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Excessive hospitality: personhood, moral boundaries and domination around the Georgian table

Abstract: This paper investigates the making of personhood through conspicuous hospitality practices in the Republic of Georgia, focusing on how this process has underpinned moral boundary drawing in Georgia's recent history - from the late Soviet era, through the 1990s, to the years following the Rose Revolution in 2003. Largely perceived and defined as tradition by local people and external observers, hospitality is a powerful device to organise social relationships and exchanges in the community. Excess is a fundamental feature of hospitality practices: people spend many hours around the table displaying, offering and consuming plenty of food and alcoholic drinks and engaging in conspicuous bodily gestures and speech.

Analysing literary and media sources and data collected through participant observation and follow-up interviews, the paper explores the way in which shifting moral boundaries drawn upon hospitality practices have transformed domination and counter-domination patterns in Georgian society. From a unifying marker of Georgians' positive distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* other people, hospitality's excesses became a token of increasing socio-economic inequality. The analysis contributes to the understanding of consumption, especially in its excessive aspects, as a fundamental element in the making of individual and collective personhood, which, in turn, shapes boundaries of exclusion and inclusion within and across smaller and larger communities.

Key words: hospitality, Georgia, personhood, consumption, domination.

Introduction: Framing the moralities of hospitality practices

While living in Tbilisi in 2008, I was invited to a *supra*[1] (the traditional Georgian festive meal) celebrating the baptism of a neighbour's child. The *supra* took place at the hosts' flat and met the specifics of traditional hospitality events: women were busy in the kitchen and men smoked and chatted while waiting for the feast to begin; men negotiated the choice of *tamada* (the toastmaster, who leads the toasting and drinking ritual called *tamadoba*); men and women sat separately at different ends of the table; there were long and articulate toasts followed by copious consumption of wine; and an impressive number of dishes were piled on the table.

During the feast, women went back and forth between the kitchen and table bringing sweet and savoury food and refilling half-empty serving dishes. After a few hours the *supra* seemed to be ending. The hectic serving of food had stopped and the sequence of toasts had slowed down, while the tablemates were chatting and eating cake. However, at some point women came out of the kitchen with roasted meat and jugs of wine. The *supra* revived,

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[1] Note on transliteration: Georgian usage follows the Apridonidze-Chkhaidze system.

although only a few men were keen on continuing to eat and drink, while other guests tried to refuse additional offers after an already lavish banquet. Still, people felt reluctant to leave as hospitality norms prescribe tablemates to remain until the feast finishes, no matter how long this takes.

Excess is a prominent feature of Georgian hospitality practices. The amount of food and – mostly alcoholic – drinks to which guests are nearly forcibly treated; the many hours spent around the table; the long complicated toasts; the spirit of competition: these elements, which are rarely missing from a *supra*, highlight the lack of moderation which inform the host-guest relationship. Accounts from travellers, visitors and external observers emphasise the lavishness of the Georgian feast, highlighting that the amount of food and drinks displayed on the table and offered to guests is deliberately much larger than what tablemates can realistically consume (Curro, 2014; Polese, 2010; Muehlfried, 2008, 2006; Tuite, 2005; Manning, 2003; Goldstein, 1999; Chatwin, 1997; see also Zanca, 2010 on Uzbek hospitality).

Far from being just a form of conviviality, or a folkloristic expression, hospitality practices are a powerful device to organise social relationships in Georgia. Largely taking place in the private domestic realm, hospitality is underpinned by publicly shared norms through which people negotiate their personhood both as individuals and with regard to their positions within a community, at the local, national and transnational level (Shyrock; 2004; Herzfeld, 1987). Moral, cultural and social boundaries separating the community's insiders and outsiders are largely drawn on the basis of people's competence in providing and reciprocating hospitality (Sorge, 2009; Heatherington, 2001).

This paper draws upon the moral tensions at work in these practices to argue that individuals' and social groups' engagement in hospitality and its attached moral evaluations are fundamental in the making of what is perceived to be a 'good person' (*k'argi adamiani*) within a community built on specific values - be it the family, the village, the neighbourhood or the national community. I identify three main ways of articulating and performing hospitality, each of them linked to a particular historical moment and its socio-political and cultural conditions: the late Soviet period, the 1990s and the years following the Rose Revolution. In each period, values attached to excessive hospitality practices underpin the making of different personhoods, which are included or excluded from the community depending on whether they fit individual and collective visions and aspirations of the community and its members. Boundary drawing between insiders and outsiders highlights different patterns of domination between individuals, smaller and larger groups, and the ways in which the negotiation of personhood through hospitality practices and their excesses comes to challenge, support or transform these patterns.

First, hospitality is analysed as a marker of unified and distinctive Georgian personhood in the supposedly homogeneous Soviet system. Many Soviet citizens and the Soviet authorities considered hospitality as an exotic practice associated with an exotic population, but also as an irrational waste of resources in contrast with socialist principles. For Georgians, however, excessive hospitality was a bond of distinction *vis-à-vis* moral indoctrination, cultural assimilation, social conformism, political control and economic depression.

Second, the paper focuses on how, following the demise of the Soviet system in the 1990s, conspicuous hospitality turned from a unifying marker of Georgianness *vis-à-vis* an external power into a means to highlight increasing socio-economic inequality across the

population. The sociability and culturedness which many people considered as essential part of - however excessive – hospitality practices was gradually replaced by copious consumption as an exhibition of private material wealth. Conflicting personhoods stemming from such developments shifted boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in a context in which fundamental moral, cultural and social values were largely perceived as falling apart.

Third, I look at transformations of the notion of excess related to the implementation of political and economic reforms after the Rose Revolution in 2003. Narratives underpinning the modernisation project carried on by political elites divided Georgian society into a 'new' and an 'old' part. The former represented the forefront of change and the embracement of Western values, as well as the citizens who made the most of the rapid economic privatisation and deregulation following the Revolution. The latter included people who, for their attachment to outdated and possibly noxious values and lifestyles, would not cope with the country's hectic pace of change. Post-revolutionary narratives considered excessive hospitality as a hindrance to modernisation, which, in turn, was linked to more moderate and sophisticated ways of conviviality. Moral and cultural personhoods associated with different consumption practices underlined the deepening of social, political and economic cleavages across society.

The study of consumption excesses at the Georgian *supra* casts the relationship between personhood, morality and domination within an historical perspective. The paper shows how hospitality practices and socio-cultural and political features of distinct historical periods charge one another with moral evaluations which rest on shifting ideas of individual and collective personhoods. Specific patterns of domination stemming from conflicting values attached to what it means to be a person within a community of other persons are identified. The aim of this study is twofold. First, it provides an empirical account of Georgian society and politics in the country's recent history from the angle of everyday consumption practices. Second, it enhances a bottom-up understanding of how domination works at multiple levels – from the family to the neighbourhood, from the interaction between different social groups to the national and international political and economic arenas – though patterns embedded in the making of moral personhoods which inform everyday social practices. In the conclusion, the paper lays the ground for analysing further shifting of moral boundaries between insiders and outsiders, arguing for the potential of collective consumption in hospitality practices to shape personhoods which challenge consolidated dynamics of domination and exclusion.

Moral consumption and personhood: a literature overview

The social, political, religious, kinship and economic implications of material exchange, consumption and squandering have a long tradition in anthropological scholarship, dating back to Malinowski's Kula ring (2007 [1922]) and Mauss' analysis of gift and *potlatch* (2002 [1925]). Anthropological and sociological studies of capitalist economies have focused on consumption practices as a fundamental way to negotiate belonging to a specific class or group (Veblen, 1994 [1899]; Daloz, 2003; Douglas, 1996). Yet, an emphasis on materialistic concerns underpinning consumption practices is met by a criticism which highlights the complexity of expectations, commitments and norms informing consumers' attitudes (Sayer, 2005, 2002; Miller, 2001).

Studies of socialist and post-socialist societies have been particularly concerned with the impact of the 'transition' from planned to market economy on material, but also social,

cultural, psychological and moral elements of consumption (Gronow, 2003; Humphrey and Mandel, 2002; Ledeneva, 1998). The increasing stratification of society into classes has been explored in relation to the differentiation of consumption patterns as a marker of what Bourdieu (1984) defines 'distinction', intended in cultural rather than socio-economic terms (Schimpfossl, 2014; Patico, 2008, 2005; Patico and Caldwell, 2002; Shevchenko, 2002). Yet, instead of focusing on the opposition between 'coping strategies' generated by 'shock therapies' (Morris, 2012; Fischer, 2010; Smith and Stenning, 2006) and conspicuous consumption as a mirror of rising inequality, post-socialist consumption practices are to be understood in the complex 'interrelation between economic embodiment of values […] and moral ones' (Patico, 2005: 479). This approach resonates with Sayer's appreciation that 'much consumption is not primarily a form of status seeking but a means to the development of skills, achievements, commitments and relationships which have value regardless of whether they bring participants external rewards' (2003: 341).

Value is where consumption and personhood connect to one another. Shared values of what is morally worthy, culturally desirable and socially acceptable are the foundation for the making of personhood, which is here understood from an anthropological angle as the 'legal, social and moral states generated through encounters with other' (Skeggs, 2011: 3; see also Strathern, 1991). While often associated with the self, personhood is defined in its relational nature, as the multitude of socially and culturally varied ways in which we conceptualise our being persons in a world made of other persons (Fowler, 2010).

Regimes of values at work in the making of personhood and in the drawing of moral boundaries are grounded not only in abstract thoughts of who and what is worthy and desirable, but also in the materiality of everyday life, including 'ideas on economy and commodity, […] relationships between objects and property, as well as general imaginaries of public and intimate spaces' (Skeggs, 2011: 2; see also Fowler, 2010; Appadurai, 1986). In this the materiality of consumption is essential in the making of personhood. More specifically, the consumption of food and other substances as a fundamental component in the process of becoming a person and participating in social relationships has been noted in several ethnographic studies. Some of these include: the process of nation building, (Dundon, 2004 on the Gogadala of PNG); the constitution of kinship (Carsten, 1995 on the Malays of the Langkawi islands); the creation of transnational selves (Chapman and Beagan, 2013 on Punjabi-Canadian families); in the post-socialist context, the invention of post-socialist selves with distinct class identities through discourses and practices around certain kinds of food (Phillips, 2002 on post-Chernobyl Ukraine); the ways in which food consumption patterns shape gendered personhoods, traditionalism and power in post-socialist Czech families (Haukanes, 2007); hospitality towards outsiders as a dramatization of geopolitical tensions in Russia (Morris, 2016).

Methods and perspectives:

This paper is based on data collected through participant observation and follow-up interviews conducted in Georgia over sixteen months (in 2008-2009 and 2014), as well as on a pilot project with the Georgian community in London using the same research methods. The aim of the fieldwork was to investigate the potential of hospitality practices as sources of civil values in post-Rose Revolution Georgia.

Even visitors who, unlike me, are not driven by a specific interest in these practices have been ubiquitously treated to hospitality when travelling to Georgia. I was frequently invited by half-strangers to their houses, where I was offered plenty of food and drink, given gifts and asked to stay over as long as I wanted. But hospitality practices also stood out as a source of expectations and anxiety for people involved. I became intrigued by the social mechanisms which lay beneath the statement that 'all Georgians love guests', which was repeated to me in every encounter with local people. I came to understand hospitality as a social device informing the ways in which people categorise themselves and others as community' insiders or outsiders, attaching to inclusion or exclusion a series a values which change along shifting understandings and expectations from the community and its members.

Outsiders' accounts of *supra* experiences express amazement and fascination, but also an ambivalent sense of helplessness (Altman, 2011; Polese, 2010; Muehlfried, 2008; Magarotto, 2002). Guests are caught in the tension between hosts' overwhelming warmth and the feeling of being completely at the mercy of the hosts' will (Grant, 2009). The continuous and insistent offer of food and drink (the latter particularly to male visitors) is pivotal to guests' ambivalent position. Participants in a feast might have a hard time to extricate themselves from their hosts' attempts to feed them. The fascinating atmosphere of a *supra*, with its smells, tastes, speech and gestures, also entails time commitment (traditional *supra* may last many hours, or even days), as well as risks of indigestion and spectacular drunkenness and hangover (which is often treated with smaller follow-up festive events).

Hospitality practices are a kind of Maussian 'total social phenomenon' (Mauss, 2002 [1925]), providing an angle from which to observe various social mechanisms: gender and generational divides, people's articulations of present and past world affairs, the relationship between individuals and the surrounding space. Talks taking places around the Georgian table – whether as formalised toasts pronounced by the *tamada*, or as more spontaneous conversations between tablemates – provide *supra* participants with a multitude of voices recalling and enacting features of the national history and culture, arguing for specific positions with regard to politics and society, and telling anecdotes and jokes (Muehlfried, 2006; Heatherington, 2001).

My participants varied in age, gender, socio-economic status, level of education, occupational strata and life experiences, and my research was conducted in different places (Georgia and London) and at different times (2008-2009 and 2012-2014). I collected a variety of perspectives on hospitality, which sometimes conflict with one another. Both women and men contributed to my study, aged between 18 and around 80. Among my participants were students, the unemployed, housewives, pensioners, teachers, engineers, carpenters, academics, artists, salesmen and social workers.

In addition to my fieldwork data, empirical contributions on hospitality practices in late Soviet years and the 1990s are an essential source for analysing changing patterns of hospitality in recent Georgian history (Muehlfried, 2014, 2008, 2006, 2005; Manning, 2012, 2009a, 2009b, 2003; Tuite, 2005; Dudwick, 2002; Nodia, 2000; Goldstein, 1999; Chatwin, 1997). Similarly, films and magazines provide rich material on the way in which hospitality and its excesses have been treated as cultural products by both by outsiders and Georgians themselves.

The excesses of Georgian hospitality

Hospitality is usually presented to outsiders – whether in conversation with locals or in touristic advertisements – as a tradition deeply embedded in people's identities and habits (Curro, 2014). Teona (36, teacher) defined hospitality 'a way of life' […] 'it is like when you breathe. You never think when you breathe, you do it naturally'. However stereotyped certain definitions of hospitality might sound, the role of *supra* as a founding national institution has been wid.0ely noted and investigated by local and external observers and analysts (Muehlfried, 2006, 2005; Manning, 2003; Nodia, 2000; Chatwin, 1997).

The Georgian word for 'hospitality', *st'umartmoqvareoba*, is made by the noun *st'umari*, 'guest', and the verb *miqvars*, 'to love', and indicates hospitality in its broader sense, as an attitude of people who like guests. Georgians may also refer to hospitality as *p'urmariloba*, from *p'uri*, 'bread' and *marili*, 'salt', which is related to the consumption of food and drinks in a festive context. These terms highlight that, first, hospitality practices are based on a range of positive feelings which link host and guest, including respect, care and protection; second, these feelings materialise in the conspicuous display, offering and consumption of food and drink.

In local articulations and performances of hospitality, the understanding that if people come as guests one 'cannot offer just a coffee' (Eliko, 62, retired engineer) is widely shared. This perspective materialises through the lavish treatment of guests not only at *supra* planned in the occasion of life-cycle events, whose preparation might take up to several days, but also when a guest shows up with no advanced notice. Such improvised visits might end up with household's members sent to the shop to buy extra food and drinks, women in the kitchen preparing a meal, relatives and friends showing up at the host's place, and many hours around the table eating and drinking (Curro, 2014; Altman, 2011; Polese, 2010).

The conspicuous circulation of food and drinks at *supra*, while emphasising hosts' munificence and care for their guests, also helps create and maintain networks of reciprocity stemming from the mutual exchange of material and non-material items (Muehlfried, 2006; Tuite, 2005; Manning, 2003; Chatwin, 1997; Mars and Altman, 1987). At the same time, the overwhelming offer and consumption of food and drinks is a strategy to prove, maintain or enhance hosts' and guests' status within the community – a process which often entails the downgrading of other individuals and groups. The supposed inability – or unwillingness – of a person or a household to provide or reciprocate hospitality adequately results in malicious gossip that easily spread across the neighbourhood (Shyrock, 2004).

Excessive consumption is a way for hosts to display their material well-being. However, the relation between the lavishness of hospitality events and hosts' socio-economic status is not straightforward. The apparently irrational investment in hosting when resources are lacking is a form of excess in which people engage as a means of moral reward *vis-à-vis* material deprivation. People's ability to throw a *supra* in spite of lack may be a highly valued social skill, which indicates the ability to get by and improvise amid hardships, and use good connections to mobilise in case of need (see also Chatwin, 1997). In addition, it evokes a sense of care and generosity towards guests over and above a consideration for one's material

condition. Levani (30, working occasionally as a builder) and his wife had two children. Their financial situation was dire, since neither Levani nor his wife had a decent and stable income to support the household. However, their home, a small flat in the outskirts of Tbilisi which they shared with other relatives (also unemployed or underemployed), was always open to visitors. Sometimes guests brought basic goods, such as sugar and coffee, since Levani's family had run out of nearly everything. Such invitations were also the occasion to hand Levani money to pay the house bills or outstanding debts. But in other instances a whole *supra* was laid out for visitors. Regardless of how the money had been found – a one-off payment from one of Levani's occasional jobs, a loan from friends – nobody seemed to think that saving for essential necessities in such a precarious situation would be wiser than spending everything on feasting.

Hospitality's excesses are a meaningful way to regulate social relationships within a community, at the local, regional, national and transnational level. Lavish hospitality to which foreign visitors are treated is a strategy to overcome the threat posed by the guest's otherness (Pitt-Rivers, 1968; see also Morris, 2016; Sorge, 2009; Heatherington, 2001). Historically, Georgia has been vulnerable to penetration and domination from outside (Rayfield, 2013). Historical accounts and local narratives depict the Georgian people as constantly engaged in a proud fight against more powerful neighbours – Ottomans, Iranians, Russians and Soviets – in order to defend their freedom (*tavisupleba*). In this context, hospitality is essential to maintain a strong local identity (Chatwin, 1997; Suny, 1988). Through the conspicuous offer of food and drinks representing Georgian cultural specifics, guests are 'englobed' in the hosts' moral and social system, whose superiority is asserted (Herzfeld, 1987).

Patterns of domination in the host-guest relationship – or, rather, between the social and national communities which host and guest represent (Herzfeld, 1987; see also Scott, 2017; Manning, 2017) – are overturned through excessive consumption. Guests need to protect themselves from disproportionate offers of food and drink, while also not offending their hosts by refusing to become involved in hospitality rituals. Working at a propeller factory in Soviet times, Gurami (65, retired) recalled visiting Russian co-workers:

> I had Russians over to this house so many times, I gave them wine, *sashliki* [meat skewers, *mts'vadi* in Georgian] and so on. Russians boast they are the best drinkers in the world, but I tell you, we Georgians are far better! Whether we drank vodka, wine or *ch'ach'a* [Georgian grappa], they got drunk and gave up much earlier than me, they couldn't believe that a non-Russian could handle alcohol the way I did, but they also respected me because of that.

Russia's political, economic and military superiority is subverted at the Georgian table. What may sound as boasting of one's feasting skills has broad moral, social and political implications. Subjugating Russian guests through excessive hospitality is a statement about the Georgian nation's superiority over its powerful neighbour – in terms of history, culture, moral and intellectual probity, manliness, bravery, resilience and cunning. Being pivotal to the making of Georgian *vis-à-vis* Russian personhood, these qualities apply to the national community as a whole. Reversing domination through 'englobing' guests is not an exclusive pattern of Georgia-Russia relations (see Morris, 2016 on similar strategies in Russia-West relations). Yet, the image of Georgians as inherently - and excessively – hospitable people had a specific meaning in Soviet times - and arguably before (Ram, 2014; Nodia, 2014): the

Caucasian people set apart from their powerful neighbour through exoticisation intermeshed with proud distinctiveness.

Reversing domination: Hospitality excesses as a unifying bond

The Georgian people have been renowned for their lavish hospitality for centuries. In Soviet times, the depiction of Georgians as dedicated hosts with a penchant for excessive feasting was a widespread yet ambivalent image, cultivated by Russians and other Soviet nationalities. Georgia was an 'exotic' part of the Soviet Union; a popular holiday destination with beautiful nature, a pleasant climate, good food and a friendly population. Soviet films and magazines stereotyped Georgians as warm and spontaneous yet bizarrely antiquated people in their excessive commitment to traditional hospitality practices.

The film *Kavkazskaya Plennitsa, ili Novye Priklyucheniya Shurika* ('A Female Prisoner of the Caucasus, or Shurik's New Adventures', released in the West as 'Kidnapping, Caucasian Style', 1966) exemplifies a benevolent yet ironic and patronising attitude towards Georgians' supposed authenticity, but also cunning.[2] Georgian (and Caucasian) excessive traditions are here employed for the sly deception of outsiders. The protagonist, Shurik, is a Russian ethnographer, who travels to the Caucasus to study local customs, including hospitality traditions. The core plot sees a trio of local men persuading Shurik that bride kidnapping is a widespread local habit, in order to push him to kidnap a young student and take her to a powerful local man who wants to marry her. In a scene, locals get Shurik drunk, teaching him traditional toasts and pushing him to drink a large amount of wine from a horn (*qants'i*). He is eventually taken away by the police.

The local men exploit the exoticised Caucasian personhood imposed by Russians, relying on Shurik's naïve belief about immobile places and societies in which ancient traditions such as hospitality and bride kidnapping are reproduced in identical ways. A similar dynamic is noted by anthropologist Florian Muehlfried (2014), who highlights how cultural and moral boundaries between insiders and outsiders were drawn on the consumption of specific qualities of wine:

> those who belong drink the real wine; those who do not are given a fake [that is, bottled wine, as opposed to homemade]. […] the Russians became more or less equivalent to fake-wine drinkers. To the bewilderment of patriotic Georgians, they even seemed to enjoy the deficient drink labelled as Georgian wine and sold in great quantities all over the Soviet Union (pp. 66-67).

For Georgians, these images of excessive hospitality, although distorted by exoticising irony, were a confirmation of their distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* other Soviet populations, first and foremost the Russian invaders/dominators (see the notion of 'edible ethnicity' in Scott 2012,

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[2] See also the film *Mimino* ('Sparrow hawk', 1977), which features a Georgian pilot who moves to Moscow to fulfil his dream of piloting for international airlines, but soon gives up the hectic and competitive life in the capital to return to his village's simple authenticity. The Soviet magazine *Niangi* ('Crocodile')'s ironic cartoons on the exaggerations of *supra* and *tamadoba* analysed by anthropologist Paul Manning (2003) provide another portrait of excessive conviviality and double-dealing attitudes to visitors as specific features of Georgians and their hospitality traditions.

2017). Recalling again the past, Gurami ridiculed Russians for lacking and craving the beauty and warmth of the Georgian land and its people:

> In communist times there were so many Russians here. Some came on holiday, some stayed longer for work or even got married to Georgians. They all loved Georgia so much, and I bet they did! We have everything here, sun, good water, great food and wine, they have none of those things in that frozen country of theirs!

In all these examples, what to Russian meant enjoying an exotic tradition for Georgians implied putting their guests in a powerless position. Outsiders were mocked for their inability to cope with hospitality's excesses and to distinguish between good or bad quality around the table. The moral implications for the making of personhood here are twofold: first, patterns of dominations are reversed by appropriating a stereotyped personhood imposed from outside to take advantage of the dominator; second, the derogatory nature of such imposed personhood is turned by the dominated into a confirmation of their cultural and moral superiority *vis-à-vis* the dominator.

The exoticisation of hospitality accounted also for Soviet authorities' more overtly negative attitudes towards Georgians' habits (Muehlfried, 2008). Excessive hospitality clashed with socialist political and economic principles. The Soviet state regarded the Georgian feast as 'a misuse of Soviet property, [which absorbed] energy that should be put to more socially – that is officially – approved ends' (Mars and Altman, 1987: 270; see also Manning, 2003). However, Georgians took the stigmatisation of these excesses as a confirmation of their distinctiveness in a supposedly homogenous society, which materialised in the ability of enjoying the private consumption of valued goods in a system affected by endemic shortages. Anthropologist Kevin Tuite (2005), who visited Georgia at the end of the Soviet era, noted that

> 'the *supra* seemed all the more grandiose because it contrasted so dramatically with the "Soviet way of life" […]: the drinking (despite Gorbachev's dry laws), the expenditure (despite Soviet salaries), the seeming absence of politics […]' (p. 9).

This Georgian individual and collective personhood had a moral and cultural positive distinctiveness and reversed patters of domination *vis-à-vis* the colonial-type relationship which the Russian/Soviet centre established with Georgia and other republics.

Upholding domination: from sociability to ostentatiousness

In spite of the underlying competitiveness, hospitality exchanges were largely considered by people involved as forms of 'equality and mannered social interaction' shared by co-nationals (Manning 2009b: 944). Collective consumption around the table was the paradigm of a common identity embedded in a culture of camaraderie. Following the disastrous fall of the Soviet Union, hospitality gradually lost its meaning as a unifying bond regulating social interactions across the national community. Hospitality's excesses came to express emerging social hierarchies. The elites rising from the murky political and economic context of the 1990s engaged in ostentatious hospitality to show off their recently acquired private wealth.

In people's accounts, as well as in cinema and literary fiction focusing on those years, conspicuous consumption emerged as increasingly immoral. *Supra*'s excesses, rather than embodying the idea that camaraderie overcomes hosts' and guests' socio-economic status,

appeared to be increasingly driven by ostentatiousness. The ideal of integrity, which as an essential value of respectable citizens was supposed to be reproduced in the host-guest relationship, was displaced by a daily fight for material wealth, generating a deep cynicism. In the 2005 film *Tbilisi Tbilisi*, market vendor Nodar powerfully portrays people's helplessness *vis-à-vis* consumption practices. These, having lost their moral connotations, were tokens of selfish monetised transactions. Talking to Otari, a former academic also working at a market stall – himself a symbol of the perversity of times in which 'professors sell margarine and salesmen have become ministers' – Nodar cries out:

> *Bat'ono* (Mister) Otari, you are an educated man, a professor. Is that what we call Georgians? Have we always been like that? How did we survive for so many centuries? Either that history is all bluff, or I understood nothing. I can understand everything: Abkhazia, refugees, hardships. But not the way people have lost their conscience! All is being sold! (*Tbilisi Tbilisi* 2005).

Political and economic troubles curtailed people's ability to get involved in lavish consumption. People felt humiliated by their inability to afford the proper celebration of weddings or funerals, or even more mundane exchanges of hospitality (Dudwick, 2002). The desire to open one's place to guests was thwarted by the fear of jeopardising the family's reputation by exposing the household's miserable conditions. Reluctance to invite people over for a *supra* accounted for the fact that hosting in a poor environment without the abundant provision of food and drink would defeat a key purpose of hospitality, the display of the host's best rooms, furniture and table, as well as of generosity towards guests. Dramatic impoverishment was a direct blow to what people perceived and defined as Georgian personhood, in which the ability to afford conspicuous hospitality practices was paramount.

The sharp decline in many citizens' life conditions was accompanied by a small elite's quick enrichment. The few people who had benefited from the chaotic economic reforms following the fall of the Soviet Union were regarded with suspicion, if not contempt, by many Georgians. The wealth accumulated by these 'new rich' was considered illegitimate and even obscene, both for the dubious ways in which such resources had allegedly been acquired and for the huge disparity between these people's luxurious lifestyle and the majority of the population's struggles to make ends meet. The 'new rich' were also despised by a part of the former Soviet intelligentsia for not being 'cultured persons' (*k'ult'uruli adamiani*), which their ostentation of tasteless material wealth made apparent (Manning, 2014, 2009a, 2009b; Muehlfried, 2005).

Here, two conflicting personhoods emerge. First, the Georgian personhood as it was understood in Soviet times, which is now hit by poverty, but still preserves culturedness and camaraderie as fundamental features of hospitality and regrets the inability to treat guests conspicuously as an embodiment of these pivotal characteristics. Second, the 'new rich's' personhood, which is seen by many people as opposite to what a 'good' Georgian person is made of, with its lack of a cultured sense of commonality and the display of conspicuous consumption as a way to underline unjust socio-economic gaps.

Common people identified the elites emerging from the breakup of the Soviet Union with vulgar consumption, corruption and violence (Manning 2009b). In Georgian slang, two words define these categories of citizens: *goimi* and *mariazhi*. *Goimi*, translatable into English as 'hick', indicates countryside people who moved to urban areas and encompasses a

'broadband broadcast of unculturedness' (Manning, 2009a: 17; see also Manning 2014's analysis of the term *kaji*, which defines a horned devil in Georgian folklore, but has also translated into slang to indicate people who ignore basic norms of civilised behaviour in post-socialist urban Georgia): parking cars on the pavement or in the middle of the street, showing off expensive items like mobile phones, sunglasses and trainers, and ignoring good table manners. A *goimi* is keen on *supra*'s excesses, but does not uphold their sociable and well-mannered component, instead enforcing food and drink consumption upon visitors and showing off by gorging on food, getting drunk and pronouncing loud and unarticulated toasts.

Mariazhi indicates the *parvenu* who holds economic and often political power in post-socialist Georgia. Some of my participants referred to a neighbour as a *mariazhi*. This man got rich after the Soviet Union's collapse, and in the late 2000s was running a successful business of foreign-branded spectacles. Among locals, he was known for the ostentatious house that he had built in the relatively modest neighbourhood. His swimming pool, hidden behind a conspicuous gate, was the object of the neighbours' scorn: the man never used this luxury because he had no clue on how to maintain it properly. He was also well known for his propensity for excess. He would throw large parties at which people became very drunk and sometimes celebrated by firing guns in the air from the balcony.

In Soviet times, excessive consumption at *supra*, however competitive, was perceived as a sociable practice, through which a unifying and distinctive personhood was built and moral and cultural boundaries were drawn to reverse patterns of domination imposed from outside. In the post-Soviet years, such boundaries were drawn across Georgian society itself, shaping conflicting moral and cultural personhoods, built on the regret for the fading away of cultured practices of hospitality, on the one hand, and the display of newly acquired wealth as a matter of moral distinction, on the other hand.

Modernising domination: Excessive hospitality after the Rose Revolution

People's growing dissatisfaction with impoverished life conditions and widespread corruption led to the mass protests which, at the end of 2003, ousted president Shevardnadze in favour of a Western-oriented government led by Mikheil Saak'ashvili. The post-revolutionary leadership implemented radical reforms to 'modernise' Georgian society, politics and economics. Excessive hospitality, depicted by mainstream narratives as a main component of an outdated world, underpinned boundary drawing which framed social and economic inequality on a moral and cultural ground.

Post-revolutionary reforms were inspired by neoliberal principles of free market and minimal state intervention (Rekhviashvili, 2015; Gugushvili, 2014). In these conditions, hospitality and its components became a commodity which, like any other, was subject to market laws. People with more money would be able to engage themselves and their guests in lavish consumption practices. Yet, in images of post-revolutionary personhood, the amount of money available to an individual or household and the frequency and quality of hospitality offered to others are not necessarily in straightforward correlation with one another.

Engaging in lavish hospitality on a regular basis would be in contrast with what Swader defines as the 'capitalist personality' (2013). Economically successful people in post-socialist societies are depicted as driven by individualism, ambition, work and materialism. Hospitality

exchanges would be based on a rational balance between the management of one's wealth and the involvement in hospitality as a leisure activity. Individualism would be at odds with the unconditional opening of houses and the sharing of intimacy with strangers. This rational behaviour would also apply to less well-off people, who, expected to make a cautious use of their limited resources, would avoid engaging in large expenditure on hospitality.

Yet, these considerations do not fit the Georgian case. As cases such as *supra* thrown by Levani's family's despite their dire financial conditions indicate, even poor people engaged in lavish consumption not only as recipients of others' generosity, but also as providers. Several participants pointed out the lack of a straightforward relation between private wealth and the provision of hospitality. Lik'a (27, PhD student) highlighted that 'quite often, families with more money are also in a way more "Westernised", with all that this implies for hospitality practices'. What are such implications for consumption patterns around the table?

Some of my participants belonged to post-revolutionary socio-economics elites and enjoyed standards of living above the average. Yet, these wealthy citizens differed from the *mariazhi* of 1990s, who were largely regarded by post-revolutionary elites as *parvenus* keen on vulgar practices of conspicuous consumption. Instead, while not disdaining the spending of money on luxurious goods and leisure, most of these people cultivated what they articulated as 'European taste', in terms of lifestyle, cultural interests and political orientation (see also Schimpfossl, 2014).

The large amount of money available to these people was not used to lay out gigantic *supra* with dozens of guests attending and endless food and drink, as such excessive hospitality would amount to loutish pretentiousness. As Mariami (62, teacher) put it, 'I believe that many Georgians do not really care about hospitality and guests. They just throw big *supra* to show off'. Money was spent to offer guests (especially Westerners) what was perceived as more refined, and therefore more 'modern' hospitality. When I was invited for dinner at her flat, Nana (38, housewife) explained that, apart from the ubiquitous *khach'ap'uri* (cheesy bread), she had prepared only what she defined as 'European food' (soufflé, roasted vegetables and apple crumble) because she thought it was more appropriate for me. Similarly, other participants from the same milieu praised 'more European' expressions of hospitality – among which were *alapursheti (à la fourchette)* standing receptions (Tuite, 2005; Manning, 2003). These social gatherings, while entailing the collective consumption of food and drinks, are the opposite of *supra* as participants are free from constrictions over consumption patterns, movement and speech entailed by traditional hospitality.

In the making of post-revolutionary personhood, moderation is a key feature of articulations and performances of 'modern' hospitality and related consumption patterns. On the contrary, *supra*'s excesses fed the view of the traditional feast as an antiquated and authoritarian practice, enjoyed only by people who still abide by outmoded norms and values, or by heavy drinkers who have nothing else to do. Socio-economic differences did matter in this regard. Tak'o (45, housewife) expressed disapproval of 'those Georgians who throw one *supra* after another, spending money they don't have and getting into debt or God knows what! I would rather look for a job if I was in their place'. The irrational engagement in excessive hospitality is specifically associated with that part of the population who did not benefit from reforms implemented by the post-revolutionary government, whose ambivalent results made Georgia poorer than other Eastern European or Central Asian states at the end of Saak'ashvili's

presidency (2012), with a GINI coefficient (42) exceeding the regional average (Rekhviashvili, 2015; Gugushvili, 2014; World Bank, 2012). In this context, the provision of hospitality in spite of financial hardship was not regarded as compliance with the moral responsibility of taking care of one's guests, but as a backward and harmful habit which kept people away from more productive activities.

As in the 1990s, moral boundaries drawn through excessive hospitality practices deepened cleavages within Georgian society, upholding socio-economic inequality on the basis of conflicting personhoods. However, in the post-Rose Revolution context domination was not predicated upon the ostentation of material wealth through conspicuous consumption. Rather, economic and political elites perceived and defined moderation as a fundamental moral and cultural feature of the 'new' part of society – one which gained both materially and culturally from the reforms. The latter was set apart from 'old' individuals and groups, which, due to their attachment to backward values and practices, were unable to keep pace with the modernisation process.

Conclusion: Overcoming domination? Building inclusive personhood through hospitality

The analysis of articulations and performances of excessive hospitality throughout recent Georgian history highlights the shifting of moral boundaries along different personhoods, which are negotiated through consumption practices in hospitality events. Depicted as exotically odd by Soviet authorities and media, *supra*'s excesses were regarded by Georgians as a marker of their positive distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* Russians and other Soviet nationalities. In the chaotic dismantling of the Soviet system, excessive hospitality was perceived as immoral by the majority of impoverished people, with few individuals using hospitality as a display of their private wealth rather than a basis for conviviality and sociability. Following the Rose Revolution, socio-economic and political elites' narratives stigmatised *supra*'s excesses as backward and harmful habits which separated the 'old' part of the population from the 'new' Western-oriented citizens who aimed to modernise the country.

Domination patters emerging from this analysis point out the progressive fading away of hospitality excesses as an expression of cultured camaraderie, the simultaneous 'immoralisation' of conspicuous consumption and the subsequent stigmatisation of such excesses as a hindrance to society's modernisation. In other words, hospitality excesses have been increasingly grounded in exclusive rather than inclusive narratives and practices. The progressive individualisation of social life which these patterns indicate partially accounts for the gradual disappearance of *supra* as a social practice, which has been noted especially in urban areas (Muehlfried, 2014). However, while occurring less frequently and with a more flexible structure than the traditional one, *supra* is still perceived by many Georgians as an expression of moral, cultural and social values based on solidarity, trust and reciprocity *vis-à-vis* the increasingly rationalised and depersonalised management of time, resources and relationships in everyday life (Curro, 2017). Arguably, engagement in excessive hospitality is still meaningful in the making of Georgian personhood, in spite of radical changes in the social, political and economic surroundings.

Further research on the topic may focus on how current transformations of consumption practices in hospitality have been interacting with the building of new personhoods, trying to

uncover whether and how patterns of domination through exclusion are being replaced by more inclusive moral boundary drawing. In this regard, women's and young people's hospitality practices are a case in point. *Supra*'s excesses have been fairly unpopular with women, who, according to traditional norms, should embody ideas of resilience and moderation, contributing to *supra* with cooking, serving and tidying up, but participating in conspicuous consumption only marginally. Similarly, strict roles are ascribed to young people, who, unlike women, are required to take fully part to excessive consumption with their older male relatives with little possibility of individual agency or choice. However, both women and young people do engage in hospitality practices which recall *supra*'s materiality, speech and gestures and are informed by the search for conviviality and sociability pivotal to collective consumption. Investigating the moral drive behind the search for more inclusive hospitality practices would shed light on the tension between conservation and change, continuity and rupture underpinning the making of personhood in today's Georgia.

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