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## **The Georgian Feast: Wine & Food as Embodiment of Networks**

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The feast (*supra* meaning: tablecloth; and its less formal version *keipi* meaning: party), is deeply rooted in Georgian consciousness and its day-to-day life. *Supra* and *keipi* are the most common social activities for the Georgian person,<sup>1</sup> who spends several hours a week in feasting and feast related activities. Sometimes a feast will count in days rather than in hours. The investment this requires in terms of time, energy and material resources is very substantial. These are no one-off events – on the contrary. In 2001 I shadowed for a week the managing director of a Georgian public utility company. About two-thirds of his time was spent socialising in feasts of one form or another. Most work related transactions were conducted over the mobile phone and though he would stay an hour or two at the office daily, his most intensive sphere of activity was within the realm of the *supra*.

Whoever wishes to learn about Georgian society, to understand Georgian culture, the *supra* encapsulates it all. It is at the feast that relationships are formed, commitments exchanged, deals cemented and bonds reaffirmed. These in turn will have direct implications on all spheres of life: family, work, friendships, social networks. The feast thus becomes a holographic imprint of Georgian society, its deciphering allowing us to deepen our understanding of this nation's past and current mores, sociality and politics; as well how its economy actually works.

### **Aims and approach**

In this paper I wish to elaborate on the food - and wine (a crucial component of Georgia's cuisine, life style and culture (Mars and Altman 1987; Chatwin 1997; Tuite 2005; Mühlfried 2006) consumed at feasts; and their significance: material, symbolic and communicative, for the establishment and workings of networks. I will demonstrate how the feast embodies the drivers of network dynamics: how trust is built, bonds cemented and commitments made.

The approach I take is ethnographic, employing 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) based on participant observation in naturalistic settings undertaken by me in Georgia and among Georgian émigrés over numerous occasions during a 25-year period (from 1980 to 2004). Overall I 'clocked' over 40 feasts and some 180 hours of feasts and feast-related activities, providing minutiae of detail, which were duly recorded as field notes (written and taped) are then reflexively reconstructed and interpreted, employing a Lévi-Straussian lens. Through this approach, I will show how a closely controlled celebration enables the gradual evolvement of a network of relationship through the embodiment of foods (Pina e Cunha, Cabral-Cardoso and Clegg 2008) and wine.

### **The rules and mores of the *supra***

The *supra* is a major occasion for demonstrating one's social standing in a society where one is perpetually 'on show': a feat for a cosmology marked by competitive individualism and conspicuous consumption (Mars and Altman, 1987). At the feast only the best will do. It takes place at the best room of the house (often, particularly in rural Georgia, a specially designated guest room) stocked with the finest furniture and display cabinets, parading the wealth of the household. Participants wear their best cloths and adorn themselves with their finest jewellery; and of course, the feast itself – the centrepiece of this celebration, is a feat of extravagance and splendour.

First, let us briefly outline the feast's main features. Essentially a *supra* (*keipi*) is an association of (mainly) men, gathered together, usually around tables; in which drinking, eating and socialising follow an established pattern and abide by prescribed rules. A *keipi* may comprise of three persons (minimum) and anything up to several hundreds (*supra*). It may convene at short notice (as when an unexpected guest arrives and participants are hurriedly

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst traditionally a male event, feasts now are also of mixed gender and there are female only feasts.

summoned) or it may be a pre-planned celebration, to which formal invitations are issued (as, for instance, a wedding ceremony). It may take place on a picnic site or in a designated hall. Mostly, however, a *supra* will be a familial-based event, exercised within the realm of the household and comprising between 10 to 20+ participants, invited in advance.

The feast is centred on the table, which carries the foods and wines and around which the participants sit. Accordingly, the most important persona at the feast is the “head of table” and toastmaster - the *tamada*, who is always a member of the host family or a very close associate and whose task is to oversee its smooth running and successful conclusion (we shall see however that he is but *primus inter pares*). Tables in Georgia as elsewhere come in all shapes and forms, but seats are arranged to form an uninterrupted closed circle. Hence, sitting space is confined to the essential minimum. As will be elaborated, the idea of the feast is not to have a meal at leisure in company, but the other way around: to demarcate a company through the agency of the meal.

### The drinking of wine

The feast is the primary place and occasion where wine is consumed, and wine is absolutely essential to Georgian culture, as already mentioned. Indeed Georgians claim that wine is Georgia’s contribution to mankind as the cultivation and processing of grapes first happened in the Caucasus. Not only are Georgian “much harder drinkers than anyone else in the world” (Maclean 1980) but wine is a symbol of the Georgian nation and grapevines are the official sign of the Georgian church. The ritual of wine drinking in the *supra* bears a clear association to the Christian tradition of Holy Communion (see following). Viniculture has also been historically a major Georgian industry (Davidashvili 1971). Yet wine is consumed mostly in feasts, mostly by men and always in a social context: it is unheard of to drink wine on your own.

The feast is punctuated by toasts, which serve as the vehicle that puts the whole event into motion, from start to finish. The first toast is always “to the occasion for which we are all gathered here” and the last will always be to the *tamada*. In between there will be 3 (absolute minimum: Tuite 2005) and up to 20+ toasts (in our experience) to honour various subjects and subject matter. Standard toasts are to parenthood, brothers and brotherhood, sisters and sisterhood, women (spouses) and womanhood, children and childhood, friends and friendship. On the other hand there are always specific toasts to individuals, particularly guests. But there are also generalised toasts on wider abstract topics, such as “world peace”, “international understanding”, the “divine spirit”, “our motherland”. Finally, there may be several toasts for special occasions. Thus, the entire *supra* is structured by language but of a specific kind (formal with elegant rhetoric) and punctuated by toasts that follow a standardised routine.

At each round, the *tamada* raises his cup in his right hand, filled to the brim, to announce the subject for that round of toasts. Whereupon he will deliver a speech (sometimes lasting up to 30 minutes), which he concludes by emptying his glass in one gulp. He would then pass the right of speech (and toast) to another participant, who would rigidly follow the same procedure (including emptying the cup) and on completion will pass it to another, etc, etc. When the round ends, a new one recommences; initiated again by the *tamada*, who repeats the procedure, round after round. In between the toasts, food is continuously being served and consumed without interrupting the flow of toasts.

### **The nature of food**

At the table, our attention is drawn to the large number of small dishes containing many sorts of meats, cheese, vegetables and bake. The blend of colours, tastes and smells - increased by

the deliberate use of small dishes - create an overwhelming effect of variety, choice and plenty. Another common denominator for most - if not all - dishes is that their mode of preparation requires laborious cooking. More specifically, the Georgian cuisine places heavy emphasis on either boiling or frying (particularly the former). Both methods require maximum modification of raw ingredients: “literally, since boiled food necessitates the use of a receptacle (or pan in the case of frying), which is a cultural object; and symbolically, in the sense that culture mediates between man and the world, and boiling is also a mediation, by means of water (oil, in the case of frying) between the food which man ingests and that other element of the physical world: fire” (Lévi-Strauss 1978:480).

Lévi-Strauss (1966, 1986) attributes to boiling the peak of acculturation in food preparation - as opposed to raw food at the other extreme, symbolising *nature*, which by the process of cooking becomes transformed into *culture*; and to rotten food, which is the transformation of the raw by natural process. Applying Lévi-Straussian conceptualisation to the Georgian *supra*, it could be argued that cooking as represented here in the form of boiling, frying and baking (baking is in line with boiling and frying. Similar to the other methods, it involves the use of a cultural device (a mould) and the mediation of the “elements”: water, air and fire as transforming agents) is a conscientious and deliberate effort of creation (and as such it differs from the natural process of food transformation - the rot) directed at interfering with and manipulating nature. This is of particular significance in the feast, where the preparation of the numerous dishes and the banquet in general are a laborious task, demanding heavy investment in time, energy, material resources and the involvement of a great number of people.

Let us now examine in some detail the preparation and outlay of a *supra*, held in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia in the mid 1980's. This *supra*, representative in every aspect, was celebrating a special occasion: the reunion of family and friends after a long separation. The hosts being wealthy, and the period (the post- Brezhnev and early Gorbachev era) being particularly favourable to Georgian economy, resulted in a somewhat more lavish feast than would have been typical.

The *supra* catered for 21 people and took some 40 hours in preparation (involving in the main two women who did most of the cooking). Fresh meats, fruits and vegetables were purchased in the market by a (male) member of the family and wine by another (male) member of the family. The following dishes were presented in the course of this feast: home made bread, *khachapuri* (cheese bread), tomato and cucumber salad (sliced and peeled), spiced cooked beetroot, *sagsivi* (boiled chicken in walnut sauce), *kharcho* (stew with spiced walnuts), *pkhali* (boiled vegetables, mashed and strongly seasoned), *goochmachi* (fried inner parts, e.g.: liver, kidney), *sogumi* (white cheese made from boiled milk), three different cakes (one seven-story cake took three hours of preparation), a selection of fruits, red and white wines and coffee.

Note most dishes were thoroughly cooked: fried or baked and mostly boiled. The lack of roasted meats is particularly noteworthy. Roasting symbolises the intermediate stage between the raw and the cooked and thus “incarnates the ambiguity...of nature and culture” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:940) – an ambiguity that may not only be confusing but potentially also dangerous (Douglas 1966). The absence of rotted foods (representing the natural form of food transformation) and of fresh (raw) food is noted too. Oddly enough, despite the seemingly large variety, the guest to the *supra* is treated both gastronomically and symbolically to a fairly unitary menu. And another puzzle: contrary to expectation, there is no ordinary flow of dishes in an established sequence. Dishes are added but rarely removed, resulting in an ever-increasing amount of dishes and foods on offer. Yet the amounts consumed are negligible, not only in relation to the abundance on display but in absolute terms. In fact there are little surprises or disappointments in a *supra*. The menu is standard and repetitive, the ‘rules’ of engagement are highly formulaic and the codes of behaviour expressly prescribed.

### **The meaning of the *supra***

What then is the underlying meaning and symbolic message that the Georgian feast aims to convey? We have noted the forms of cooking, the uniformity of the table and restriction with which food is treated. The evidence points to the idea that the *supra* is a highly cultured event: **cultured** in the Lévi-Straussian sense of a carefully crafted social transformation of the natural. Instead of cultured read imposed, restrained, disciplined - and you get the message: the joyful, bountiful, bacchanalian *supra*, is but the outer layer of what essentially a highly regulated, carefully construed and earnestly executed event.

The Georgian feast can be seen to follow the three phases of the rites of passage (separation, transition, incorporation) depicted by Van Gennep (1905) in his seminal work. The extreme codification of drinking and eating and the tight rules governing the process of toasting are designed to facilitate the subjugation of individuals as persons (an identity one is encouraged to leave behind the door of the feast's situ, in the first, separation phase); in order to assume a role as representative of particular groupings (such as son, sibling, parent, professional, institutional member, resident of a locality, national...see the logic and sequence of toasts mentioned before). Becoming a representative of a wider social category<sup>2</sup> puts a demand on the person to represent them with honour and to insist that they are honoured through him. This is done via the medium of toasting, and it is here that the role of *tamada*, head of table, (autocrat of the banquet: Tuite, 2005) assumes its significance as ritual master - in conducting safely the participants gathered around the table through the transitory troublesome transformation period (betwixt & between: Turner 1969) - second phase of the rite of passage.

It is the vulnerability of participants at this transitory stage that call for the tight regulation of the feast's rules of conduct to create 'sameness', a necessary attribute of the liminal personae (Turner 1969). Participants are expected to stay sober throughout, not to eat excessively - and in a polite manner (that is, no audible chewing noises, no emissions). Leaving their seats (even if only to stretch) is considered spiteful, chatting while others make a speech is inconsiderate and may give rise to offence, "sipping wine is a deadly sin" (Mühlfried 2005:17), relieving themselves is unmanly, being unruly is a sign of disrespect. The underlying structure is a strict congruence of transactions. The term of transaction is used not only in the Maussian sense of exchange, but also in the colloquial meaning of Transactional Analysis (Berne 1978), defined as 'an exchange of strokes'. A stroke being "any act implying recognition of another's presence" (p. 5). The way the feast operates, particularly in its early stages, is designed to carefully monitor the number of strokes distributed, so that each and every participant will get an even share and honoured in their turn. Thus everyone has or had parents and therefore everyone can be honoured - equally - on these grounds. It is trickier with children, but this is overcome by carefully naming them - so that each participant will get maximum recognition. One participant in the above feast who did not have children, was congratulated by each participant in his turn to bear children soon, thereby preserving the equality of strokes and allowing him to complete the transaction (Tuite, 2006 also reports on a similar occurrence). It is then, that a temporary status is established, that of brotherhood, "a community or comity of comrades" (Turner 1967:100) - a *communitas*. This new social entity is a homogenized assembly, which shed distinctive marks of rank, wealth and prestige. Grounded by bonds of equity exchange and situated in the here and now, the feast now celebrates itself reaching Dionysian heights, aided by the substantial quantities of wine consumed<sup>3</sup> - a shared *flow* (Turner, 1977).

A note on the role of wine in the feast would now be in order. Wine is treated as sacred consumption (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989) and (Mühlfried (2006) equates its symbolic

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<sup>2</sup> The external status of those present is not entirely eliminated though. It is reflected in the order of toasters and the time they are allotted to speak (Mühlfried 2005, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> Over a typical feast duration of, say five hours, comprising 10+ toasts, it would not be unusual for a man to have consumed 2-3 bottles of wine

role in the feast to the wine presented as Christ's blood in the Christian Holy Communion.<sup>4</sup> For someone not to toast properly in their turn amounts to sacrilege. Since, like the fire that mediates the transformation of the raw into the cooked, so is the wine the mediating agent transforming a self-serving individual into a network member. This should explain two puzzling phenomena concerning the consumption of wine. Firstly, why wine is not to be consumed alone; and secondly, why it has to be swallowed in one gulp. It should be clear that without wine there can be no feast, since the toasts are the vehicle through which the feast progresses, from start to finish. Since the wine is part and parcel of the feast and indeed its transforming agent, it would be antithetical to have it consumed in private. **The wine therefore stands in direct relation to the company and in direct opposition to the individual.** For that reason wine is not consumed for personal gratification and therefore would not be drunk at leisure. In the feast, wine is drunk by regulation - only after a speech and in one gulp. That is why the drinker 'dedicates' their wine to a purpose, which is always in the service of a greater cause. One's intake is expected to tally with the others - therefore the cup is to be full and emptied to the bottom (glasses are always transparent), emphasising commonality and equity.

### **The mission of the *supra***

By now we should have no doubt that the *supra* is a strong manifestation of *culture* in the service of harnessing *nature*. But why? What is so dangerous about nature that demands its harnessing? The key to this question is to be found in the turbulent and violent history of the Caucasus region to this day. It is against this backdrop of perennial instability that regulating measures needed to be taken, and hence the main aim, the 'primary task'<sup>5</sup> of the feast is to establish commonality and consolidate mutual-interests relationships among its participants, who in their *natural* state are characterised by egoistic ambitions, 'macho' type aggressiveness and ingrained insubordination. In this cosmology, where 'every man for himself' and anyone is 'on the make', in-group relations are under constant risk of strife, suspicion and conflict (Douglas 1978).

The *supra* hence can be construed as a sacred consumption ritual (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989) whereby through the agency of the *tamada*, hereby occupying the role of master chef, a process of ritual 'cooking' takes place aimed at transforming raw individuals into a 'civilized' collegiality. As this social cooking ensues and alcohol takes its toll, this strongly rigid, highly codified, autocratically managed process, gradually transforms and gives birth to a party of peers where social networks (family and work related networks) can safely unfold. Within the realm of this secure environment, individuals bond for common interests. Thus, business deals can be struck, ventures may be envisioned and partnerships cemented - an essential feature of organizational networks in developing economies, where these are predicated on the establishment of personal trust (Michailova and Worm, 2003).

The feast symbolises *culture* (civility) while its disparate constituents: the individuals who have come to participate in it, are *non-culture*. In direct relation to the cooking analogy, it could be argued that as individuals they are at the 'pre-cooked' stage: they are raw and it is only through their participation in the feast that they become transformed into a sanctified cultural entity. Two schemes run through the feast. One is the *natural*, a-social competitive spirit which participants as individuals embody, representing their untamed egoistic profane state. The other, is the *cultural* co-operative togetherness, created in the process of the feast, a sacred collegiality. As it transits from its highly codified and regimented beginnings towards a

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<sup>4</sup> and blood brotherhood is the highest and most sacred form of friendship in the Georgian tradition.

<sup>5</sup> I am tempted here to employ Bion's notion of group dynamics (Bion, 1961)

*communitas* of social relations, the feast establishes the conditions for the creation and maintenance of a network situ.

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