

***Supra* as a Space of Female Agency: Women's Roles in the Georgian Feast and Their Significance for Maintaining of National Identity**

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Abstract

A special significance granted to food preparation and its consumption contributes to the formation of the local identity. In Georgia, the *supra*, a massive feast organized for different occasions, is a great example of commensality and identity forming process. However, previous research does not recognize enough the role of women in the *supra* culture: it was mainly perceived as a male-dominated, ritualized gathering focused on alcohol consumption. This article presents Georgian highly ritualized feast from a perspective which takes into account the leading role that women play in it and retraces the mutual dependence between the massive scale of cooking that happens during the *supra* and women's agency. Furthermore, this reevaluation, based on the ethnographic research conducted in Western Georgia in 2010-2015, shows that the amount of efforts which women devote to the cooking process influences not only their families, but also maintains the Georgian identity as a whole.

Keywords: Georgia, women, *supra*, agency, food, cooking, identity

Bir Kadın Özneliği Mekânı Olarak *Supra*: Gürcü Sofrasında Kadınların Rollerini ve Ulusal Kimliğin Sürdürülmesindeki Önemi

Özet

Yemek hazırlama ve tüketimine verilen özel önem, yerel kimliğin oluşumuna katkıda bulunur. Gürcistan'da, farklı vesilelerle düzenlenen devasa bir ziyafet olan *supra*, birlikte yemek yeme ve kimlik oluşturma sürecinin güzel bir örneğidir. Ancak, önceki araştırmalar *supra* kültüründe kadınların rolünü yeterince tanınamaktadır: bu genellikle erkek egemen, ritüelleştirilmiş ve alkol tüketimine odaklanan bir toplantı olarak algılanmıştır. Bu makale, Gürcistan'ın oldukça ritüelleştirilmiş ziyafetini,

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kadınların oynadığı lider rolü dikkate alan bir bakış açısıyla sunmakta ve *supra* sırasında gerçekleşen büyük ölçekli yemek pişirme ile kadınların eylemliliği arasındaki karşılıklı bağımlılığı yeniden ele almaktadır. Ayrıca, 2010-2015 yılları arasında Batı Gürcistan'da yapılan etnografik araştırmaya dayanan bu yeniden değerlendirme, kadınların yemek pişirme sürecine harcadıkları çabanın sadece ailelerini etkilemekle kalmayıp, aynı zamanda bir bütün olarak Gürcü kimliğini de koruduğunu göstermektedir.

In many societies, complex layers of meanings are inherent in food consumption. What, how and why we eat tells a lot about a society, its history, cultural changes and the humans' views of themselves. Food and its consumption are important elements of the articulation of social and cultural identity, making them social phenomena which go far beyond the paradigm of 'meeting the needs' (Cherfas). As an element of maintaining a group membership, food also appears to be directly linked to constructing, building and supporting of the gender and national identity among the members of a given group.

There is a great diversity of meanings taken on by women's responsibility for food preparation and distribution; these activities are greatly connected with the functioning of society. For example, among the Zumbaguan Indians of Andean Ecuador, it was the elderly women who were responsible for food preparation and serving, which offered them the opportunity to determine the hierarchy through deciding on the order they would serve food to people and on the content of their plates (Weismantel). In Western culture, in turn, women were able to use compulsive eating, obesity, fasting, or the symbolic value of food in various ways to express their own 'self', to solve problems, or achieve an important position in society, where they often were in a subordinated position (Counihan 1999, 12).

Moreover, by producing, distributing, and consuming food, women attempt to express their attitude towards family members, the world around them, the ancestors and the gods, participating in the constitution of the gender order. In such cases, the meaning of food goes beyond its physical dimension, since it participates in

supporting the individual's vital forces and might be used as an instrument for building social hierarchies and renegotiating power relations in which women often take dominant positions. Georgia is one of the places where we can observe this complexity of female involvement in cooking processes.

The goal of this article is to show the mutual dependence between *supra*, the massive cooking enterprise which structures a significant part of Georgians' social life, and the agency of the woman who devotes much of her time and energy to this enterprise, thus manifesting her influence on the quality of the socio-economic function performed by her family on the level of the immediate environment and society as a whole. My research goes beyond the framework of previous academic works mainly created by Western male researchers who stressed the male-dominated nature of *supra*. I focus instead on the female perspective of the feast, and on cooking for others in general. Female voices that we can hear from the kitchen spaces allow us to understand the meaning behind the time-consuming and laborious process of feeding those around them.

The attempts to present female cooking as a key factor involved in the processes of socio-cultural reproduction of local societies have already been made in social sciences (DeVault, Abarca, Christie, Counihan, Cairns and Johnston). What is more, this interconnection attracted the anthropologists' attention as early as the 19th century, and since then food studies have served as a platform for debating anthropological theory and designing research methods not only within their own field of study but also in all social sciences which employ qualitative research methods.

I base this article on qualitative anthropological research in Ozurgeti in Western Georgia in 2010-2015 which involved unstructured interviews with Georgian women and participant observation of everyday activities of these women in the kitchen space within the household and the ones outside it, tied to cooking or food distribution / consumption.

Before discussing the main body of materials gathered during the fieldwork, I want to emphasize where this article is written from. This is crucial as I do not come from Georgia and thus, I am

automatically seen as a “Western” anthropologist who comes to study indigenous traditions and customs. Therefore, there is a need to critically engage with the complex relation towards the material in question and ask whether a researcher has a right to discuss local women’s experience from a delocalized position.

I was born in Belarus and was confident that my country of origin would help me during the fieldwork as, apart from language,¹ after all I share some form of the Soviet past and post-Soviet nostalgia with Georgian people. Yet, after spending time in the field, I realized that we still have differences in our cultures despite these similarities. I mostly observed these differences in culinary and food practices. To some extent, this was the reason for treating me as an outsider. What is interesting about this situation is that, as a result, my position allowed me to ask my interlocutors questions concerning issues which they possibly took for granted as ‘shared knowledge’. In that way, I gained access to information most deeply rooted in the consciousness of my female interlocutors, important to them and which they probably reflected upon for the first time. This can be seen in comments during the interviews such as:” I didn’t even think about it before”.

Thus, gaining access to this knowledge made me an insider of the processes taking place in everyday female life. Such moments of contradiction - of being an insider and outsider at the same time, - gave me a unique perspective on particular issues such as food preparation and its consumption within the given family. This is a proof of fluidity of the status of the anthropologist who constantly moves between the categories of the insider and the outsider during the research, which, in fact, greatly aids in collecting information and, furthermore, allows him / her to maintain a critical view on the reality under research.

Another contradiction was revealed to me through my personal experience as a woman who does not cook and who has always believed that others’ expectations regarding my cooking have had an oppressive tone. Before the fieldwork, I started asking myself if I would be able to speak with people and interpret their

¹ Russian language is known by the majority of people I was in contact with in Ozurgeti.

words objectively if I have such assumptions in mind. This made me convinced that it was necessary to carefully listen to the people's voices in the field to understand them, especially when one does not always share their opinion. It also made me see the importance of looking at others' actions through the prism of their views and beliefs, which allow us to understand people's motivations. This comprehension of what people are trying to tell us when we participate in given practices together is a necessary condition of constructive cultural criticism that, in turn, allows the researcher to avoid the trap of ethnocentrism. As a consequence, the anthropological perspective of tuning in people's motivations allows closely understand what they mean without any initial speculations, and here the anthropologist's status of an outsider can act as their strong point and not a disadvantage.

Supra and its gender dimension

The research I have conducted is an attempt to present female cooking for the *supra* in Georgian context as an agentic activity, endowing this practice with features that can be defined not as substitutionary to the ritual male drinking, as the feast had been presented so far by researchers of the Georgian region (most of whom are Western and American scholars), but as a key element of social activity. This article is also, in a way, a continuation of the ideas proposed by Laura Joy Linderman in the *Anthropology of East Europe Review* in which the author, using the example of a few feasts that took place in Ozurgeti², suggests rethinking previous ideas concerning the Georgian *supra*, focusing the attention on showing the diversity of the roles Georgian women assume during the feasting process (Linderman 22).

At the same time, the gender-marked description of the *supra* provided by such researchers as Bregadze, Manning, Mühlfried, and Nodia presents the Georgian man as if he was the main, inseparable, and independent element of the feast. Meanwhile, only the investments made by all participants of the *supra* can guarantee its successful performance, and therefore the woman's role is perhaps the most crucial since, without her, one of the

² The town where my fieldwork also took place.

components, namely, the food would not have been observed. In fact, the feast's success and quality depends precisely on the diversity and abundance of foodstuffs cooked by women, including the lady of the house, her female neighbours and close relatives. Therefore, the analysis of Georgian feast from the perspective of the reproduction of masculinity means idealising its real nature and disregarding the multitude of the ways the *supra* functions in society (Linderman 36).

One of the first researchers of Georgia who paid attention to specifically female practices during funeral feasts was the linguist Helda Kotthoff. Her approach was characterised by a fixed gender paradigm that set a strict division line between the male and the female roles and spaces in the society. This division was also confirmed by the data gathered during my fieldwork: a separation into gender-determined spheres still exists in modern Georgia, while belonging to the male sphere has lost its previous symbolic meaning, evident, for example, in communal drinking. In this case, the latent masculine 'idealism' manifested through toasting and drinking goes in opposition to the feminine 'materialism' (Manning 2007, 8) which includes cooking, attending to guests and cleaning up after the feast.

In the Georgian context, food is an indispensable component of the *supra* (feast), with its ritual meaning which helps building up the feeling of kinship and national unity (Goldstein). A special significance granted to food preparation and consumption in this country can be explained by culturally elaborated features which have taken part in the formation of the Georgian national identity (see Wilk; Appadurai; Pilcher; Yuval-Davis). Feasts are a means of expression; a symbol; and sometimes even a means of manipulating the national identity, and also social markers of individual rites of passage, such as baptisms, weddings or deaths (Mühlfried 16).

It can be said that the entire social life in Georgia is an "endless series of *supras*" (Manning 2007, 2). Food-related habits become the foundation for sociality, which explains why they have not changed for a long time. Georgians believe that their cuisine and dishes make them distinct from other nations and 'embody the

taste of the nation', which is only 'theirs' (Ibidem 11). The *supra* itself is believed to have unique features, which is allegedly characteristic of only Georgian society (Dunn 256).

Supras differ in levels of formality, but each of them is characterised by an extremely abundant selection of various foodstuffs. The food which Georgians explicitly mark as Georgian and which thus makes them distinct from other nationalities prevails on the table both at homes and in restaurant spaces, to which the massive feasts tend to be moved gradually from the yards adjacent to houses. What is more, the length of the *supra* varies from 3 to up to 7-8 hours, depending on the reason, place, and time of its beginning. The ritualised drinking, which the Georgian feasts involve, is controlled by a toastmaster or *tamada* (Manning 2007, 1).

Supra is viewed as something ancient and inherent in the Georgian tradition, dating back to the medieval times. Meanwhile, historic sources point out to the 'invented tradition' of the *supra*, a product of the 19th century initiated by the Georgian nobility in the wake of the national movement, which became a reaction to the Russian colonial government (Mühlfried 16; Manning 2007, 16-17). It was then that the *tamada* and the certain sequence of toasts, intended to symbolically compensate for the loss of the country's independence, became part of the *supra* (Bregadze 12-14). The Georgian nobility began to view the *supra* as a kind of 'compensatory private locus of traditional authenticity, ... an "inner sphere" of authentic traditional Georgian "society", opposed to the "outer sphere" of the Russian state (Manning 2007, 17), ' in other words, a kind of a civil society of the time, which emerged in opposition to the dominant policy of the Russian Empire (see also Nodia). However, even though the *supra* is believed to have aristocratic roots, it has become a symbol of the cultural difference of the nation as a whole and a factor which differentiates between 'us' and 'them' (Mühlfried 17).

In the Soviet era, the feast maintained its previous meaning by becoming a prototype of a micro-society, in opposition to the government and the political system, and the locus of consumption, as opposed to the sphere of production, being

associated with the government's planned economy (Manning 2007, 18), thus, making the *supra* a micro-society where personal links and kinship would become the basis for overcoming the bureaucratic system. Moreover, in addition to political meaning, the reception of guests played an important role during this time. The table set was a manifestation of hospitality to the visitors, a reflection of the prestige, identity and moral values of the individual family, and also a place where the large family would meet the rest of the world (Dragadze 97).

Mutual support from women from different families ensured the proper organisation of the feast: they would cook and set the table together and relieve each other to be able to join other guests at the table. Should any family leave their extended family and live separately, women who lived in the neighbourhood could bring food to them or come and help in cooking when many guests were expected, since they all understood the meaning of cooperation and joint effort (Ibidem 52).

Even though the attitude to the *supra* has changed since the collapse of the Socialist system in the 1990s, the *supra* has to a great extent preserved its previous nature and remained a 'compensatory private locus' for the manifestation of religious views, civil values, personal freedom and Georgianness, which had been rejected in the Soviet times (Manning 2007, 2). At the same time, since the socio-economic situation got worse, many Georgians have been forced to cut expenses on feasts, restrict the number of guests to relatives and close friends, and refrain from frequent feasting.

In the modern Georgian context, the *supra* has remained the key element of national culture, being an inseparable part of everyday life, determining the basic life cycles of people, and also of religious celebrations. For example, regarding wine as a metaphor of blood which Jesus shared in the form of wine with his disciples, Georgians drinking wine during the *supra* imagine that by drinking it they share kinship with each other, thus creating a community of close people – friends, relatives, and the Georgian nation in general.

The *supra* is multidimensional as it includes communication, regulated elements of behaviour, drinking and eating. These

elements are not equally important, recognised or ritually regulated (Manning 2007, 4). A detailed examination of the woman's role in the process of *supra* preparation and throughout its duration allows me to reconsider the previous simplistic view on the woman's significance and the whole range of gender relations in the modern Georgian society.

Gamge and the female cooking community

When researching the female foodwork in Central Mexico, Maria Elisa Christie asked her interlocutor what would happen if women stopped cooking during the fiestas. She replied that love and unity within the household would disappear, chaos would come and feasts would turn into 'drinking affairs for men only': "There would be nothing, because without the cook there is nothing (Christie 213)."

To organize the huge gathering of people, a person who is familiar with the cooking process and who has a deep knowledge of local settings, is necessary. The figure of the woman as the main person in charge of organising a feast is predominant in Georgia. This concerns not only the woman in charge of cooking certain dishes, but the figure of the 'manageress' who is usually elected by other women before the beginning of the feast primarily to further direct the whole preparation process. To name this person, Georgians often use such terms as '*gamge*' (manager), 'commander', 'head', 'forewoman', 'director', and '*pasukhismgebeli*' (person responsible). What is important is that she herself does not always do the cooking.

When mentioning the manageress, my interlocutors would often name certain women in their district who are often elected to hold this position, considering their special skills and cooking knowledge. In one of the conversations Lia mentioned her neighbour in this context:

"...When, for example, there's a wedding in the neighbourhood, all neighbours help this family to make a big table... The woman in the family won't cope with that alone, and they help her. To do this job they appoint what we call a *gamgebi* who is the manageress – a *gamge* can be a male or female

manager³. In such cases men directed by the *gamge* could, for example, arrange the tables in a certain way”.

However, the other women I talked to either did not mention the existence of a *gamge* among men at all or said that the female manager alone directed the organisation of the entire *supra*: “Sometimes a woman directs the whole thing – both men and women. They choose a woman who can do everything” (Lamara, Lia’s mother).

Rusudan shared her experience of being the manageress of a *supra* and noted that in her case, it was an inherited position that had been passed on by her mother and grandmother:

“For example, I know that when I was small, my mother told me that my grandma was like that, she did everything [for a feast] so that everything was good and made sure that there was enough of it. After all, they have everything at the restaurant: plates and other tableware. Right? And in our case, when we did it at home, we took it [the supplies] from our neighbours. And there was everything, and they [women] did everything. Then, when my grandma was already gone, my mother did that. My father didn’t, but my mom did, she was the head... It’s a very difficult thing. Then they said, you do this. But what I did: I would do only the organisation. I know how to do everything, but organising the whole thing is the most important task”.

In this context, cooking appears as an enterprise that needs organisation and adequate management, with its system and proper mechanisms the operation of which is secured by female cooperation and *gamge*’s coordination.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in Mexican context. In her research covering women’s participation in fiestas in Central Mexico, Maria Elisa Christie emphasised the importance of the position of the female *mayordoma* (hostess in charge) in the functioning of the fiesta who supervises all tasks carried out by the women. These women come together to volunteer services through formal arrangements and being a part of them needs special command; that is why Christie was never allowed to join in just

³ Some mentioned that separate *gamges* were elected for men and women.

because extra hands were needed. The final word belongs to the *mayordoma* and nobody has the right to question her (Christie 16, 245).

The main difference between the Mexican example and the position of the female *gamge* in Georgia is that the relations between Georgian women are less structured in the process of cooking. In this case, we can observe various forms of female cooperation during the preparations for a feast: when the *gamge* is only in charge of organising the event and does not take part in cooking, when she is also engaged in cooking, as well as cases where there is no manageress. The lady of the house may decide whether to invite the 'manageress' or not depending on the purpose of the *supra*. Thus, it demonstrates the flexibility of relations within the female networks and the reflexivity of their members when certain actions are taken based on skilful knowledge of the cooking process and on the human resources necessary for it. At the same time, this reveals the independent character of such female networks on the scale of the entire system of social relations and their participation in ensuring the functioning of the entire social layer, namely large feasts which play a significant role in everyday Georgian culture. Moreover, the places where the manageress and her co-workers arrange their enterprise seem to be the space where women make free choices.

Apart from playing the role of manageress, there are other situations where women have a decisive role to play. Many women said that the general atmosphere in the house changes when guests are expected. This atmosphere is created by belonging to the womenspace where joint cooking takes place. Describing the cooking process using the example of her own family, Ani said:

"You know, this is probably the most important thing: I like such periods very much when there are holidays, when people come. You can feel this. This variety of smells. Everybody knows who does what: mom does something, grandma does something, I help. The mood is sort of lofty. I like these periods very much when something is happening at home. And men probably become somehow different at this time, trying to help or go to the market, bring something".

This womenspace in most cases is the kitchen, a sacred place, where not everyone has access to. When Nino was preparing for a small family feast as the first guests were coming, she would immediately shut the door to the kitchen where she, her daughter and I were finishing the cooking by dividing different responsibilities among us. Something that was completely in her power was happening behind the kitchen door, and those who were uninvited had no access there. Furthermore, this was a space where anything was permitted, where there was a tacit consent to actions that would have been unacceptable in a space where men were present, and a space where 'profanes' had no access. This concerns the situations when women, for example, could expose their bodies without feeling embarrassed, if they were hot due to high temperature caused by the food being cooked. Therefore, Georgian women call the kitchen a space reserved exclusively for people who are closest to them, where others could not enter.

In turn, when the woman leaves the kitchen space, she faces the rest of the world, her family and relatives for whom this 'sacred work of cooking' was done. And here again she enters the comfortable space as she is surrounded by the people who allow her to feel that her family is something whole. This is why spending time in the company of the close ones is especially valued, as this can make people feel closer, strengthen family bonds and the place of the individual in the system of kinship relations, even if the family has to save every day to hold a feast. This is precisely the reason why the food on the table is the reflection of the values of the family and its social aspirations. The dishes prepared by the woman become a focal point for the family members, around which the family becomes united, chatting, crying and laughing together.

Therefore, a woman engaged in food preparation for the feast is aware of her participation in an important event in the life of the family community, keeping the traditions which ensure the continuation of existence of the community within its symbolic framework of Georgianness that is maintained partly through attachment to the traditional foodways. Cooking for the family gatherings can hardly be called a woman's 'private' business; not only because in most cases women share this labour with others,

but also because this is involved in the process of cultural reproduction and a massive transformation of raw ingredients in the kitchen into culturally appropriate dishes (Christie 35).

The role of toasts devoted to women

There are no examples in my ethnography when a man could replace a woman during the *supra*, including preparations and various forms of female participation in the feasts. Meanwhile, the woman is able to enter the so-called 'male areas'.

Florian Mühlfried pointed out to the fact that some women perform the function of the *tamada* in the case of feasts (Mühlfried 2006 after Linderman). In fact, I witnessed a situation when a young woman, aged 24, was appointed as a separate *tamada* for the female half of the table during a feast in which both men and women participated. Linderman, describing her fieldwork experience, also noted active participation of women of rural Guria in toasting and drinking at *supras* (Linderman 40), which suggests that it would be a mistake to marginalise women's experience in the area of ritualised drinking and continue to view it as it has done previously: as a male-dominated sphere.

Toasts devoted to women are a separate element of the *supra*, and it does not matter whether women are present at the table or not. Such toasts usually present an idealised image of the Georgian woman, stating such qualities as her modesty, chastity, kindness, fragility, obedience, patience, thoughtfulness, and being a good housewife and mother. Frequently mentioned examples of women during the *supra* who are believed to have had these features are Saint Nino, Queen Shushanik, Queen Tamar, Maria Tskneteli and Ketevan the Martyr: well-known Georgian historical figures. However, a more thorough examination of their biographies reveals that they had more masculine than feminine features. None of them could be called meek, modest, giving top priority to housekeeping, weak, hiding behind the man's back or passive (Chankotadze). Thus, it is obvious that the idealised female features praised in toasts are merely a desire to follow the ritual rules set for the *supra* itself, which however do not reflect the real state of affairs and only

reiterate the well-established formulas used in the mainstream discourse.

One example of such toasts when the desired image of the woman does not live up to reality took place at a country picnic near Kutaisi which Ruso and her friends held to celebrate my arrival to Georgia. During this improvised *supra* wine was drunk and toasts were raised in quite a structured form. One of the toasts was devoted to Georgian women. Throughout the duration of the toast which was performed by all men one by one, the women present thanked them immediately after a separate part of the toast was raised, and when the toast ended, each of the women said their words in return⁴. This shows that even in the cases when the function of the *tamada* is reserved exclusively for men, the voices of Georgian women can be heard in response to the toasts devoted to a group of women or to individual ones. They are not speechless recipients of the male toasting practice; instead, they fully participate in it in admissible forms as part of the existing discursive tradition.

When referring to discursive traditions that female behaviour fits in with, it is worth paying attention above all to the content of the toasts addressed to women. Practically all of them, in one form or another, fit in with the ideas of the strictly determined gender role models where the Georgian woman is expected to have the position of a caring subject who is completely devoted to her family and the desires of its members. This content prevails in toasts addressed to women as a group, as was the case with the picnic near Kutaisi in the company of the young people where the men raised the toast to the young women (*'gogo'*). They mentioned a young woman's purity and innocence, and this is the way a young woman 'should be' in their opinion when she is getting married. As a continuation of the toast, the young men wished the women to find husbands and to themselves to find wives who would understand them. Thus, this kind of narrative, fitting in with the formal toasting procedure, presents an idealised image of gender relations. This tendency could also be observed at the same *supra* when it was gradually separated into

⁴ In the Caucasus, this practice is called *alaverdi*.

male ritualised drinking accompanied by toasts and female free talking/drinking entertainment that only formally reminded a traditionalised meal.

At the same time, there is another example of a toast. It presents a personalized appreciation of the woman's labour as part of the complex and tiring project of organising a family feast, which makes it distinct from the example that objectifies the woman's image in the toast. At the supra dedicated to Nino's husband's birthday, a separate toast was devoted to her as the person who prepared it. It was emphasised during the toast what a good woman and housewife she was, and the men expressed their joy with the fact that Nino's personality and her joyful way of being made her a person with whom it was pleasant to be friends. A separate moment was devoted to her cooking skills, which, as the men said, made presence in their home even more pleasant. The invisible coordinated work directed by Nino (her daughter and I helped her with the cooking), as a result, provides her with responsibility for the results of this labour which are fully evaluated by those around her.

Such kind of toasts, which are devoted to individual women who either prepared the food or for whom the feast is held, are moments of intimacy in the entire ritualised realm of toasting, as they often concern individual people and their personal qualities, including those linked to the skill of preparing the supra, bringing people together and creating conditions for sociability. This aspect of the feasting practice becomes significant to Georgian women themselves because it allows them to feel the connection with the others who gathered around the table, which is a meaningful component of female cooking experience. However, even formal toasts devoted to women as a group are valued by local women despite their rather ritualised manner. Such speeches represent the space where female participation in acts of sociability is fully appreciated and accepted, taking into account that these toasts follow the ones dedicated to God and motherland.

Women as rebels during the supra

Areas of free choice appear not only within the kitchen walls where the *supra* is prepared. These zones of female agency can emerge also during the feasting process and refer to all its aspects: alcohol consumption, toasts, or other forms of behaviour during the *supra* as a whole. Women's behaviour during a feast is regulated to a lesser extent when compared to that of men. Men are not allowed to leave the *supra* without the *tamada's* consent, while the comings and goings of women are not regulated; they can leave the feast at any time or, for example, join the women in the kitchen to share their impressions concerning the *supra* or discuss any other topic, since the atmosphere of the feast does not provide occasions for a joint discussion of specific issues of concern due to the large number of guests.

I noticed it during a feast I was invited to, held 40 days after the death of a family member. I was among those women who left the table during the feast and found some of the women who had taken part in the cooking and did not join the guests, sitting in a spacious room with an air conditioner, engaged in a lively conversation. At the end of the *supra*, some of them went to the main table, but they only did this after some of the guests had already left, continuing the conversation with other women who had come to the *supra*.

Furthermore, unlike the speeches of the male participants of the *supra*, which were subordinate to the toasts, female conversations were informal and unrestricted in points of topics, as well as inaccessible to men, who were busy playing their restricted ritualized roles. Therefore, the behaviour of the women present during this feast does not fit in with the submissive silent participation paradigm in the so-called 'male centred gathering' (Manning 2007). Women are able to create their own 'community' within the main *supra* which men have no power to control. This was the case during the aforementioned feast held 40 days after a person's death, when the women sitting at a separate table were talking so loud that the *tamada's* voice could not be heard, and men's appeals to them to be silent and pay attention to the content of the toasts were disregarded. Toasts which appear here

as men's domain can be contrasted with women's unstructured conversations during the same *supra*, where the latter could be seen as another form of discourse with its own agency that can dominate the *tamada's* structured toasts.

At the same time, it is the women who assume the controlling function during the feast when they decide that it is time to end it. In this case, without any special signs, women begin to collect the food and dishes from the table. This may happen while toasts are still being raised by the men remaining at the table.

Another area in which women exert control is alcohol consumption. Female drinking during the *supra* is also characterized by a 'democratic' style, where there is no structural framework of the traditional *supra*, but there is room for spontaneity and also less alcohol is consumed. This is an alternative form of alcohol consumption in the Georgian context, where women are able to control themselves, which is not always the case with male drinking. Moreover, women themselves take part in alcohol consumption and do it also on a regular basis. Wine appears in women's lives at quite an early age and is not considered as damaging. Along with food served during feasts, alcohol has a share in creating the conditions that contribute to sociability in which men and women alike are involved, even though the forms of their participation may differ.

The ritual component assumes that men participating in a feast should drink after every toast, and in most cases are obliged to drink the entire contents of their glasses, while no such strict rules apply to women, who do not have to drink after every toast and may drink wine in any quantities, without sticking to the 'bottoms up' ritual (Ibidem 10). Such a tradition, which requires abundant wine consumption from men, may lead to situations when the man who fills the glasses with wine before the *supra* is not always capable of being responsible for them after the end of the feast because he becomes too drunk, and another man participating in the feast takes charge of it, which means that the host is not able to control their actions fully.

To gain control over the male body, women also enter the male domain of alcohol consumption, as was the case at the *supra* held

to celebrate Merabi's birthday. His nephew, Ziko, who was also present at the table but left it before other men, told me that in these cases when wives do not accompany their husbands during a feast, they call them at a certain stage of the feast checking their condition and, as a result, may even call a taxi to take them home. During Merabi's birthday party, his wife, watching one of the guests, decided herself to call his wife and then ordered a taxi for the male guest as she was afraid that he would not be able to get home by himself. If both spouses are present at a feast, it is the wife who initiates leaving the table and thus controls her own body and the body of her husband who loses control under the influence of alcohol.

The male out-of-control behaviour may also outrage women because uncontrolled male deeds upset the balance in other spheres for which the woman feels responsible. This was the case on the second day of Merabi's birthday celebrations, when he invited his work colleagues over while his wife Nino was absent. When the woman came back home, she encountered a mess: unwashed dishes and food left on the table. The latter annoyed her the most because the food might have become spoilt outside the fridge and the family would not have been able to eat it for a few days following the feast. In this case, the woman felt a destabilizing impact of the man's uncontrolled behaviour who had not only upset the home's stability and order, but had also entered her domain of providing food for the family, where the Georgian woman has full control. Thus, women in this context act as controlling subjects who have not only control of the food that is served at the feast, but also of the people's bodies at the *supra*. It is manifested in the way women manage time during the feast and leave the table whenever they wish, in the lack of men's influence over women's behaviour and men's dependence on women's actions during and after the feast.

Female-only supra

It is important to pay attention to a separate phenomenon, of female *supra*, which takes place quite often in the Georgian context. It may take place both as part of everyday small feasts,

when close girlfriends, neighbours or colleagues gather together for no special reason, and on more significant occasions such as birthdays. One of the examples was a female-only *supra* where we gathered to celebrate Tako's birthday. At the planning stage, Nino, the mother of the young Tako, emphasised that it would be different from the usual feasts with a large variety of dishes and guests, and that everything would be in 'European style', which meant that food such as pizza, *khachapuri*, pies and fruit would be on the table. By calling the feast European, the woman put it in contrast to the usual Georgian feast characterised by a set of obligatory dishes.

The *tamada* was elected from among the older women since along with Tako's girlfriends (the girl was 26), Nino's girlfriends were also present, thus making it a mixed-age feast. However, if we compare it to the feast with a man as a *tamada*, this woman did not embark on performing her duties immediately, which means raising the first toast, but only after the guests have started eating. Furthermore, throughout the whole *supra*, toasts were raised by other women too. The sequence of the toasts was also different. All toasts concerned Tako's life, be it toasts devoted to the young woman's herself, her husband or her mother.

As for the alcoholic drinks, they also differed from the ones usually served at a feast. In addition to the traditional drink, wine, there was also vodka, which was drunk by one of the women, while most of the women drank chocolate liqueur made by Nino. As a result, the wine stayed untouched, which would not have been the case at a usual *supra*.

In general, alcohol consumption in the female circle is viewed as a deliberate activity, as was the case during one of the lunches at the Skamkochaishvili family, when red wine was offered to the women who had gathered at the table. It was emphasised that wine served with lunch improved digestion, so by consuming it everybody could join the 'healthy' Western European practice of drinking wine at lunchtime without raising any toasts and without electing a *tamada*.

In a research devoted to Austrian village feasts, Thornton mentioned two different types of social events: the first one

characterized by high degree of intimacy and the second one being quite a formal celebration. Both of them were associated with different drinks (Thornton). In the Georgian context, the former can be a female gathering, and the latter – the *supra*. Red wine or sweet alcohol, such as the liqueur, are perceived as female beverages.

There was dancing at Tako's birthday, which can also happen on other occasions. However, what made the dancing different in the female-only *supra* was its variety and openness: women were dancing both to modern Russian pop music and the 90s hits, and they also performed national Georgian dances. Some of the dances were quite expressive, which could also be said about the jokes and conversations heard at the festive table.

Men who were at the moment at home were not invited to the feast. Only Tako's husband, Paata, once came into the room where the guests were sitting. He stood at the door for some time, while the women congratulated him on his wife's birthday. In this context, the women became outraged when Tako's father and one more male neighbour came later and expressed the desire to be served at a separate table.

Thereby, during the *supra* women appear as those who criticize but at the same time enjoy the Georgian feasting culture – be it the 'democratic' form of the female *supra* or a rebellious behaviour in the format of the general feast. However, in their critique, they do not go beyond the discursive tradition of the *supra* as a Georgian cultural phenomenon, because women themselves act as keepers of the feasting tradition.

Organizing supras at restaurants

At present, feasts are gradually moving to restaurants. However, restaurants are not so popular among the residents of villages who hold *supras* in their houses and adjacent areas. Women who still prefer home feasts to those held in restaurants have said that eating at home is above all more comfortable to them; homes are still used as feasting venues mainly due to lack of funds. In addition to this factor, people also mention attachment to tradition, which makes Georgians continue holding family feasts

in their homes. Both decisions are seen as acts of agency: staying home and cooking better food than the restaurant-made food, as well as giving up cooking and entrusting restaurant cooks with this task. Nevertheless, all of my interlocutors agree that home cooking practices are a part of Georgian tradition and that the fact that feasts tend to be increasingly more often held in restaurants is a symbol of modern trends in society.

More senior women note that the main reason why they prefer home feasts is that there is no need to hold a *supra* in a restaurant, since all the needed products, such as meat and wine, are always available in each house. From these women's perspective, inviting guests to a restaurant seems shameful as this would mean that there are no women in the family who can cope with preparing a feast, and no women whose cooking skills are sufficient to prepare the food. There are also women who would not opt for a restaurant due to distrust for the food quality, which is characterised as 'dirty' as opposed to the 'clean' food prepared at home. The home in this context is the mainstay that is capable of satisfying the needs of not only the family itself, but also its close friends, where women can guarantee family welfare by consciously choosing to prepare the feast by themselves.

For this reason, the fact that one of the families from a nearby village held the wake at a restaurant in Ozurgeti became a memorable event in the town's life. This fact attracted the attention of the town's residents; it meant that there was a 'deviation' from what was viewed as the usual practice, however, it was viewed in a positive sense and characterised as 'civilised' by the woman who told me about this.

Choosing to organise a *supra* at a restaurant is also embedded with agency. When the responsibility of preparing a feast is passed on to the restaurant workers, the key factor is the trust in the quality of their work. Rusudan shared her experience in this area: "We know how they cook here and so we go. We wouldn't go to some other restaurant because we know that they work here, and they cook well here" ... In this case, a team of female cooks working at a restaurant becomes an analogue of the female community in charge of preparing the feast at home. At home, the *gamge* that

takes this function for the time of the *supra* surrounds herself with women whose quality of work she trusts. The same happens when the feast is held in a restaurant, when the hostess chooses herself where the feast will be held, and her decision is based on the evaluation of the cooking skills of the restaurant staff. If necessary, she may, for example, decide to exclude dishes which fail to meet her requirements.

Going out to restaurants in the company of other women is a new phenomenon in modern Georgia, as this was not practiced in Soviet times. Nowadays, they go there either to celebrate such occasions as the Women's Day on 8 March or the New Year's Eve, or out of the desire to spend time with their girlfriends. Women usually decide to spend time together in this way spontaneously, which makes it different from the preparations for a home or restaurant *supra* planned ahead – “we want it, so let's go”, as Rusudan (II) characterised *khinkali* parties with her friends.

This is a proof of a more democratic nature of such female feasts, revealing a desire to give up cooking for a while and pass this labour to other women, restaurant workers, accompanied by the trust of the quality of their work and the use of food as a source of sociability. As noted by Rusudan, the restaurant space is viewed by her and her girlfriends as a “neutral ground” since “you don't want to make anyone work more than yourself”. When women decide to spend time together in a public place, none of the participants of the feast is in a situation when she has to assume the burden of holding the party because the women split the bill equally. “We have this German calculation”, as Rusudan summed up.

Another interlocutor views eating out as a therapeutic measure involving the need to create conditions in which the woman can forget about her everyday chores: “...Routine has absorbed the woman: they should get and bring and cook by themselves. This tiredness has taken all that aura away. So, when something is needed – we already order everything from the restaurant: “Girls, let's go and have fun, sit, talk and eat”. So that we don't have to run around. So that we could sit together and not because we are no longer housewives...” (Nona).

A restaurant feast becomes one of the manifestations of female agency with its numerous layers. First of all, women consciously refuse to cook and decide to enjoy food and the company of close friends in the restaurant space. Meanwhile, the main function of feasting is preserved, namely, participation in the act of sociability. If a woman is asked where she would prefer to hold a family feast, she would answer increasingly more often “obviously, in a restaurant”. This is followed by a whole list of advantages this solution offers, such as a significant reduction of work the woman has to do, for example, the fact that it is no longer necessary to look for additional tables and chairs, to serve the guests, and to clean up after the party. Another reason for choosing the restaurant as a feast venue mentioned by women is their work schedule which does not allow them to become engaged in the time-consuming cooking process that requires full-time engagement. It shows that a paid job outside the home is an important element in Georgian woman’s life, which she prioritizes when it is possible to transfer foodwork to other women.

Women as keepers of Georgianness

Claims that women are pushed to the margin through ‘attachment’ to the processes taking place only in the kitchen space, when women’s participation in the *supra* becomes irrelevant after the food was brought to the tables (Manning, chap. 1:21) form a bias regarding the investigation of the woman’s position in society. What is more, the descriptions of *supras* that have prevailed in previous research, were allegedly exclusively male-dominated, and in fact disregarded the entire multi-layered nature of the *supra* in modern Georgian society.

In fact, all of the examples presented in this article characterize women as reflexive agents involved in food practices. The Georgian women’s agency allows them to be flexible in understanding the essential moments linked to eating practices and to identify those which are able to please them. At the same time, it is necessary for women to always reconcile their own interests and desires with those of their families, of which they feel to be inseparable with. As a result, all their actions remain within

the framework of the family's integrity and meet the needs of reproducing "the real Georgian family".

The integrity of the family gathering together at one table is a priority inherent in the idea of Georgian commensality, and cooking lies at its centre. It is precisely the food present at the family gathering that is the main integrating factor entailing family's reproduction. What is more, food is an ongoing element that "constitutes the life of the household" (DeVault 54) both through feeding its members as part of small family gatherings and through engaging an extended circle of relatives and friends. This is a process in which they participate to maintain the production and reproduction of the family as a social construct. As a result, during the *supra*, we can observe a kind of manipulation of social relations performed and upheld by all actors engaged in the *supra*.

Thus, food is the binding factor and a guarantee of maintaining the space which connects contemporary Georgians with their past generations; a continuity facilitated through their awareness of the inalterable presence of a certain set of traditional dishes on the table. Through its traditionalism, food constantly reminds people of their roots, including those referring to Georgianness, being a tangible factor which builds ties to the community, the family and the nation. Food traditions, being a part of the monolith of national traditions, need to be upheld and incessantly cultivated, and it is the women who take part in these processes, proving that they have the knowledge necessary in the process of socio-cultural reproduction of the community. It is around the Georgian woman that the idea of being a part of the community – female, family and nation – is being formed.

In the course of the *supra*, women turn out to be the creators of their own community, which is characterised by a mode of existence independent from male ritual drinking. During the feast, women keep control of their bodies and also exert influence on the male bodies in cases when men lose control of them. With a sufficient level of reflexivity, women act as supervisors of the implementation of the basic ideas and values inherent in feasting practices, preventing their disappearance from the realm of everyday social relations. Georgian women thus remain the

keepers of local identities, which in turn allow them to see the place of the *supra* from various perspectives and develop their own view, and, at the same time, do not rule out their personal emotional attachment to the cooking process. This points to the existence of gendered forms of power within a broader nexus of 'hegemonic food femininities' (Cairns and Johnson 28) which become an embodied experience of women. When engaged in cooking, women have the right to set the rules determining who, when, how and in what atmosphere will be received, what dishes will be served and what kind of information they will convey about the lady of the house who made them, thus being creators of the surrounding reality – both that of their own and that of the people close to them.

The Georgian *supra* in this context manifests the idea of ongoing social relations and community exchange capable of functioning within the framework of market relations and within the socially unstable environment provided by the modern Georgian state. Thus, at each of its stages, the feast appears as not a private sphere but instead an arena for public expression. The Georgian house often becomes the only place where people can establish business and personal relations. This is due to the weakness of other social institutions which, at present, have been replaced by the family and the immediate environment. Given these conditions, cooperation as a part of the female community is one of the elements of the social sphere where the actors are endowed with a full spectrum of instruments necessary for the process of production of food, social relations, and national identity.

Thus, in the context of the Georgian *supra*, one can observe a great variety of women's experiences, depending on the type of the feast, on its participants, and on the age of women, which all affect the nature of the women's participation in preparations and their presence at the *supra*. This variety of female experiences contradicts the simplified approach to *supra* as a male centred activity. Questioning the masculine nature of the Georgian *supra* should begin from the stage of food preparation and its serving, where the woman plays the key role as without her this event

would not take place. This is perfectly demonstrated in Merabi's attempt to receive his workmates by himself, when the feast did not go right due to the absence of the woman at home.

Therefore, cooking in no way confines women to the closed space of the household; on the contrary, it strengthens the bond with social networks which, in turn, allow them to play an important role not only within their immediate environment but also to participate in the cultural and social reproduction of the Georgian society as a whole. Moreover, women engaged in the process of cooking have access to embodied knowledge and a full awareness of their capacities as transforming agents which has a considerable effect on reshaping of their position in society.

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