, a man is *literally* arranging his luggage, which happens to consist of all the food and drink needed for a supra. But to ‘arrange affairs’ which this cartoon is titled, means also to ‘bring about ones plans by means of friends, networks and bribery’. In other words, these goods will be consumed at a supra which will be repaid in services.

The Turn to everyday life. Noticeably, images of the supra up to the 1960’s or so usually engage the supra as a *relational* image that articulates the world of *qopa* to the state along one of their disputed boundaries, for example, production versus

consumption, public versus private identities. In the recent period of socialism, however, increasingly one sees cartoons begin to explore aspects of the supra ritual itself *absolutely*, as part of the commencement of a socialist critique of culture, of everyday life. I have already used many cartoons from *Niangi* from this period to illustrate various ethnographic points, and I think the point is well illustrated. The contemporary critique of the supra owes a great deal to its image constructed in the Socialist period.

But now, in the post-socialist period of grinding poverty and despair, it has become clear that the socialist period was also the golden age of Georgian hospitality and the supra. Far from reforming the supra being the primary concern, people increasingly wonder whether they could throw a supra at all, even if they wanted to. Georgians have moved from a period of conspicuous consumption, under socialism, to a period, under post-socialism, of consumption, conspicuous in its absence. As if to underline this point, images of the supra disappear from the pages of *Niangi* in the post-socialist period. I have found only one. This final cartoon underlines precisely these Georgian anxieties over the imminent end of the Georgian tradition of hospitality. Georgians are depicted carrying foods typical of the supra into an alien space craft to demonstrate the point that they wish to show, even in these dark times, that they do not lack hospitality.



--Where are you going, boys?

-- So that the Aliens do not say that Georgians are an unhospitable people!

And to some extent this 'false glare' created by conspicuous consumption before outsiders, whether Americans, Europeans, or space aliens, *is* still successful dramaturgically. Many foreigners who live in Georgia remain doubtful that the claims of poverty amongst the population could be real; 'Georgians are richer than they say', a journalist resident in the country for a number of years confided in me. Undoubtedly he had been to a number of supras, just like me, to emerge with such an impression.

Map



Figure 1

BEER (Wine)

Playful (serious)
 Insincere toasts (sincere toasts)
 Informal (formal)
 Public (private)
 Unregulated drinking (regulated drinking)
 No Tamada (tamada)
 'Urban' tradition

'Alapursher'

Standing (sitting)
 Work-related (work in itself)
 no *tamada* (tamada)
 no focus (focussed)
 'European' (Georgian)
 Modern (traditional)

Complementary

'Supra'

**Wine
 Tamada
 Men**

**Serious, sincere toasts
 Formal, focussed event
 Private, not work-related
 Regulated drinking
 Georgian, Traditional**

Conflicting

COFFEE (Wine)

Women (men)
 Fortune-telling (toasts)

'Democracy'

no *tamada* (tamada)
 no 'stupid rules' (regulated)
 'European' (Georgian)
 'Modern' (traditional)

Figure 2: homologous fade relations between activity types and participant types in *supra*

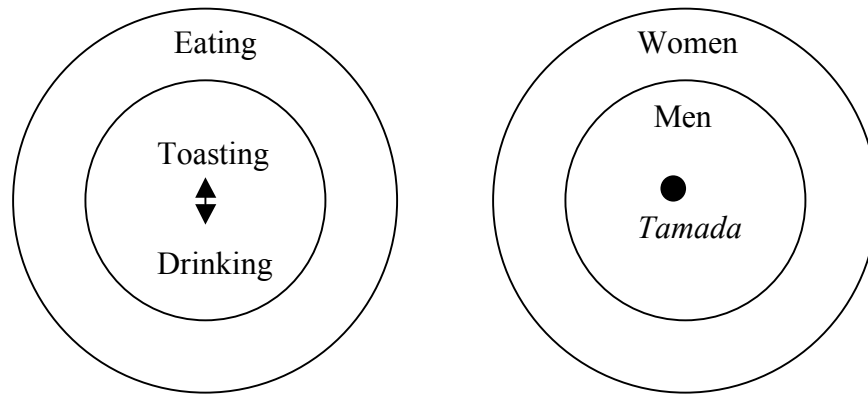


figure 3

Stage	Happy Supra <i>lxinis supra</i>	Sad Supra <i>ch'iris supra</i>
I. 'Ritual toasts'	Ego(x) Contemporaries of x	Ego (deceased) x Predecessors (the dead) of x Contemporaries (the living) of x
II. 'Personal toasts'	Consociates of x	Consociates (in general) of x
III. Carnival	Anything	--

Figure 4. Fade out structure of toasts

Toasts which are to:

Participants

Egocentric relations

Sociocentric relations

Present, specific

Absent, increasingly general

Absent, general

Increasing social distance and abstraction

Part 1: Obligatory toasts

1. ORIGO [Person or persons present honored in supra]

2. Own household members (Spouse, Children)

3. Parental household members (Parents, Siblings)

4. Grandparents

5. Relatives

6. Friends

7. Neighbors

From Part 1 to 2

*Transition from sober to drunk,
Formal, hierarchical relations to
informal, intimate relations among those present,
Increased physical and emotional expressiveness,
Tamada increasingly loses function.*

8. Women

9. Ancestors

10. Children

11. Georgia(ns)

12. All good people

Part 2: Personal block of toasts

(Includes one toast to every person present)

....