

The Autocrat of the Banquet Table: the political and social significance of the Georgian *supra*.  
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**0. Introduction.** Ask any foreigner who has spent time in Georgia to describe his or her impressions of that country, and without fail the banquet (*supra*) will appear at or near the top of the list. Nearly twenty years ago, I spent nine months in what was then the Soviet Republic of Georgia, to gather linguistic data for my PhD thesis. The day after my arrival in Tbilisi, I went to the center of the city to have a look around. A man of about my age stopped and asked me (in Russian) where I was from. I answered him in the best Georgian I could muster at the time. Within minutes, or so it seemed, we were seated in a restaurant. The waiter came by, and my new acquaintance, and now my host, ordered three bottles of wine – for two people. When the wine arrived, he filled our glasses, and then made the first toast at my first *supra* on Georgian soil.

It was a captivating moment: The spontaneous generosity shown by someone I had met only minutes earlier, the abundance of food and wine on the table, the stylized eloquence of the toasts, the sense that I was participating in some sort of ancient ritual. The *supra* seemed all the more grandiose because it contrasted so dramatically with the “Soviet way of life” as it was represented at the time of Gorbachev and Reagan: the drinking (despite Gorbachev’s dry laws), the expenditure (despite Soviet salaries), the seeming absence of politics – to the point that, on the few occasions where a tipsy banqueter made disparaging remarks about Communists or Russians, he was reproved by the other guests.

Yet the Georgian banquet is heavily loaded with political implications, whether or not politics is spoken about at the table. Since the *supra* is such a prominent feature of social life, and furthermore, one that is frequently mentioned as a marker of Georgian or Caucasian identity, authors who write about this ritual necessarily engage with widespread notions of Georgianness, and find themselves – tacitly or explicitly – taking a stance with regard to such politically-loaded issues as gender, labor and consumption. Criticism of the *supra* can arouse passionate and angry responses, as occurred recently in reaction to an essay by the sociologist Emzar Jgerenaia, in which he claimed that sublimated homoeroticism underlies the typically all-male Georgian banquet, going so far as to label it “geipi” (a hybrid term of his own confection, combining “keipi” [party, feast] and the English word “gay”; Jgerenaia 2000: 38). But at the same time, Jgerenaia – once one reads past the deliberate provocation and pop-psychology – and several other recent commentators have raised important questions concerning the cultural, social and political implications of the *supra*. These are the issues I as well wish to discuss in the present paper, from the perspective of an outsider who has, nonetheless, spent countless hours at the banqueting table.

### **1. Literature on the Georgian banquet.**

I begin with a very brief review of the literature on the *supra*, which I divide, for ease of exposition, into three rough-and-ready categories: descriptive, ethnological and revisionist-iconoclastic. They could be said to correspond to chronologically distinct phases in the investigation of this phenomenon, at least with respect to the appearance of the initial works of each category.

(A) DESCRIPTIVE: This category is the oldest, going back to depictions of feasts and banquets in Georgian literature, from the Middle Ages onward, and accounts written by European travellers to Georgia, such as Ambrosio Contarini (who passed through Georgia in 1473), Archangelo Lamberti (Italian missionary in Mingrelia from 1633-1653), the French writer Alexandre Dumas (who visited the Caucasus in 1858-1859), and numerous 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century visitors. Leaving out, for the time being, accounts predating the incorporation of Georgia into the Russian Empire at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writers describing the Georgian banquet have been impressed as much by its rule-governed homogeneity as by the abundance of wine and food displayed on the table. This has given rise to “how-to” guides, such as Holisky (1989) and, in part, Magarotto (2002), intended to inform readers about supra etiquette, the types of banquet, the sequence of toasts, etc. The chief features mentioned in descriptions of the contemporary Georgian banquet include the following:

(i). THE CENTRAL ROLE PLAYED BY THE TOASTMASTER (known in Georgian as *tamada*, or in some regions, *t'olumbaši*). 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*. The ideal *tamada* should not only be knowledgeable, witty, and articulate, but also a good drinker, i.e. capable of ingesting inordinate amounts of wine (four or five litres is not unusual) without suffering a noticeable degradation of his faculties.

(ii). SUPRA ETIQUETTE. No wine is to be consumed unless a toast (*sadyegr dzelo*) has first been pronounced by the drinker. But that is far from all: Each round of drinking begins with a toast on a particular topic declaimed by the *tamada*, after which he – and only he – drinks. After the toastmaster finishes, the other guests, one after the other, give toasts of their own on the same theme, then each of them drinks. Furthermore, each drinker, ideally, should drink ALL of the wine in his drinking vessel (glass, horn, or whatever it might happen to be) in a single draught. In practice, only the *tamada* is obliged to adhere to this rule, but the other men strive to consume at least half of the wine in their glasses. Although the toastmaster chooses the subject of each round of toasts, his choice is by no means free. The order of toasts, especially in the opening phase of the banquet, follows a quite rigid sequence, although the exact order followed depends on the type of occasion, and also the region of Georgia where the banquet takes place. Anywhere from three (the absolute minimum, to my knowledge) to three dozen or more rounds of toasts may occur during a single banquet. A typical evening supra in a private home might go on for three or four hours, though banquets lasting from 7 or 8 pm until 3 o'clock or later at night are not at all rare. I once attended a portion of a Georgian wedding banquet held in a posh (by Soviet standards) Moscow hotel, which, I was told, was in its third day.

(iii). THE SPIRIT OF COMPETITION. At the banqueting table, guests often seek to demonstrate to the others their eloquence, knowledge of national history (drawn upon when pronouncing toasts to Georgia, to the ancestors, or on similar themes), their singing – and occasionally, dancing – ability, and also their capacity for maintaining self-control despite the huge consumption of alcohol. As agonistic behavior within the parameters imposed by convention, the supra could be considered a kind of sport, but Georgians almost always downplay the nakedly competitive side

of banqueting. They emphasize rather the cohesion and camaraderie generated by mutual appreciation of each other's abilities, as well as each other's faithfulness to the traditional values that are displayed in the performance of the supra.

(B) ETHNOLOGICAL: Not surprisingly, the ubiquity and rule-governed consistency of the Georgian supra has attracted the attention of foreign researchers, who detect in it the marks of ritual, in particular, a ritual enacting certain representations of Georgian identity. Examples of work in the field of "supralogy" include sociolinguist Helga Kotthoff's (1995, 1999) analyses of the Georgian banquet toast as speech genre, Florian Mühlfried's (2006) cognitive-anthropological study of gender-linked attributes of the toastmaster (*tamada*), and Paul Manning's (2003) work on the supra as image of private consumption in Soviet discourse.

(C) REVISIONIST-ICONOCLASTIC: Georgians commonly hold up the supra as a showcase of their national character, as an essential component of social life, and even as an "academy", where the true history of the Georgian nation is transmitted and its fate discussed, however these might be represented in officially-sanctioned media and textbooks. Criticisms of the dominant view have also been voiced. In an unpublished paper, Manning (2003) examines the deployment of the supra as a symbol of unproductive private consumption in the Soviet Georgian satirical magazine *Niangi*.<sup>1</sup> In this context the supra is depicted as excessive, self-indulgent, wasteful, corrupt and counter-productive, in contrast to socially-useful labor (as symbolized by collective-farm workers, for example). Post-Soviet counterdiscourses concerning the supra, such as those to be discussed here, come from a different source and are couched in different language. Rather than invoking the decisions of the preceding Party Congress, the authors of revisionist treatments of the supra draw upon sociological, historical and psychological theories that were little-known or even taboo to Soviet researchers. Most of these writers are linked to the so-called "third sector": non-governmental organizations, many of them funded by European or American agencies. They tend to be relatively young, conversant in English and sometimes other West-European languages, and some travel abroad frequently. Because the activities and publications of many members of these group are funded by foreign grants, critics — representatives of the old intelligentsia, traditionalist and anti-Western activists — refer to them reproachfully as "grant-eaters".<sup>2</sup> I hasten to add that the label is unfair or in any case inaccurate, since a sizeable contingent of intellectuals who share the cosmopolitan and liberal attitudes of the NGO-affiliated grantivores work in more traditional institutions. Many of these are literary critics, translators and writers, generally — but not always — in their 40's or younger. Rather than perpetuate usage of the pejorative label "grant-eaters", I will designate this group as the "third sector". My choice of label captures both the distinction made between NGOs and the private and state sectors, as well as that between this group and two other loosely-defined cohorts within the Georgian elite.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this periodical — *niangi* means "crocodile" in Georgian — mirrors that of the celebrated Soviet journal *Krokodil*. While the two publications shared a common format and reflected similar Kremlin-directed ideological objectives, the articles, jokes and cartoons in *Niangi* are geared to a specifically Georgian readership.

<sup>2</sup> Or "grantivores", if you prefer (cp. Russian *grantoedy* and its equivalents in the languages of the ex-Soviet republics: e.g. Geo. *grant'ič'amiebi* or *grant'ismč'amlebi*, Armenian *grantagerner*).

Mühlfried (2005) contrasts the “grant-eaters” to the so-called “red intelligentsia”,<sup>3</sup> academics esconced in the state university, the Academy of Sciences, the Writers’ Union and similar institutions, especially those who rose to positions of authority during the Soviet period. I would add a third constituency to this portrait of the Georgian academic scene, whom I will call, for lack of a better term, the “white intelligentsia”. Many individuals, often the descendents of old aristocratic families, found employment as professors, researchers, artists, musicians, and similar positions, without joining the Communist Party or actively collaborating with the regime. Georgians made the distinction between “red” and “white” intelligentsias (though not with those labels) in Soviet times, but the frontier between the two camps was not that easy to make out, and in any case, it was crisscrossed by numerous lines of friendship and cooperation. Many intellectuals were difficult or impossible to classify according to this binary scheme. The rapid changes of government since 1991, however, have made the frontier more evident and perhaps less porous. Many, but by no means all, members of the white intelligentsia supported Zviad Gamsaxurdia during his short-lived presidency, and continued to advocate his policies after he was deposed in 1992; some underwent persecution or were forced to emigrate as a consequence. The red intelligentsia opposed Gamsaxurdia, and, by and large, welcomed the return of Shevardnadze. Despite these differences in political orientation, representatives of both groups oppose the third sector’s revisionist critiques of traditional practices, since the latter go against the grain of both Soviet-epoch historiography, and the vision of the Georgian past adhered to by nationalists aligned with the Zviadist movement.

Here in tabular format is my field-guide to the Georgian intellectual milieu. Needless to say, when classifying individuals, especially those with the dense and wide-ranging social networks typical of the Georgian elite, this classification is simplistic to the point of caricature. It is based primarily on my own observations, and thus likely to reflect observer bias in some fashion.

|                              | “red intelligentsia”   | “white intelligentsia”  | “third sector”   |
|------------------------------|--|---|--|
| <i>employment</i>            | traditional academic & artistic institutions (generally higher-ranked positions)     | traditional academic & artistic institutions (generally lower-ranked positions) | NGOs, visiting posts in Western universities; also includes literary critics, writers, translators |
| <i>background</i>            | older generation, of varied social origin (many from established Communist families) | older generation, often from aristocratic families                              | younger, many from white intelligentsia families   |
| <i>political orientation</i> | opportunist-conservative; pro-Shevardnadze   | nationalist, religious conservative; pro-Gamsaxurdia                            | cosmopolitan, pro-Western; pro-Saakashvili or liberal opposition                                   |
| <i>gender attitudes</i>      | tend toward conservatism, but includes professional women                            | favor traditional gender roles  | favor gender equality, liberal lifestyles  |

I will focus on two contentious issues raised in the past few years with regard to the Georgian banquet. First to be discussed are the origins of the supra, of toasting as currently practiced, and of the role of the *tamada* as master of ceremonies at the banquet table. Next we will examine the social and political attitudes which the supra is believed to encapsulate: the relative significance

<sup>3</sup> Zaza Shatirishvili (2003) calls these two groups the new and old intelligentsia, respectively.

of written and unwritten codes of behavior; and the supra and (or *versus*) civil society.

## 2. The evolution of the Georgian banquet: from *nadimi* to *supra*.

Rituals, especially such ubiquitous ones as the Georgian banquet, are commonly imagined as coeval with the national or religious community itself. There is in fact just such a legend concerning the origin of the supra, which I have heard on several occasions, and which crops up on numerous web pages, travel guides and popular publications about the Georgians:

When God was distributing portions of the world to all the peoples of the earth, the Georgians were having a party and doing some serious drinking. As a result they arrived late and were told by God that all the land had already been distributed. When they replied that they were late only because they had been lifting their glasses in praise of Him, God was pleased and gave the Georgians that part of earth he had been reserving for himself. (from R. Rosen, *The Georgian Republic* [Hong Kong, 1991], cited by Braund 1994, p. 70)

In this tale, the Georgians are represented banqueting and drinking toasts in God's honor, presumably while other nations show up at the appointed time and place to receive their allotments of land. But is the Georgian supra as we now know it as old as this legend would lead one to believe? If we define the supra as a meal or banquet where the consumption of wine is regulated by a toastmaster (*tamada*) and a conventional toasting sequence, then it may not be as ancient as many think.

Although feasting and wine-drinking are mentioned in the masterworks of Georgian courtly literature (*Vepxist'q'aosani*, *Amiran-Darejaniani*, etc.) and early travellers' accounts, the institution of the toastmaster and, indeed, toast-making in anything akin to its contemporary form, are conspicuously absent. The Georgian words for "toastmaster" – *tamada* and *t'olumbaši*, both of non-Georgian origin – are not attested before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> The word *supra* itself is likewise absent, at least as a term for the banquet; in the medieval Georgian translation of the *Shah-Nameh supra* refers only to the tablecloth or dining table, that is, with the same meaning as its Persian source *sufre* in the original text. The Georgian terms designating feasting in pre-Tsarist times are *nadimi* and *p'uroba* (< *p'uri* "bread", commonly used to denote all types of food served at a meal). I will present here the principal characteristics of the *nadimi* as described in medieval Georgian courtly literature, and the writings of foreign visitors to Georgia (a handy overview of these materials is provided in the third chapter of Mühlfried 2006). Among the latter, the Italian missionary Archangelo Lamberti is an especially valuable witness. He resided in the western province of Mingrelia for twenty years (1633-1653), learned the local language, and was instructed by Rome to supply detailed descriptions of local customs, practices and mores.

*a. Lavish display of food and drink.* At banquets, especially on special occasions, or when honored guests are present, the host lays out, if at all possible, far more food and drink than the guests could possibly consume. Lamberti (44) was amazed by the number of bulls, pigs, poultry

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<sup>4</sup> Of the two words for toastmaster, *t'olumbaši* (< Turkish *tulumbaş*, "head/chief of the wine-skin" [KEGL]) has been largely supplanted in standard Georgian by *tamada* (probably < Circassian [Kabardian] тхьэмәдә, lit. "father of the gods"; Colarusso 2002: 45), which originally referred to leadership in general, not only at the banquet table ("უფროსობა ან თავობა, მკვალ, ღვინის სმპა" Chubinashvili 1887/1984: 516).

and game animals slaughtered on the occasion of weddings or holidays in 17<sup>th</sup> century Mingrelia, despite the impoverished circumstances in which most people then lived. The banquets described in the 12<sup>th</sup> century *Amiran-Darejaniani* were praised not only for the abundance of wine and food, but also for the expensive gifts presented by the hosts (usually royalty) to their guests.

*b. Length of time spent at the banquet.* Lamberti expressed dismay at the inordinate amount of time his Mingrelian hosts spent at dinner: “it is unfortunate that, because of the insufficiency of food, they entertain themselves rather with talk and wine” (48). On holy-days, the faithful rushed out of the church to take their places at banquets that not infrequently lasted from midday to past midnight. The kings, ladies and cavaliers featured in the *Amiran-Darejaniani* would attend sequences of banquets going on for days, the guests periodically moving from one palace to another, with breaks to go hunting.

*c. Central importance of drinking.* While hosts are praised for the lavish quantities of food they lay before their guests, it is the consumption of alcohol (i.e. wine in the pre-Tsarist accounts) that occupies center stage. Men capable of drinking more wine than the others at the *nadimi*, without becoming incapacitated or drunk, were singled out for special praise. Lamberti (49-50) recounts the story of a certain “Scedan Cilazé” (Č’iladze?), whose reputation as a champion drinker was said to have drawn the attention of the Shah of Iran. Invited by the Shah to his capital, Č’iladze outdrank the best drinkers of Iran, and received rich prizes in recognition of his prowess. Finally, “the shah himself wished to compete against him in drinking, but he drank so much that he became ill and gave up the ghost. Č’iladze however, laden with gifts, returned to his homeland”.<sup>5</sup>

*d. Toasts.* “Mingrelians have the tradition of drinking toasts”, writes Lamberti (48)

but their toasts are not like ours. Who wishes to drink someone’s toast, must do as follows: When the wine-pourer brings him a cup of wine, the toast-drinker tells the wine-pourer, take this cup to so-and-so. This man takes the cup from the wine-pourer, first inclines his head to the one from whom the toast comes; he then slightly touches his lips (to the cup) and drinks a bit; then he cleans the place on the cup where his lips touched, inclines his head a second time, and send the cup back. When the toast-drinker receives the cup, he empties it completely, and in the same manner sends the cup to the one whose toast he drank, and in that way pays his respects.

Toasts are described in medieval courtly literature also, and like the above, they are directed to fellow banqueters, rather than to the long-gone ancestors and abstract themes that appear on the list of obligatory toasting themes for the contemporary Georgian supra. There is also no mention of lengthy toasts, or of guests vying with each other in the eloquence of their toasts on a particular theme. Friedrich Bodenstedt, who lived in Tbilisi from 1843 to 1846, and the afore-mentioned Alexandre Dumas, who visited the Caucasus fifteen years later, mention the same brief exchange of Turkish phrases between the proposer and recipient of a toast:

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<sup>5</sup> The tradition of champion drinkers was still alive when Dumas visited Georgia, and indeed he is reputed to have bested his hosts at their own game: *Oui, le gigantisme de notre Alexandre Dumas se (dé)mesure autrement : dans les années soixante, quand, en Georgie, les meilleurs buveurs boivent directement à l’outré vingt-cinq bouteilles de vin, il se voit décerner un certificat attestant qu’"il a pris plus de vin que les Géorgiens"* (Mathieu 2002).

Celui qui porte le toast dit ces paroles sacramentelles : « Allah verdi. » [“God gave”]  
Celui qui accepte le toast répond : « Yack schioldi. » [= Azeri *Yaxşı ol(di)* “Be well”]

Recalling the banquets of his childhood, the poet Ak’ak’i C’ereteli (1840-1915) pointed to the absence of the newer style of toasting, especially thematic (*samizezo*) toasts, which “could not even be imagined” at the time (*ჩემი თავდასხვალება*, Pt I, ch. 1), but which became an inalienable attribute of the supra within his lifetime (Nik’oladze 2004).

When did the supra, with thematic toasts and a tamada, supplant the medieval *nadimi*? Levan Bregadze (2000) did some philological spadework, and traced the earliest appearance of the Georgian word for “toast” – *sadyegr dzelo*, lit. “for long life”<sup>6</sup> – to a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century poem by Grigol Orbeliani entitled “*sadyegr dzelo anu omis šemdgom yame lxini, erevnis siaxloves*” (“Toast, or night banquet after battle, in the vicinity of Erevan”). Orbeliani (1800-1883) was a Georgian nobleman who served in the Russian Imperial army in the 1820’s and 30’s, following the annexation of Georgia into the tsarist empire. His poem consists of a series of toasts pronounced during an all-night banquet by a group of soldiers seated around a campfire. After a brief introduction, the text shifts to direct address: A voice calls on the assembled brethren to drink a cup full of wine to those fallen that day in battle. There follow several lengthy toasts – to celebrated ancestors (especially royalty), to Tsar Nicholas I, to the Georgian homeland, to friendship in the face of death, and to love – each followed by a brief refrain, uttered in chorus by the soldiers. As Bregadze notes, an earlier version of Orbeliani’s poem had a different title — “*t’olubaši anu omis šemdeg lxini da sadyegr dzelo, 1827 c’elsa*” (“Toastmaster [*t’olu(m)baši*], or banquet after battle and toast, in the year 1827”) — and was described on its title page as an “imitation” (*mibadzva*) of a work by the Russian poet Vasily Zhukovsky. The model for Orbeliani’s “Toast[master]” is Zhukovsky’s celebrated *Pevec vo stane russkix voinov* (“The Bard in the Camp of the Russian Warriors”) composed in the aftermath of the War of 1812. This poem likewise comprises a sequence of toast-like invocations, pronounced by a speaker holding a cup of wine, to forefathers and the homeland, the Tsar, living warriors, and those who had fallen in combat; to brotherhood, love, bards (*sotrudniki voždjam* “colleagues of commanders”), and lastly, to God.

On the evidence of this poem and several other literary sources mentioned in his essay, Bregadze concludes that “the supra, it would appear, received the form it has today at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and ... by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this form of banquet has spread everywhere” (12). I will get back to this assertion in a minute, but before I do, I would like to dwell a bit more on the parallel between Zhukovsky’s *Pevec* and Orbeliani’s imitation. The two texts are structured as long passages attributed to a single voice, followed by refrains, echoing portions of the preceding text, representing a kind of chorus. In Zhukovsky’s poem, the principal voice is

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<sup>6</sup> Although the derived word *sadyegr dzelo* can be traced back no further than two centuries, its compound root — *dye* (day) + *grdzel-* (long) — occurs in texts from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, e.g. *cxovndi uk’unisamde dyegr dzelobita, mepeo!* “Live for ever, with length of days, O king!” (*Amiran-Darejaniani*); *ac’, švilo, ymertman tkven mogces atas c’el dyeta grdzeloba, sve-svianoba, didoba ...* “Now, my child, may God grant you length of days for a thousand years, good fortune, greatness” (*Vepxist’q’aosani* 1545). In modern Georgian usage, it is important to note, *sadyegr dzelo* denotes any kind of toast proposed at a banquet, not only those wishing health and long life to an individual.

labeled *pevec* “bard”. In Orbeliani’s earlier imitations the equivalent part is assigned to a *t’olubaši* “toastmaster”, and in the later ones the label is changed to *sadyegr dzelo* “toast”.

|                     | LEAD PERFORMER                    | CHORUS                                   |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Zhukovsky 1812-1815 | <i>pevec</i> “bard”               | <i>voiny</i> “warriors”                  |
| Orbeliani 1827      | <i>t’olu(m)baši</i> “toastmaster” | <i>dast’aluḡi</i> “refrain” <sup>7</sup> |
| Orbeliani 1870      | <i>sadyegr dzelo</i> “toast”      | <i>mxedarni</i> “warriors”               |

The equation made by Orbeliani between *pevec* and *t’olu(m)baši* merits closer study, certainly closer than I am capable of at present. Zhukovsky’s bard gives every appearance of being a figure drawn from Thomas Gray or the Scottish ballads of Walter Scott or Macpherson, rather than from the banqueting practices of Russian officers at the time of the Napoleonic Wars (Rayfield 1994: 144; Catherine O’Neil, pers. comm.). Just such an occasion is depicted by Tolstoy in *War and Peace* (chapter 71), and it has little in common with Zhukovsky’s campfire orations. The nobleman hosting the banquet signaled for the glasses to be filled with champagne, then rose to his feet and called out “To the health of our Sovereign, the Tsar”. He emptied his glass and threw it to the floor. The others shouted “hurrah” and smashed their glasses in similar fashion, while the band played a patriotic song. After the servants swept up the shattered glass, another toast was proposed, to Prince Bagration, followed by shouting and the smashing of drinkware, and so on, as other guests, club members and the organizing committee were toasted in their turn, ending with a final salute to the host.

As far as the toasting is concerned, this is fundamentally the same structure as that noted in medieval Georgia (without the broken glass, of course), and for that matter, in the Western world since Roman times: personal toasts to sovereigns and fellow banqueters, with little in the way of verbal elaboration. But whereas Zhukovsky’s bardic feast is a fictional product, the insertion of names from the present and recent past into the frame of romanticized Celtic minstrelsy, that concocted by Orbeliani could pass for the transcript of an actual supra, albeit one with an uncommonly talented tamada capable of expressing his *sadyegr dzeloebi* in verse.<sup>8</sup> According to the textual evidence, the transition from medieval *nadimi* to modern supra followed on the heels of the incorporation of Georgia and the rest of Transcaucasia into the Russian Empire in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Post hoc, propter hoc*: in Bregadze’s opinion, the new supra, with its *tamada* and sequence of toasts, came into being precisely as a means of symbolically compensating for lost sovereignty: “The Georgian supra, and in particular, its chief element, the toast, became a compensation for unfulfilled duties ... Real care for the homeland was replaced by the toast to the homeland; the real doing of good, by the toast to goodness”.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> “სიმღერის დროს ყოველი ხანის შემდეგ გამეორებული კუპლეტი ან სტრიქონი, რომელიც ლექსის მთავარ მოტივს შეიცავს” (გრიშაშვილი, იოსებ. 1997. *ქალაქური ლექსიკონი*: 78-79).

<sup>8</sup> Although rare, such toastmasters do exist! See the collection of versified toasts created by Vano Xaraišvili (1997), a celebrated rhyming *tamada* from Xašuri in central Georgia.

<sup>9</sup> მოიშალა ქართული სახელმწიფოებრიობა, ჩაკვდა ქართული საზოგადოებრივ-პოლიტიკური ცხოვრება — აყვავდა ქართული სუფრა! ... ქართული სუფრა, კერძოდ, მისი უმთავრესი ელემენტი — სადღეგრძელო — იქცა შეუსრულებელ მოვალეობათა კომპენსაციად. ... სამშობლოზე რეალურად ზრუნვა სამშობლოს სადღე-გრძელოთი იცვლება, სიკეთის რეალურად კეთება — სიკეთის სადღეგრძელოთი (Bregadze 2000: 13-14).



“Old-intelligentsia” critics of Bregadze, such as Gociridze (2001), denounced his apparent unfamiliarity with Georgian ethnography; had Bregadze done his homework, he would not have overlooked the evidence of tamada-like practices in traditional folkways, or in peripheral, culturally-conservative regions of Georgia. Without endorsing Gociridze’s traditionalist, and not especially convincing, critique of Bregadze’s thesis, I will briefly present some widespread elements of Georgian (and, in general, Caucasian) belief and practice which, as it were, fertilized the soil from which both the earlier *nadimi* and the contemporary supra sprouted.

(i). THE RITUAL USE OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES. The traditional religious practices of Georgians and their neighbors – either those described by ethnographers, or those still practiced today – invariably are marked by the use of wine, vodka or beer (depending on what is available locally) as an offering to the divine patrons of the community, or poured out as a libation to the deceased. (Libations – usually reduced to the pouring of a few drops of wine onto a piece of bread – are commonly performed even at contemporary urban supras). Among the Pshavs and Xevsurs of the northeast Georgian highlands, offerings are presented at shrines under four species: alcohol, bread, sacrificial animals and beeswax candles. After receiving the offerings from each petitioner, the *xervisberi* or *xucesi* (priest-like celebrants of traditional highland ceremonies) makes an invocation to the patron saint or deity while holding up a glass of wine or other alcoholic drink, which he then drinks. The petitioner and other men near the shrine precincts then do likewise. After the meat from the sacrificed cattle and sheep has been boiled or roasted, the *xervisberi* goes to each banquet and consecrates it, once again by holding up and then drinking a glass of wine.

(ii). POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE AGONISM. As I mentioned earlier, the Georgian banquet is an arena of competition among the men at the table. Descriptions of the supra tend to foreground what I will call “positive agonism”, that is, the competitive display of quantity. This is most notoriously expressed through the amount and quality of the food and drink laid out before the guests (cp. “four-story banquets”, with trays of food piled so high on the table that the guests cannot see the fellow partiers seated across from them, lampooned in one of the *Niangi* cartoons exhibited by Manning 2003);<sup>10</sup> the dozen or more glassfuls, hornfuls — and even flower-vase-fuls<sup>11</sup> – of wine chugged down by each drinker in the course of an evening. Positive agonism is also expressed verbally, in the form of lengthy, elaborate toasts, sometimes accompanied by the recitation of poetry or quotations from Georgian literature. Less often remarked upon, but of equal importance if one is to understand many otherwise puzzling aspects of traditional Caucasian behavior, is

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<sup>10</sup> In Tbilisi in 1986 I witnessed a table literally crack asunder from the weight of the food piled atop it for a supra, sending dishes, plates and wine-pitchers crashing to floor. Rather than express dismay at the damage to the table and the spoilage of food, the hosts laughed and pointed with evident pleasure to this emphatic display of Georgian generosity.

<sup>11</sup> This is as well is something I saw with my own eyes, at a supra honoring the baptism of the daughter of a close friend of mine. After several rounds of toasts drunk from ordinary glasses, the tamada looked around the room for more challenging drinkware. His gaze settled on a vase of flowers. With evident glee he poured out the water and flowers, and filled the vase with a pitcher of wine (a litre at least). The tamada slurped down most of the contents — the rest spilling over his shirt — then filled the vase and handed it to the next drinker. As is the custom with toasts drunk from horns or other unusual drinking vessels, all men at the table were obliged to follow suit, to the best of their ability.

“negative agonism”, by which I mean the competitive display of restraint and self-control. If one is to believe the accounts of ethnographers, seconded by the vivid descriptions of highland morality contained in Grigol Robakidze’s short story *Engadi*, the Xevsur mountaineers made self-control (*tavšek’aveba*) into something of a cult. True self-mastery was manifested by controlling your sword strokes in a duel so as to only lightly wound your opponent; to control your passions so as to pass the night caressing a friend of the opposite sex (*sc’orperi*) without consummating the relationship; to bear the excruciating pain of traditional surgical interventions (including trepanation), or the agony of a difficult childbirth, without crying out.<sup>12</sup> At the banquet, negative agonism is directly joined to the excessive consumption just described. The ideal drinker not only ingests as much or more than his fellow banqueters, but at the same time he manifests no significant impairment of his alertness, eloquence, singing or dancing ability. The fame of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century champion drinker Č’iladze depended as much on the latter as on the former talent. In at least some regions of the Caucasus, there was a negative counterpart to the positive-agonistic display of hostly generosity as well: Seated at a table piled high with food, the ideal guest, according to an Ossetian proverb, leaves it untouched “even though hungry cats be clawing at his stomach” (Kalojev 1971: 197).<sup>13</sup>

(iii). THE GUEST-HOST RELATION. For the peoples of the Caucasus, whether from the north or the south, Christian or Muslim, hospitality is a central component of their self-image. For Georgians, “a guest is of God” (*st’umari γvtisaa*). Traditional Daghestanian and Circassian homes always included a finely-furnished guest room or guest-house. According to Hewitt and Watson (1994: 6) “Abkhazians considered it rude to close the kitchen door because that implied that the family was not willing to offer hospitality to any passing guests”. The banquet table, needless to say, is a privileged venue for displaying hospitality. But traditional Caucasian conceptions of the guest-host relation (Georgian *st’umarmasp’indzloba*) imply obligations for both parties, guest as well as host, and are situated in the larger context of mutual ties and responsibilities traversing the potentially dangerous outside world, a topic to be discussed in the following section of the paper.

### 3. The supra as socio-political model.

After citing the popular myth about Georgians feasting while God apportioned land to the peoples of the world, Braund noticed something else in the legend that merited comment:

The Georgians were late: they had broken the rules. The model appeals to one contemporary Georgian self-image: Georgians are seen to be clever and resourceful, properly concerned with pleasures. They are seen not to be concerned with punctuality, for Georgians often pride themselves explicitly on their disregard for the constraints of time as for other rules and limitations. Georgians often speak of themselves as clever rule-benders, cunning and intelligent. Such a self-image had particular appeal for a people who lived in a land closely regulated by an alien authority (Braund 1994, p. 70).

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<sup>12</sup> My summary of Xevsur negative agonism is based on Tedoradze 1930, Baliauri 1991, Tuite 2000, among others; I also draw upon interviews with the ethnographer Tinatin Ochiauri (July 2001) and her brother Giorgi (March 2005).

<sup>13</sup> While living among the highland Georgians of Xevsureti in the early 1920’s, the anti-Soviet rebel leader Kakutsa Choloq’ashvili impressed his hosts by his restrained behavior at the banquet table. It is recalled that “he ate very little, and only the best pieces” (K’onst’ant’ine Choloq’ashvili, pers. comm.).

The legend also illustrates the curious fact that, whereas Georgians vaunt their insouciance toward the written rules upheld by the State, the Church, the traffic police or even God Himself,<sup>14</sup> they adhere with remarkable tenacity to the unwritten conventions of the supra, and its code of hospitality, honor, and gender-appropriate behavior. In the view of some recent commentators of the “third-sector” camp, behind this seeming paradox lurks a major obstacle to the evolution of the sort of civic order characteristic of West-European societies. Since long before the incorporation of Georgia into the Soviet or even Tsarist empires,

the country’s bureaucratic control is based not on formal laws, but rather the transformation of those laws into lawlessness, the removal of the idea of order from their content, their poetization, mythification, verbalization, “putting-into-words”, “reanonizing”, “reconception”, their mythopoetic transfer into such a format that formal laws no longer have a decisive meaning, and disputes are settled “by relationship with some people, by friendship with others, by deference with some, by divine bluntness with others, by bribery with yet others” (Berdzenishvili 2004: 170).

Look at our streets, Berdzenishvili laments,

the country is full of drivers that know nothing at all of traffic rules ... Corruption has reached such uncontrollable dimensions that even in cases of total ignorance of the rules of the road, drivers’ licenses are freely given out ... It would appear that people are willing to pay money under the table in order to put their own lives, and those of others, in danger (2004:168-9).

According to Jgerenaia (2000: 33), it is because Georgian society never underwent anything comparable to the Reformation that “a Western concept of citizenship and civil (social) philosophy” never developed there. As a consequence, official, codified models of society — represented by the Orthodox church in Jgerenaia’s essay, but one could just as well replace it with Tsarist, socialist, Soviet or Western-liberal ideology — never penetrated the “village”, i.e. society itself, where unwritten conventions hold sway, and where the arena of social and political action is the supra.

In the final analysis, the law (holy writ) did not participate in the process of upbringing and socializing each new generation, in that it was successfully supplanted by the unwritten tradition of the supra ... One fundamental trait of Georgian culture is the priority of the unwritten over the written (Jgerenaia 2000: 34)

The collection containing the above article and the one by Bregadze discussed earlier is entitled “The Georgian banquet and civil society” (*ქართული სუფრა და სამოქალაქო საზოგადოება*), though the statements just quoted might give one reason to suppose that the title ought to have been “The Georgian banquet *versus* civil society”. The term “civil society” has been a staple of politological discourse since Hegel’s time, and numerous definitions are in circulation (Kaldor (2003: 6-10) identified no less than five). Georgian third-sector intellectuals tend to equate civil society with the institutions in which they operate, but in this paper I will adopt a more tradition definition of

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<sup>14</sup> Cp. W. E. D. Allen’s remarkable characterization of the “aesthetic irresponsibility” and “amoral and untrammled mind” of the Georgians: “The sense of nation is in itself a kind of aestheticism – a form of sensual taste – a preference for one’s kind in contrast to other kind. On the other hand no man – or no people – of essential aestheticism, of taste, can conceive a fixed preference for a certain religious or political conception” (*History of the Georgian People*, 71-2).

civil society as the zone of activity between the household and the State, the functioning of which is assured by the absence of coercion and common ground roles of interaction and sociality.

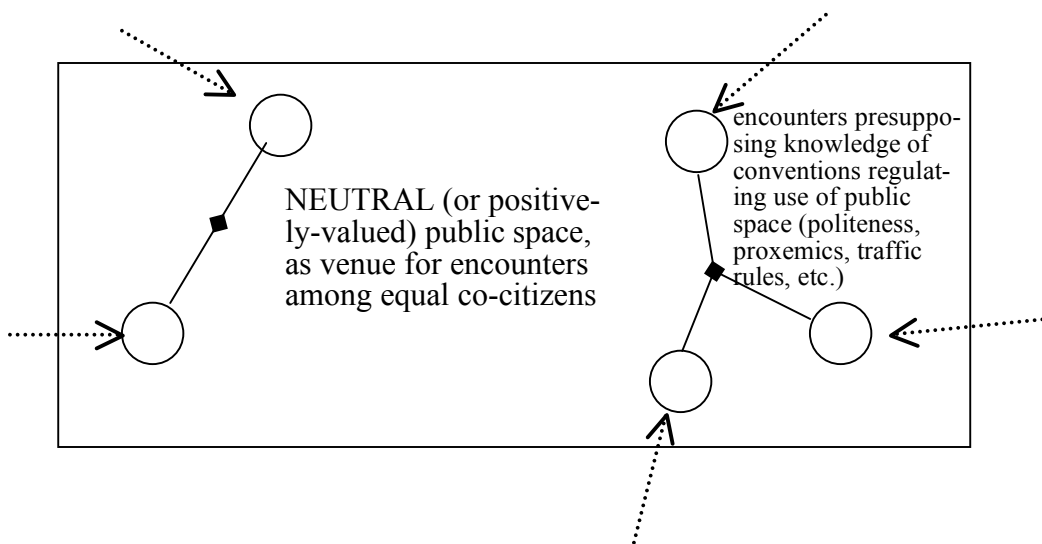
It has become a commonplace to contrast the rule- and convention-bound supra, under the “dictatorship” of the tamada, with “democratic” gatherings (Manning 2003), where guests – young elite urbanites or “third-sector” intellectuals – drink, eat, dance, socialize and move about in relative freedom. Among the latter type of social event, the buffet-reception known to Georgians and Russians under the French expression “à la fourchette” (а-ля-фуршет, ალაფურშეტი) has become the paradigmatic example of the intrusion of Western forms of sociality into Georgian public space. The supra-versus-buffet dichotomy has become a trope of much ethnological and revisionist writing about the Georgian banquet, so I will follow in this vein by sketching out two prototypes of sociopolitical space, the one modeled on the “à la fourchette” buffet, the other on the traditional supra.

TWO MODELS OF SOCIOPOLITICAL SPACE

|                               | <i>supra</i>   | <i>à la fourchette</i>                         |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| <i>interactional paradigm</i> | GUEST-HOST RELATION  | CIVIL SOCIETY                                  |
|                               | centralized, focused<br>immobile<br>asymmetric<br>selective, by invitation | decentralized<br>mobile<br>symmetric<br>open   |
| <i>regulatory code</i>        | UNWRITTEN TRADITION  | WRITTEN LAW                                    |
|                               | highly ritualized, less creative<br>gender-marked                          | less ritualized, more creative<br>gender-equal |
| <i>discourse paradigm</i>     | MONOLOGIC  | DIALOGIC                                       |
|                               | rhetoric, oratory<br>agonistic-epideictic                                  | (Habermasian) conversation<br>cooperative      |

I. À LA FOURCHETTE MODEL. The first type of sociopolitical space presupposes an arena of interaction — “civil society” – which exists outside the individual household, but which is also free of state control other than that required to maintain it in state of security, accessibility, cleanliness and working order. At the same time, the citizens as a whole cooperate toward achieving the above-mentioned goals. A crucial correlate of this kind of civil society is not only respect of written laws, but also the equal treatment – and if possible, consideration and courtesy – toward the frequently anonymous others who share one’s public space. Investigators of the microsocial, such as E. T. Hall and Erving Goffman, have revealed the extent to which behavior in public spaces – service interactions, random encounters, traffic and queuing rules – depends on communally-shared codes of behavior, as well as conventions guiding the interpretation of and accommodation to social actions that do not fit the habitual script. The communicative counterpart to equal treatment is dialogue, in which each participant, presupposing that the other adheres to certain interactional ground rules, attempts in good faith to understand his or her interlocutor – the Habermasian conversational ideal often mentioned by writers on civil-society-related questions (cp. Manning 2007).

Here is a diagram of civil society as an à-la-fourchette buffet. Clumsily represented as circles are citizens entering public space from the private domains of their households. Each citizen has equal rights of access to public space, but also equal responsibility for its upkeep and proper exploitation. The participants circulate freely, encountering other co-citizens, with whom they may engage in dialogues or conversations (these are the solid lines meeting at diamond-shaped intersections). Their interactions are regulated by the presupposable ground rules for the use of public space, proxemics, speech-genre norms, and the like. Some types of encounters and conversations modeled here are relatively routine or ritualized (instances of Malinowskian “phatic communion”, employee-client service encounters), but each interaction has the potential for creativity, for elaboration in unexpected directions. It is important to note the absence of a hegemonic center-of-attention in à-la-fourchette civil society. One may have, of course, participants seeking to draw attention to themselves in public space, but they are not built into the system, so to speak.



It must, of course, not be forgotten that the à-la-fourchette buffet is still a highly marked social ritual in today’s Georgia. It is almost exclusively practiced by younger, educated, more or less cosmopolitan Georgians – or by those who wish to be seen as such – and thus those who encounter each other at an event of this type simultaneously signal their equality with their peers (contrasted with the asymmetrical relation to be discussed in the next paragraph), and their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the vast majority of Georgian society.<sup>15</sup>

II. SUPRA MODEL. In my view, the foundation of the Georgian banquet – both the earlier *nadimi*, and the present-day supra – is the guest-host relationship, a complementary pair of roles, with their respective duties and obligations, known in approximately the same form throughout the Caucasus. Foreign visitors to the region report their astonishment at the generosity of their hosts, the quantities of food, drink and gifts with which they are received. (In another *Niangi* cartoon collected by Manning (2003), Georgians are shown bearing gifts of food to an alien spacecraft “so that the extraterrestrials do not say that Georgians are inhospitable”). Even as they

<sup>15</sup> My thanks to Florian Mühlfried for bringing this point home after an oral presentation of this paper.

marvel at the lavishness of the hospitality, however, visitors not infrequently grumble and chafe at the restrictions guesthood imposes on them – the long hours spent at the banquet table, when they would rather be sight-seeing, sleeping, or doing anything beside eat, drink and listen to toasts. There is a wonderful Georgian saying, quoted to me a few years ago by my friend and colleague Mirian Xucishvili, that sums up the role of the guest with far greater wit and concision than the writings of any ethnographer: “the guest is the host’s donkey; he can hitch him wherever he wants” (*st’umari masp’indzlis viriao; sadac unda, ik daabamso*). But what such visitors fail to understand, as they return to their home country (or planet) with stuffed bellies, aching heads and suitcases full of gifts, is how the host-guest relation (*st’umarmasp’indzloba*) came to take on the dimensions lampooned in Soviet films and cartoons, and celebrated in travel guides.

Civil society, defined as an arena of social and economic activity outside the private and government sectors, but maintained by the combined efforts of both citizens and State, was unknown in the premodern Caucasus, and can scarcely be said to exist today in some political units of the region. Depending on the epoch and the locality, the space beyond the domesticated realm of the homestead and the village was either conceived as a savage no-man’s-land, or an alien, hostile domain controlled by an intrusive State. Traversing the wild, potentially dangerous exterior, however, are bonds between individuals, households and communities, traditionally expressed in the language of kinship (sworn brotherhood, milk siblinghood, fictive adoption, godparenthood) and the guest-host relationship (Tuite 1998).<sup>16</sup>

The guest-host relationship is asymmetric, and highly ritualized (or “highly presupposing”, in Silverstein’s sense). Host and guest play their respective roles, as dictated by tradition.<sup>17</sup> The host kills the fatted calf, provides for all the guest’s needs – as these are defined by custom, rather than the guest’s actual wishes (*st’umari masp’indzlis viria*, after all). The relationship thus initiated is intended to be long-lasting, to be reciprocated and renewed by further acts of hospitality, and even to be continued by the descendants and relatives of the original host and guest. Most forms of Caucasian hospitality are gender-marked, being either restricted to men, or foregrounding men as the principal actors. At the same time, hospitality depends heavily on the “shadow work” of women, who prepare the food, serve the guests, and clean up afterwards, even if they are invisible, or nearly so, at the banquet.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cp. Parkes 2004 on fictive kinship as a mechanism for creating “alternative social structures” in regions lacking strong political centralization, such as the premodern Balkans and Caucasus. I would add that overly strong centralization, in the form of an intrusive state apparatus that insinuates itself into not only the public, but also the private spheres, likewise favors the maintenance of alternative networking mechanisms.

<sup>17</sup> See the detailed study of Xevsur *st’umarmasp’indzloba* by Ochiauri 1980, who describes local hospitality etiquette for various types of occasion, various categories of kin, even the correct manner for visiting a woman confined to the menstruation hut.

<sup>18</sup> In the winter of 2005 I visited the former mosque (*jame*) in Chxut’uneti, an Acharian village near the Turkish border. The mullah’s residence on the lower floor included a guest room with a small window in the wall adjoining the kitchen, through which the womenfolk could pass food to the mullah and his guests without being seen.

There is also a degree of exclusivity to the guest-host relation, since it presumes that both parties understand their respective roles and responsibilities, and that the host's generosity is met by the guest's trust and submission. (It is this latter condition, I am convinced, that is the chief source of confusion for uninitiated foreign guests). To illustrate Caucasian beliefs concerning the investments entailed by hospitality, I will draw upon a celebrated poem by Vazha-Pshavela, which, significantly, bears the title "Guest and Host" (*st'umar-masp'indzeli*). Zviadauri, a Georgian from Xevsureti, strays into Chechen territory while hunting, and meets Joq'ola, who invites him home as his guest. Zviadauri has in fact raided this very village on numerous occasions, stealing livestock and killing many Chechen warriors. Nonetheless, he accepts the offer of hospitality, and as he enters the house he hands his weapons and armor to his host's wife, yielding himself totally to Joq'ola's protection. Joq'ola's neighbors discover the identity of their Georgian visitor, and come to seize him. Rather than surrender the man who slew so many of his kinsmen – including his own brother — Joq'ola defends him with drawn dagger:

Today he is my guest;  
Though he be responsible for a sea of blood,  
I cannot betray him,  
I swear by God ...

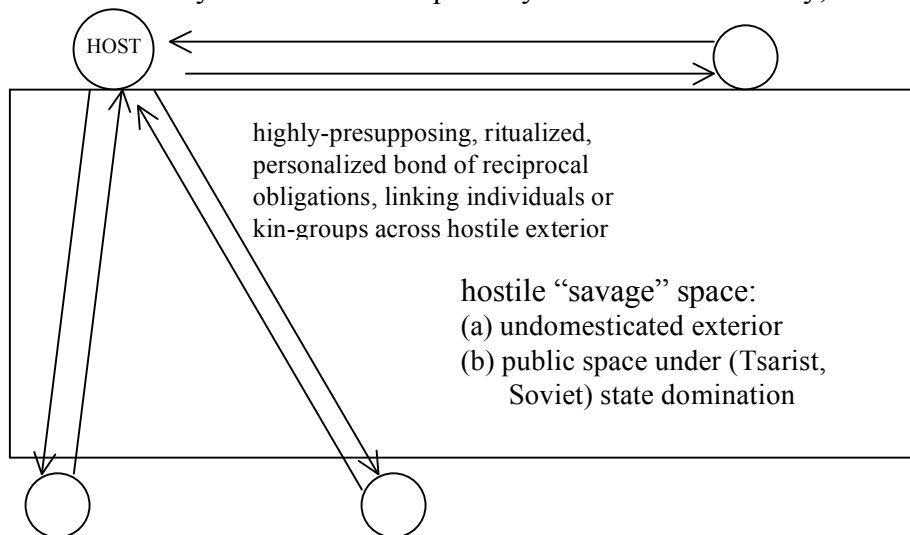
The words Vazha put in the mouth of the Chechen Joq'ola still resonate with Caucasians. Yet this astonishing, and ultimately tragic, illustration of hospitality presupposes that host and guest play by the same rules, with the same intensity of commitment. The same can be said with regard to the supra. The guest-host relation receives its most condensed manifestation at the banquet table, in the agonistic display of generosity (enabled by female shadow-workers), in the guests' submission to the will of the *tamada*, and in the investment all participants are expected to make toward the successful performance of the supra. Furthermore, a great deal of talk around the banquet table, and especially that framed in toasts, has a markedly self-referential component (Manning 2003).<sup>19</sup> Not only are hospitality, positive and negative agonism, and Georgian (or Caucasian) values on display at the supra, they are explicitly mentioned and singled out for praise and reinforcement.

In the above diagram the agonistic, monologic oratory of the supra is contrasted to the cooperative conversation among citizens favored by Habermas. It should be noted that the sense of agonism appropriate to the supra is not the same as that employed in most analyses of political rhetoric. According to Gary Remer, "while the conversational ideal is cooperative, oratory is agonistic. The orator's goal, particularly in deliberative and judicial oratory, is to defeat his opponent" (1999). The Georgian toast (*sadyegr dzelo*), however, is an instance of the third rhetorical type recognized by Aristotle, *epideictic*, defined as 'the ceremonial oratory of display' (*Rhetoric*, Book 1, Chapter 3). Performances of this third type – e.g. speeches delivered at the Olympic games, funerary orations praising the deceased – are to be evaluated aesthetically, on the basis of style and eloquence, rather than the persuasive merits of their content. The succession of *sadyegr dzeloebi* at the supra are agonistic in this latter sense: they manifest a competitiveness

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<sup>19</sup> Self-referentiality seems to be another feature of the supra which was absent in the pre-modern *nadimi*.

grounded in shared beliefs, and therefore fulfill a cohesive rather than deliberative function. The speaker seeks to demonstrate eloquence and virtuosity while saying something he presumes his listeners already assent to. The supra may be a kind of academy, but it is rarely an agora.<sup>20</sup>



In the above diagram, unlike the previous one, the circles (representing participants) do not meet in exterior space, which is conceived as undomesticated and dangerous, but rather within the homestead of the one among them who serves as host. These encounters, unlike the ones modeled in the à-la-fourchette scenario above, presuppose a much richer fund of shared knowledge, and a higher degree of investment by participants in the relationship. Traversing the exterior is a network of bonds established through hospitality — or artificial kinship, which could be conceived as an enhanced guest-host commitment solemnized through fictive adoption or siblinghood — which enable the movement of people and goods, and mutual aid and defense, across clan, ethnic or religious frontiers.<sup>21</sup> If the traditional perception of external space is a negative one, that of the communities situated beyond that space is more ambiguous: the people

<sup>20</sup> For this reason, toasts on genuinely controversial themes, on which at least some of those present at the supra have opinions strongly divergent from those of the tamada, tend to provoke discomfort and even conflict, rather than debate. The cases most often cited involve the notorious toasts to Stalin, which are still a not-uncommon phenomenon over a decade after the restoration of Georgian independence (Nodia 2000; Manning 2003). Dissident banqueters find themselves confronted with the difficult choice between compliance (e.g. toasting Stalin’s leadership of the USSR to victory over Nazi Germany, while passing over the rest of his career in silence) or blatant refusal, at the risk of provoking a violent response. By contrast, refusal to drink a personal toast appears to have been a legitimate option at the medieval *nadimi*, if we accept as evidence the following exchange from chapter 9 of the *Amiran-Darejaniani*:

We ate food and drank wine. Then one of them filled his cup, stood up, and said thus: May God magnify Sepadavle son of Darisp’an, who has no equal on the face of the earth. He drank the wine and sat down. Then he filled the cup again, gave it to me and said: You too must call a blessing upon Sepadavle son of Darisp’an, and then drink. I told him: I have come to do battle with him, and until either he bests me or I best him, I will not invoke a blessing on his sun.

<sup>21</sup> Marriage, which in Georgia and much of the North Caucasus is forbidden between people known to be related, serves a similar network-expanding function, in that it forges a bond between otherwise unaffiliated kingroups.



living there are a potential source of danger, but also potential allies. Hence the importance placed by communities throughout the Caucasus region on network-establishing and network-reinforcing practices such as hospitality, fictive kinship, and the banquet. If one stretches the definition of civil society a bit to accommodate any non-governmental institution which permits the free association between people from different households (cp. Nodia 2000: 6), then traditional Caucasian hospitality could be said to fulfill this role; according to some Georgian analysts, it may have been the only functioning “civil-society” institution during the Soviet period (Gurgenidze 2000: 56; cp. Xaindrava 2000: 54).

The correlate of the negative conception of external space, alas, is a tendency toward predatory, exploitative or neglectful behavior in areas beyond the borders of the homestead and village. The traditional belief system of the highlanders of northeastern Georgia even included a divine patron — invoked under the name of St. George — of men as exploiters, for the profit of their communities, of the undomesticated space outside of the village and its adjacent fields. The Transcaucasian St. George is the protector of shepherds, hunters, travelers, and men raiding cattle from their neighbors on the other side of the mountains [Charachidzé 1968: 620; Tuite 1998]. Echoes of ancient divisions of space into the domesticated, private interior and the savage, exploitable but dangerous, exterior still emerge in contemporary Georgian daily life. During my first visit to Tbilisi in 1985, I was continually amazed, and baffled, by the abrupt transition from filthy, litter-strewn entry-ways into sumptuously-furnished apartments, once my host opened the door: the outer, public space was the domain of the intrusive, hostile State, whereas the domain across the threshold was private, one’s own, and looked after accordingly.<sup>22</sup> More recent manifestations of this sharply binary spatial distinction are not pleasant to recount: the pollution and littering of public spaces — including ecologically-delicate rivers and forests — and the pillage and vandalism of utilities, public buildings and parks during the 1990’s (e.g. telephone wires torn down and sold for scrap; the destruction of the central water-heating boilers in Tbilisi). It appears as well that anonymous others (i.e. non-guests, non-kin) encountered in public space are equally liable to be treated with neglect or worse; as a case in point I submit the near-total disregard for traffic courtesy and the safety of pedestrians manifest by Tbilisi drivers.

#### **4. Civil society and its discontents.**

If, as many fervently hope, independent, post-Soviet Georgia will witness, sooner or later, the reconfiguration of public space in the image of Western-style civil society, what impact will this have on the guest-host relation and, more specifically, on the supra? Put another way, is the disappearance of drinking horns, four-story banquets and displays of epideictic oratory the price

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<sup>22</sup> A similar opposition, although it manifests itself in quite different ways, is expressed through the contrastive Russian modifiers *svoj* “one’s own” and *čuzoj* “other, foreign, strange”, which occur frequently in the narratives of Russian villagers collected by Margaret Paxson: “Being *svoi* can mean being a member of one’s immediate or extended family, a co-villager, a dear friend, a compatriot. The term *svoi* is a marker for belongingness of a wide range of types. *Chuzhoi*, the second term, is the opposite of *svoi*. Related to the same word that means “wonder,” or “miracle” (*chudo*), and other words which denote dangerous beings (such as *chudovishche*, monster), *chuzhoi* refers to being a stranger — one who is a foreigner or outsider. It can be a person from another family or village or region or country” (Paxson 1999: 71; 2005: 77-85)

Georgian society must eventually pay for clean parks and courteous drivers? Rather than engage in a pretentious and pointless stab at crystal-ball gazing, I will conclude by presenting three case studies, based on my own observations over the past ten years.

**I.** In the summer of 1995 I returned to Tbilisi for the first time since 1991. In the interim Georgia's first post-Soviet president had been deposed in a coup d'état that left much of the downtown in shambles. Shevardnadze was back in power. In the aftermath of a senseless civil war, Abkhazia was de-facto independent and Tbilisi's finest hotels packed with refugees. The economy was a mess, wages were not being paid, crime and drug abuse had spiraled out of control. I was staying in the apartment of my ex-wife's family. A couple days after my arrival a neighbor came by, a woman in her late 50's or early 60's. "Manana" (not her real name) was grumpy and very unhappy. The previous day, she told me, she boarded one of the minibuses (marshrutkas) that had become an increasingly popular means of transport in the city. The fare was the equivalent of 15 or 20 cents, more expensive than the archaic, painfully-slow streetcars, but much cheaper than a cab. A woman she knew came aboard a short while later, and sat not far from her. Ordinarily, the appearance of an acquaintance in any kind of public transportation, and even more so in the cramped quarters of a minibus, was met with an exchange of greetings and small talk, and an offer to pay for his or her ticket. Manana, however, had been reduced to such poverty in the years following the collapse of the USSR, that she could barely muster up the change for her own fare, much less someone else's. Her friend was clearly in the same situation. But rather than carry on their conversation and then go their separate ways, each paying for her ticket, the two women avoided acknowledging each other's presence, silently kept their gazes fixed in the opposite direction, until my neighbor, now even more depressed than she had been before she boarded the marshrutka, got off at her stop.

The 40 kopecks that Manana would have spent on her friend's minibus fare in 1985, but no longer had in 1995, is a droplet of the grease that enabled the machinery of hospitality to function. In order for Georgians to maintain their social networks the traditional way, a certain amount of excess wealth has to be available. Even those who were not especially well-off could summon the necessary resources to play host when the occasion demanded, whether it be a few extra rubles to invite an acquaintance for beer and khinkali, or the equivalent of several months' salary for a full-blown supra to celebrate a birthday, a wedding or the return of a son from military service. As Tamara Dragadze (1988) observed in a Rachan village in the late 1970's, and I witnessed on several occasions in the late 80's, Georgians could marshal considerable sums of money surprisingly fast, by drawing upon family savings and the excess funds provided by relatives, neighbors and friends.

In a sense, the *Niangi* cartoonists had a point: Hosting a supra required excess resources; the amassing of such resources presupposed a network of kin, friends and clients; and the maintenance of the network required ... more supras. The endless cycle of banquets, of *don* and *contre-don*, worked as long it was oiled by surplus wealth and fuelled by the unremunerated labor of women. Surplus wealth was obtained from a variety of sources, many of them grouped under the heading of "corruption", or in any case, of undeclared revenue (e.g. private tutoring of

students preparing for university entrance exams, from which faculty members could earn double or more than their official salaries).

When the economy collapsed in the early 90's, the host-guest cycle ground to a halt for many Georgians, in particular, those who had no links to the Shevardnadze machine. Supras became rarer and sparser. But to grasp the poignancy of Manana's story, one must consider the social as well as the economic context. Rather than a neutral zone of encounter between co-citizens, public space remained for Manana both a negatively-charged field traversed by the lifelines of her social network, and a stage upon which she performs before others, even in the tiny 12-seat theatre of a Tbilisi marshrutka. Beyond the purely pragmatic issue of network maintenance, hosting affords the pleasure of generosity, and an opportunity to display the disregard for money that appears to be a common feature of Georgian presentation-of-self.<sup>23</sup> Unable to afford the small sum needed to "host" her acquaintance in the marshrutka, Manana averted her gaze, and glumly pretended not to notice the other's presence. To have done otherwise, to have chatted with her without offering to pay her fare, would have been tantamount to calling into question the foundations of her social network. To someone accustomed to relationships maintained by repeated acts of hosting, in the context of which each such act demonstrates the investment and commitment made by both parties, the abrupt shift to a pay-your-own-way symmetrical interaction would have seemed either to signal a chilly downgrading of the relationship, or an admission of failure.

The depression and isolation that Manana experienced because she could not, or would not, extract her relationships from the old, familiar system of prestations and interdependencies, brings home one crucial component of the psychological cost of sudden poverty for a significant segment of Georgian society — a cost that Western economic and political analysts overlooked. Ten years later, among some of my "white intelligentsia" friends, who had suffered a dramatic loss of income in the 1990's, the supra, and the host-guest relation in general, have by no means disappeared, but they have been scaled back. Georgians have told me of trimming supra expenditures, limiting guest lists to close friends, and entertaining less frequently.

II. The essay by Jgerenaia mentioned at the beginning of this paper ends, rather surprisingly, with a declaration of fidelity to the supra, and outrage at its supplanting by the buffet-reception (*gaalapuršet'eba*). Indeed, he calls on his readers to actively resist such innovations, by "transforming any type of *à la fourchette* into a supra". In the summer of 2001 I may well have witnessed an instance of what Jgerenaia had in mind. At the invitation of a friend of mine, I attended the presentation of a new edition of the poetry of his grandfather, the celebrated writer Giorgi Leonidze. Despite the boiling July heat and lack of electricity, a standing-room-only crowd filled the lecture hall of the Writers' Union, for an afternoon of readings from Leonidze's

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<sup>23</sup> Once in the late 1980's, after arriving by marshrutka at our destination, a friend pulled out a handful of change to pay his fare and mine. A 15-kopeck coin fell to the floor. *Iq'os!*, he called out, "let it be", and we exited the conveyance without retrieving the coin. A Russian would have picked it up without hesitation, another friend claimed, but not a Georgian. The rarity of 1- and 2-kopeck coins in late-Soviet-period Tbilisi — to the extent that people often substituted the 10-k piece (which had the same diameter as the 2-k) when calling from payphones — probably derives from a similarly-motivated disdain for small change.

poetry, reminiscences by friends, and appreciations of his work by literary critics. Afterwards, we were invited into an adjoining room for an *à la fourchette* reception. As the guests circulated with small plates of food and plastic glasses containing white wine or soft drinks, two men in their 60's or 70's stood by the bottles of wine at one end of the buffet table. Suddenly one of them declared, for all to hear, that this was an insult to the memory of a great poet and a great Georgian. He filled a glass, pronounced a *sadyegr dzelo* in commemoration of Leonidze, and drank his wine to the bottom. The man standing beside him followed suit, and soon a half-dozen or so men were clustered about the self-proclaimed tamada. A supra bubble had emerged, one could say, within the context of an *à la fourchette*. It was to be continued later the same day at the home of Leonidze's grandson, with the same person as tamada.

The case of the “supra bubble” at the Writers' Union indicates, first of all, that wine continues to have special meaning compared to other beverages, and that its consumption requires some sort of ritual framing. I doubt that this framing will wither away to the vestigial “cheers” or “tchin-tchin” uttered by Westerns before their first sip of predinner drinks, at least not in my lifetime. At the same time, the noticeable rise in popularity (and quality) of Georgian beer is at least in part attributable to its exceptional status as the only alcohol-containing beverage which does not require ritual framing (Xaindrava 2000: 53-54; Mühlfried 2006: Manning & Uplisashvili 2007).<sup>24</sup>

Second point: As I recall, only men participated in the impromptu supra at the Writers' Union, even though a large number of women attended the reception. It is not surprising, of course, that Georgian women continue to regard the supra as a guy thing, but the co-existence of the two forms – and especially the potential for the kind of simultaneous occurrence described here – presents an interesting new social choice for men: the relatively unconstrained *à-la-fourchette*, where women and men meet on an equal footing, or the rule-bound gender-segregated supra. Presented with options unavailable to their fathers and grandfathers, will young men vote with their feet, so to speak, against the supra?

Finally, one more point that I sense was made by the dissident tamada and his cohort is that there is, frankly, something a bit cold about the *à-la-fourchette*. The supra requires the guests to sit together and not move about – except for the poor women going to and from the kitchen, of course – but the loss of freedom to wander about the room, plate and glass in hand, can contribute to the generation of warmth and camaraderie. The conventions of toast-making and *tamadoba* are certainly confining, and no one denies that they have generated countless hours of uninspired verbiage and insincere praise. But every now and then, an exceptional supra orator reminds one of Goethe's words: *In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister*. K'ot'e Čoloq'ašvili, to mention just one illustrious example, is a witty and charming conversationalist under any circumstances, but when he is seated at the head of the table with a glass of wine in his hand, his verbal artistry somehow rises to a higher level. Friends who have shared this experience with me consider a supra with a tamada of this calibre as an “academy” in the truest sense. That may be

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<sup>24</sup> Among the Georgians of the highland districts of Pshavi and Xevsureti, homemade beer is consumed at shrine festivals, but the bottled beer drunk by city-dwellers inherits none of its ritual significance.

so, but it is also the stage for the performance of an indigenous art form – even if it is only two centuries old! – that the à-la-fourchette could never supplant.

III. The last instance to be discussed happened just a short while ago. My friends “Mzia” and “Givi” have three young children, two boys and a girl. After toasting me on the occasion of my birthday, Givi sat his younger boy (5 years old) on his lap, gave him a glass of wine, and directed him to do likewise. He told the child what words to say, and admonished him for holding the glass in his left hand instead of the right, as custom dictates. Then Givi passed the wine-glass to his 8-year-old son, who formulated his own *sadyegr dzelo*. It was brief, just two sentences, but contained some of the habitual formulas, made use of the optative mood, and even referred to me in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, as sometimes occurs in formal greetings (but is rare in toasts). The daughter, who was standing just behind her father, was not invited to pronounce a toast.

Several authors in the *Georgian Feast and Civic Society* collection refer to the supra as a special context for the transmission of values, rhetorical skills and behavioral norms to young people, for better or for ill. P’aat’a Gurgeniძე makes the remarkable assertion that, whereas Georgians are baptized as Christians in church, “we are baptized as Georgians specifically at the supra” (2000: 56), since it is at the banquet table that values and a sense of ethnic cohesion are instilled. Since the Georgian language does not have a category of grammatical gender, it is not made explicit whether ALL Georgians, or only boys, are “baptized” at the supra. Whatever Gurgeniძე may have had in mind, I would claim that both sexes undergo a sort of baptism, if by that is meant their initiation into certain gender-appropriate ways of speaking, behaving, and even thinking. In the cases of girls, their baptism is one of exclusion from the main events at the supra, to eventually join their mothers, aunts and older sisters in the kitchen.

Of Givi’s two sons, the older boy already had some mastery of the language of the *sadyegr dzelo*; the younger one still needed coaching. On other occasions as well I have seen boys of similar age rehearsing the spoken formulas and even gestural movements (e.g. raising the right hand with extended index finger, then making a slight twirling motion to punctuate the key word in the phrase) appropriate to supra discourse. In Nodia’s view, the oratorical training received by young Georgian males at the supra “academy” finds application well beyond the walls of the dining room or banquet hall. “In large part, the style of public (*sajaro*) discourse is the style of the *sadyegr dzelo*” (Nodia 2000: 5). This is a startling assertion, and one that confirms my own impressions of the sort of speech heard at protest rallies and “meetings” (*mit’ingebi*). Like the epideictic oratory of the banquet toast, these monologues aim to reinforce beliefs already held by the audience, rather than convince or convert. Should partisans of an opposing opinion be present, one is far more likely to witness a shouting match than a debate.<sup>25</sup>

Kept out of the spotlight of the banquet table, like Givi’s daughter, girls acquire different, less

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<sup>25</sup> One wonders if the influence of the *sadyegr dzelo* genre extends even further into the public domain. The case could be made that too much post-Soviet historiography reads like patriotic toasts – accompanied by specious etymologies and the tendentious attribution of toponyms and tribal names – rather than a methodologically respectable reconstruction of the past. See Shnirelman 2001 for some cautionary tales.

formalized, ways of socializing, and different speech habits from boys, employing discursive styles less marked by the epideictic oratory of the *sadyegr dzelo* (cp. Kotthoff 1995: 376-7). In today's Georgia, women are becoming increasingly prominent in the political, media and intellectual arenas, and – as in some Western countries – their academic performance is catching up with and even surpassing that of the males in their cohort. I strongly believe that the daughters and granddaughters of yesterday's shadow-workers will have much to say about how future generations of Georgians socialize, build and maintain networks, speak, and behave, in public.

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### **APPENDIX. Banquet and tamada outside of Georgia.**

Just how “Georgian” is the supra? Here are four texts which I recently found on the Internet by searching with the keywords “tamada” and “toast”, that is, the two features of the supra of interest to Bregadze (2000) in his paper on the origins of the supra. The passages are quoted verbatim (except for the removal of ethnic identifiers). Can you identify the ethnic group(s) whose banqueting behavior is being described?

Text A:

Some strictly observed customs have come down through the ages, and meals may seem somewhat prolonged to Europeans. Before sitting down to the feast, the most respected, experienced and witty of the guests is chosen to be the tamada, who presides over the table. As a rule, he raises the first glass to the person being feted or the guest of honor. Then toasts are drunk to each of the guests in turn, the *tamada* ensuring that seniority is observed, and that none of those present are neglected. It is customary for the person being toasted to thank all those who have complimented him and to drain his glass last. Toasts are drunk to all kinds of things and people: to parents, children, friendship, happiness. A resourceful *tamada*, or any of the guests with his permission, can think up all manner of toasts. The last glass is always drained to the hosts and their home. Toasts are pronounced standing, and every speaker seems to try to outdo the preceding one, although not in the amount of drink. Xs generally drink a lot, but they know when to stop, and it is considered quite disgraceful to be unsteady on one's feet. (Anonymous 2005)

Text B:

It's a rare party in X that has no toastmaster – whether it be a dinner party, wedding, birthday party or Jubilee. In the West, people clink glasses of champagne, wine and vodka, wishing each other good health, "Cheers" or "Ciao." It's as simple as that. Not so in X, where a specific person is designated or, sometimes, just assumes, the role of toastmaster. Think of him more like an "emcee," orchestrating and improvising what, in essence, is a dramatic social performance. In the X language, he's called "tamada," (ta-ma-DA) which is derived from two words – "tam" (all, everybody) and "ata" (father), as in "father of all." In essence, that's his assigned responsibility – to connect people with each other, guide them, and provide for their well-being. It's his job to know who all the guests are, at least, all of the important ones, and to introduce them formally by lavishing praise upon them. These speeches are entertaining, informative and spontaneous in nature, and may last up to 10-15 minutes (though it sometimes seems like an eternity). (Garibova 1996)

Text C:

Vodka, cognac and champagne are only drunk (ad fundum!) after a toast. The ‘Toast Master’ or ‘Tamada’ will decide on the order of speeches, usually in order of seniority, although foreigners may be given preference. A toast will usually include words of thanks for the hospitality, and generous wishes for the well-being and good health of the host and his family, or any other words appropriate to the occasion. (Wilson 2001)

Text D:

Food forms the social fabric of this country, both warp and woof. X people are always looking for an excuse to either host a guest or be one. There's even a name for the man or woman in charge of keeping the evening's food and drink flowing: the tamad or tamada. I don't possess the physical

capacity to eat every time I'm asked. My first week here, I was so constantly full, my stomach hurt. (Fearnside 2002)

If you guessed Armenia for A and Azerbaijan for B, your familiarity with Transcaucasian customs is far greater than mine. Special credit goes to those who identified the sources of C and D: Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, respectively. Whatever its ultimate origins might turn out to be, the institution of the toastmaster, and even the lexeme designating it — *tamada* — has planted its roots throughout the former Russian Empire.<sup>26</sup> If Bregadze is right, and the Georgian banquet evolved into a compensatory theatre where words replaced actions, and a private sociopolitical microcosm – with the *tamada* as sovereign – was created in the image of a glorified past, how well does his hypothesis account for the success of the toastmaster outside Georgia? I hope some day someone more qualified than I will give this fascinating problem the attention it deserves.

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<sup>26</sup> The word *tamada* (тамада) in Unicode Cyrillic script garnered 71,700 “hits” on Google.com, mostly from Russian web pages, but also from sites registered in 13 of the 15 former Soviet republics. In Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere, professional *tamady* advertise their services as masters of ceremony for wedding receptions, birthdays and jubilees, where they not only propose toasts, but also entertain the guests with jokes, amusing anecdotes and party games.