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“Supra is not for women”: Hospitality practices as a lens on gender and social change

Abstract: Strict gender norms have been often highlighted in studies on the Georgian society. Georgian women and men are valued as ‘proper’ persons when they embody and perform ‘traditional’ gender identities and roles, which are articulated as ‘natural’. Gender divides are epitomised by the rigid structure upon which *supra* (the traditional Georgian feast) rests. While women’s contribution to *supra* is fundamental, the female role envisages passive presence in a male-dominated event. For this reason, *supra* is regarded as a practice from which women are excluded.

Narratives brought about by the Rose Revolution questioned traditional practices as expressions of backwardness which hindered the country’s ‘Westernisation’. Drawing upon fieldwork data and media and film analysis, this chapter investigates women’s reframing of hospitality in a context of accelerated ‘modernisation’ *vis-à-vis* ‘tradition’ in post-revolutionary Georgia. This process is caught in the tension between internalisation and exposure of gender divides, between private reproduction and public reappropriation of hospitality practices. The chapter explores everyday conflicts experienced by women between demands from ‘tradition’ and top-down modernisation narratives which frame women’s empowerment as unquestioned endorsement of Western values and lifestyles.

Introduction:

The protagonists of the 2014 Georgian film *In Bloom (Grdzeli Nateli Dghreebi)* are two fourteen-year-old girls, Ek’a and Natia, growing up in the shattered context of early 1990s Georgia, in which the country, after gaining independence, was plagued by poverty, endemic corruption, organised crime, ethnic conflict and civil unrest (Manning 2009, Shelley et al. 2007, Dudwick 2004). One scene of the film shows Natia’s wedding, which, as it usually happens in Georgia, is celebrated with a big *supra*, a festive meal involving the copious consumption of food and drinks in the occasion of life-cycle events or of more mundane gatherings among relatives, friends and neighbours (Curro 2014, Altman 2011, Muehlfried 2006, 2007, Chatwin 1997; see below). Natia’s wedding *supra* is set in a small overcrowded flat, with women rushing busily between the kitchen and the table, which is laden with food. Following the toasting and drinking structure called *tamadoba* (see below), men drink wine from horns, making several toasts, including, ‘To our women! What would our life be without them?’

The toast, ‘To women!’ (*Kalebis gaumarjos!*), of which there is an old-fashioned but possibly more popular version using the term *mandilosani*, ‘ladies’ - literally ‘those who wear headgear’), is pivotal to the *tamadoba* drinking structure. In many *supras*, only men take part in this (and other) toasts. Most of the time women stay in the kitchen, emerging to bring out food. When a toast is said in their honour, women are sometimes invited to have a glass and sit down for a bit. Yet, even when they take part in hospitality events, sitting and eating with

the men, women are largely excluded from traditional toasting, and, in general, from the active making of gestures, narratives and meanings at *supra*.

Gender and cultural studies specialists, as well as anthropologists and sociologists, have broadly highlighted the resilience of strict gender norms and ascribed gender roles in Georgian society (Curro 2012, A. Rekhviashvili 2010, Lundkvist-Houndoumandi 2010, Sumbadze & Tarkhan-Mouravi 2006, 2003). Georgian women (but also men) are valued as 'proper' members of their community to the extent to which they embody and perform what are perceived as 'traditional' gender roles, which common narratives articulate as 'natural' attributes of all 'normal' human beings.

Gender divides are epitomised by the rigid structure upon which the traditional Georgian *supra* rests. The female contribution to hospitality events is fundamental, not only for the great effort and the amount of time which women invest in cooking, preparing the table, serving guests, cleaning and tidying up, but also because the female figure is essential in the imagery of *supra* and of society at large (see below). However, women's role is that of passive presence in a male-dominated event. For this reason, *supra* is largely regarded by local people as well as external observers as a practice from which women are excluded (Curro 2014, Tsistishvili 2006).

Modernisation narratives emerged after the Rose Revolution questioned traditional practices as expressions of backwardness which hindered the country's 'Westernisation'. In politics, academic discourse and everyday life *supra* has been object of ambivalent evaluations. On the one hand, material and non-material elements of traditional hospitality practices - such as wine, food, singing and dancing, as well as Georgian people's warmth and friendly attitudes towards outsiders, or *supra's* ability to establish and cement ties of friendship and reciprocity - have been celebrated in various ways, as a specific feature of Georgian identity and distinctiveness, a fundamental practice in people's everyday social life, as well as one of the country's resources to appeal visitors from abroad (Curro 2017, Frederiksen and Gotfredsen 2017). On the other hand, the vertical structure of *supra* and its drinking ritual, *tamadoba* (Tuite 2005, Manning 2003, see below), the irrational spending of time and money in hospitality practices, the celebration of harmful behaviour, such as getting drunk and overeating, and the role of *supra* as a hub through which informal networks and deals developed (Manning 2003, Chatwin 1997, Mars & Altman 1987, 1983) contrasted with the image of the country and its citizens which the post-revolutionary government wanted to give to outsiders: a young democracy which has got rid of negative legacies from the Soviet era and is rapidly modernising following Western political and economic models. Such a critique of *supra* offered a potential framework for women to negotiate and challenge their marginalised position.

This chapter investigates social change in post-Rose Revolution Georgia focusing on gendered practices and narratives which surround traditional hospitality. After a brief overview of my research methods and my fieldwork experience, the interplay of gender dynamics and traditions of hospitality in Georgia is introduced. *Supra* is analysed as a social practice which, while largely unfolding in the private sphere of the house and the family, encapsulates social norms and dynamics which have a public relevance, including identities and roles attached to men and women and the regulation of interactions between genders. Subsequently, the problematic co-existence between 'tradition' and 'modernity' emphasised by

post-revolutionary political narratives and practices will be delineated as the framework within which Georgian women negotiate changing roles and identities at the individual and collective level in the process of questioning their position in the context of *supra* and in society at large. Analysing ethnographic data, this process is caught in the tension between internalisation and exposure of ‘traditional’ gender divides, between private reproduction and public reappropriation of hospitality practices. The chapter sheds light on everyday conflicts experienced by women between demands from ‘tradition’ and certain top-down modernisation narratives which frame women’s empowerment as unquestioned endorsement of Western values and lifestyles.

Research methods and fieldwork experience

The ethnographic material presented in this chapter (which is supported by the analysis of film, media and literary sources, as well as by the discussion of data and insights provided by relevant surveys and academic literature) was collected during my stay in Georgia (mainly in Tbilisi, but also travelling around the country) in 2008-2009 and 2014, as well as in a pilot project conducted with Georgian people living in London from 2012 to 2014. The material has been partially included in my PhD thesis on Georgian hospitality practices as a way to channel reciprocity and solidarity *vis-à-vis* the social, political and economic disintegration brought about by the post-Rose Revolution modernisation project. Using participant observation and semi-structured interviews as main research methods, I spent time with women and men aged 18 to 80, getting involved in a variety of activities – from feasting to cooking, from shopping to exploring Tbilisi’s neighbourhoods – accompanied by more focused discussions on various social and cultural issues which my participants considered to be prominent in their everyday life. Gender relations, particularly when played out in hospitality practices, were a pivotal point of many of my conversations with women, but often with men as well.

Women who helped me with my research belonged to different generations, social and economic backgrounds and educational and professional experiences: among my participants were students, teachers, housewives, psychologists, engineers, university lecturers, political activists, artists, shop assistants, hair dressers and retired people. When our discussions revolved around gender and the relation between men and women in Georgian society, the main topics which emerged regarded motherhood, the role of religion, family life, marriage and divorce, virginity and sex, and, more generally, the set of responsibilities and expectations with which the community surrounds the two genders. Feelings and attitudes towards *supra* and the role which hospitality practices envisage for women were expressed and discussed by my participants within this bigger pictures of norms and role attributed to men and women.

Opinions on such topics differed greatly according to my participants’ age, as well as socio-cultural and economic background. While, on a general basis, older generations tended to be more conservative and support the traditional division of gender roles and identities, critical perspectives on the role of women around the table, but also in the family and the larger community, did not miss from the standpoint of women over their 50s. Conversely, several young women seemed to feel comfortable with the role of wives and mothers – quite commonly, since an early age – which society still largely bestows upon their female

members. Thus, while generational divides are a significant indicator for analysing women's approaches towards gender dynamics into play at hospitality events and in society at large, different views are to be attributed to the combination of multiple factors, which will be analysed in details throughout the paper.

My relationship with female participants was largely based on deep respect, complicity and intimacy, but in some cases coldness, distrust and even open disapproval were displayed. This was due to the fact that, in most occasions, I did not conduct my research with male and female participants separately. Instead, I was involved in the life of households or neighbourhood communities which were formed by many different men and women. In such cases, my interactions with men and women of different age and cultural, social and economic background interplayed with one another, and gender divides had a double-edged effect on my opportunities to talk about certain topics, meet certain people and enter certain spaces. My male participants did not expect me to behave like a Georgian woman, so, in the framework of hospitality practices, it was not usually problem for me to be involved in activities such as drinking and even toasting with men. Also, I was usually not supposed to help other women with the tiring tasks underpinning the preparation and delivery of a *supra*. Such an ambivalent position as a female foreigner, who arrived as an outsider but then became something more than a short-term guest, was regarded with suspicion by some – mostly elderly – women, who were at odds with what they considered as rather unorthodox behaviour for a female. Nevertheless, I developed ties of affection with most of my female participants, who, even in the case of disagreement, enjoyed an open discussion, and possibly confrontation with me on a variety of topics, including the tension between oppression and security which they perceived as entailed by living in a highly patriarchal society.

Gender divides at the Georgian table

Literally meaning 'tablecloth', *supra* is the traditional way of feasting in which hosts and guests gather at a table for many hours, consuming huge quantities of food and drink, delivering elaborated toasts and singing traditional songs. *Supra* is considered a founding national institution, to such an extent that 'whoever wishes to learn about Georgian society, to understand Georgian culture, the *supra* encapsulates it all' (Altman 2011, p. 2; see also Nodia 2014, Muehlfried 2006, 2005). Defined as a practice 'heavily loaded with political implications', particularly regarding issues such as 'gender, labour and consumption' (Tuite 2005, p. 9), *supra* has a moral, cultural, social, political and economic scope which spreads beyond the boundaries of receiving guests privately within a domestic space. Food and drink consumption in traditional hospitality settings is regulated by norms which have public meaning in assigning people a place within society. *Supra* must be as conspicuous as possible (Altman 2011, Polese 2010). The traditional pattern for this event requires that a large variety of food is put on the table from the beginning of the feast, with piles of small serving dishes which are constantly refilled throughout the banquet. Basic *supra* food includes fresh bread and cheese, tomatoes, cucumbers, herbs, pickles, *khach'ap'uri* (cheesy bread), aubergines stuffed with walnuts, *pkhali* (beetroot or spinach mixed with walnuts and spices), cold meat and fish, as well as cakes and sweets. In addition, hot dishes, mostly in the form of boiled, stewed and roasted meat and *khink'ali* (big meat dumplings), are served throughout the feast.

Supra has a highly codified structure of toasting and drinking (Douglas 1987), called *tamadoba*, which regulates the conspicuous consumption of alcohol pivotal to big hospitality events. *Tamadoba* is led by a toastmaster, the *tamada*, who is chosen from the males present to deliver toasts (*sadghegrdzelo*).¹ The *tamada* has a key role in the successful outcome of a *supra*, since he is expected to create ‘social heat’ (Chau 2008, p. 485). Toasts have ‘a predictable internal organisation, combined with an apparent freedom of expression’. To some extent, improvisation is allowed ‘within a well-defined structure. Repetition, formulaic speech, parallelism, extravagant wording, and other factors of verbal art play an important role’ (Kotthoff 1995, p. 354). A good *tamada* has sense of humour and mastery of Georgian history and culture. He brings about matters of shared knowledge, creating a sense of commonality among participants (Muehlfried 2007). He is sensitive to the participants’ mood and ensures everyone’s involvement while avoiding boredom, awkwardness and cold-heartedness. Scrupulous management of drinking also prevents *supra* from degenerating into chaotic drunkenness (Manning 2003, Chatwin 1997).

A *supra* may start with praise of the host (*maspinzeli*), and his/her family. Drinking to children, women, the dead and ancestors is also customary. Many toasts are dedicated to love and friendship, to Georgia and its history and culture, to the homelands of foreign guests and to friendship between people (guests’ co-nationals and Georgians). All toasts are pronounced with the formulaic expression ‘*gaumarjos!*’, ‘*victory to...*’ For example, ‘(victory) to Georgia!’ is ‘*Sakartvelos gaumarjos!*’ Sipping wine is not allowed outside of proposed toasts, when glasses are emptied in one go. In certain toasts, specific items are used as wine containers – namely horns (*q’antsi*) and clay pots of various sizes. On such occasions, the *tamada* drinks first and then passes the container on to the others, who in turn say a few words and drink. Participants are expected to follow the given structure.

When the most solemn toasts are made (including the toast to women), men stand up and women sit. Lasha (28, chef) once told me that this is a sign of respect for women, so that they do not get tired. This explanation sounded absurd to me, given that most demanding tasks at a *supra* are overwhelmingly performed by women without this raising much concern in men. However, Lasha’s words expressed the ambivalence underpinning not only men’s perspective on women, but also the way women think of themselves and their role in the making of *supra* and in family and society at large.

Georgian tradition is permeated by a cult of women, who are seen as the embodiment of the nation. Women are ‘the potential source and bearers of life, it is thought that all essential female characteristics derive from that’ (Dragadze 1988, p. 159). Also, ‘Georgia itself, as a nation, culture, ethnic entity is invariably symbolised by a woman. Your country is referred to as your *deda-mits’a*, “mother-ground” [...]. The Georgian language is *deda-ena*, “mother-tongue” [...]. The capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, is *deda-kalaki*, “mother-city”’ (Dragadze 1988, p. 158). Certain positive qualities, which are considered to be weaker in men, are attributed to women, such as stability, reliability, bashfulness and pragmatism (Lundkvist-Houndoumadi 2010). Far from being regarded as lower beings per se in the

¹ According to some research (Muehlfried 2007, Tuite 2005) and some participants’ views, women can also be *tamada*. However, such an event is reportedly and increasingly rare (I have never witnessed such an occasion, unless the event was an all-female one). Moreover, drinking is still widely considered, by both men and women, as a typically male activity, therefore I refer to *tamadoba* and *tamada* in male terms.

society, women are fundamental parts of the historical and cultural imagery of the national community. However, social narratives value women as Georgians – and even as ‘proper’ human beings (Dragadze 1998) – only to the extent to which they fit what are regarded as their natural roles and identities. As a consequence, womanhood and motherhood are largely considered inseparable issues, while male and female behaviour concerning pre-marital sex, adultery, divorce and re-marriage are judged by different standards (Buckley 2005, Sumbadze & Tarkhan-Mouravi 2006, 2003).

Traditional gender divides are made apparent in the structure of hospitality events. It is misleading to look at hospitality as a practice which forces women to toil against their will for men’s enjoyment. Traditional *supra* have a rigid division of roles which supposedly fit men’s and women’s respective natural attributes. Assigning women to the cleaning and cooking is not necessarily meant to excuse men from tiring tasks. Rather, women are regarded as the revered guardians of housekeeping traditions passed down the female generations (Chatwin 1997). Certain chores in the organisation of *supra* are also allocated to men, especially the provision of food and drink in general and meat in particular. .

However, the main feeling expressed by most of my female participants was estrangement from *supra*. The way in which hospitality events unfold does not envisage women as autonomous actors in hospitality performances. Although it is unthinkable to display a *supra* without the contribution of women, the female role is that of a passive presence determined by the rules of the male-dominated plot of the event. Women’s participation in a *supra* is desirable for everyone, and not only for practical reasons. Yet, women are denied agency over hospitality events, as if hospitality practices belong to a parallel yet unattainable male world. Practices of consumption of food and, especially, wine at a *supra* reinforce bonds of affection and even intimacy between men, while at the same time excluding women by the making and strengthening of these social ties.

The recurring division between public and private as respective male and female worlds (Landes 2003, Slater 1998, Weintraub 1997, Pateman 1987) is relevant here. Even when celebrated in private households, *supras* are public events which act as a stage to display the host’s worldview. The dynamics of a *supra*, including roles and identities attached to men and women, are publicly shared norms which affect the public position of individuals and groups in the community. Since in the national imagery the active producers of public social narratives are male, the stage of hospitality is managed by men. Women are a fundamental part of the plot, but only to the extent to which they fit the narrative ascribed to the event. The only link between the private and the public is represented by thoughts, words and objects – such as food, or toasts, as the example from *In Bloom* indicates – which embody the traditional ideas of womanhood to be made public on the stage.

Modernisation narratives brought about by the Rose Revolution targeted *supra* as an authoritarian and backward practice, which upheld stereotypes of masculinity and femininity largely questioned and outdated in liberal Western societies. The next section will analyse the main points underpinning such narratives to outline the framework within which women question the roles and identities ascribed to them in traditional hospitality practices, which are a useful lens through which gender divides in Georgian society can be investigated.

Past against future: The Rose Revolution's modernisation narratives

The Rose Revolution unfolded in November 2003 as ultimate expression of citizens' anger towards president Eduard Shevardnadze and his government, which, in power since 1992, had plunged the country into a spiral of economic collapse, endemic corruption, organised crime and ethnic conflict. After a series of peaceful protests, Shevardnadze was removed and Mikheil Saak'ashvili, a young lawyer educated in the US, was elected president by a landslide. From the perspective of the new leader and his entourage, this political turn consisted in 'changing everything, and changing everything fast' (Full Speed Westward 2013) through a relentless move from the back to the front, from the 'before' to the 'now' and the 'after'.

The newly elected political leadership's narratives which underpinned the country's transformation rested on dichotomies which divided society into mutually opposed parts. Despite the often strong nationalist rhetoric which accompanied Saak'ashvili's raise to power (Vach'ridze 2012), these narratives classified citizens according to specific clear-cut oppositions. First and foremost, the post-revolutionary government emphasised a deep cleavage separating the 'future' from the 'past' in the development of Georgian society (Gotfredsen 2014, Frederiksen 2013). This opposition delineated people's moral, cultural, and social attributes as either compatible or incompatible with the post-revolutionary project of radical renovation not only of political and economic institutions, but also of society and its members as a whole (Frederiksen & Gotfredsen 2017). As a consequence, narratives and practices underpinning the Rose Revolution and its aftermath, while being supposed to unite all citizens under the banner of modernisation, transparency and democratisation after years of troubles, contributed to the creation and deepening of moral, cultural, social, political and economic cleavages across the population (Curro 2017, Frederiksen & Gotfredsen 2017). Post-revolutionary modernisation narratives attempted to justify social and economic inequality brought about by the government's reforms (which included swift privatisation and deregulation of the economy, L. Rekhviashvili 2015, Gugushvili 2014) on citizens' supposedly different moral and cultural standings.

In this framework, while being preserved in stereotyped images to depict Georgia to outsiders as a rapidly modernising yet still romantically exotic country, *supra* and its main constituents have been questioned as fundamental expressions of that kind of backwardness and irrationality that the Rose Revolution and the reforms which followed meant to get rid of. *Supra* had been at the centre of a debate between the older Soviet intelligentsia and the post-revolutionary class of intellectuals, academics and third sectors workers even before the events of 2003 (Muehlfried 2005, Shatirishvili 2003, Gotsiridze 2001, Nodia 2000). Yet, following the progressive consolidation of Western neoliberal models brought about by the Rose Revolution among a certain part of the population - in terms of politics and economy, but also of culture and morality -, different perspectives on *supra* increasingly became a marker to differentiate between 'new' and 'old' Georgians.

The spending of money and time to organise and deliver *supras* was deemed to be in contrast with principles of economic rationality and individualism which the neoliberal doctrine pointed out as the key to economic and, therefore, political and social development (Curro 2017, Muehlfried 2014; see also Swader 2013). Many citizens who enthusiastically embraced what post-revolutionary narratives promoted as Western values turned to kinds of

socialisation and entertainment which radically differed from *supra* both from a quantitative and, most importantly, a qualitative perspective. Quantitatively, people who gained from the reforms implemented after the Rose Revolution seldom employed their increased economic and social capital to perform grandiose hospitality events in the traditional fashion. In the view of several participants in my research who belong to this social group, throwing huge *supras* with tenths of guests and massive amounts of food and drinks would amount to gross pretentiousness. Instead, many people would spend money to offer (particularly Western) guests expressions of hospitality which were qualitatively different inasmuch as they were articulated as more refined and therefore ‘modern’. When I was invited for dinner at her luxurious flat, my host Nana (38, housewife) explained that, apart from the ubiquitous *khach’ap’uri*, she had prepared only ‘European food’ (soufflé, roasted vegetables and apple crumble) because she thought it was more appropriate for me. In a similar fashion, other participants from the same milieu praised what they articulated as ‘more European’ expressions of hospitality. Among these are so-called *alapurshet’i* (*à la fourchette*) standing receptions (Tuite 2005, Manning 2003), which are the opposite of *supra* in both ritual form and symbolic content: there is not clear hierarchy between participants, and people are free to move around, help themselves with food and drinks and engage in conversation with other guests as they please. In contrast with such moderate forms of hospitality, *supra* was seen as an antiquated and authoritarian practice, still enjoyed only by very traditional people who abide by a patriarchal social structure, or by heavy drinkers who have nothing else to do.

It can be hypothesised that, in such a framework, women felt encouraged to rethink and challenge their subordinated position at *supra*, which was to a large extent a mirror of the strong gender divides still prominent across Georgian society. As it will be shown in this chapter, my female participants related in different ways to their exclusion from the male world of hospitality. The competence needed to behave appropriately between the private and the public realms entails women’s internalisation of ascribed gender identities. However, gender roles in hospitality can also be approached from a detached and sometimes critical perspective, which enables women to challenge the discrimination of which they are the object.

Internalising gender roles or exposing exclusion?

Framed across society as timeless tradition, or even as biological attributes, normative ideas of womanhood are hardly questionable. Widely popular institutions, first and foremost the Georgian Orthodox Church, assertively promote traditional gender norms, influencing both public policy and private beliefs and practices (Rekhviashvili A. 2010). As a result, moral standards of female behaviour appear to be largely internalised by many Georgian women.

To use Bourdieu’s concepts, women’s internalisation of gender roles amounts to symbolic violence, which takes the form of habitus and is expressed through misrecognition (Bourdieu 1990, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004). While talking to me about their thoughts and feelings with regard to their condition as women, some of my participants ‘misrecognised’ gender discrimination, denying that hospitality practices demand a lot from women while actually excluding them. In a conversation with Teona (42, teacher), I pointed out that in one of the families with whom I used to live, *supras* were very formalised in terms of gender divides. While men feasted in the garden with wine and meat, women (when they

were not busy cooking and serving) would sit in the house looking after the children, drinking coffee or sweet liqueurs and eating cake. Teona made clear that this was not ‘tradition’, but my host family’s distortion of norms. She also told me that, when the separation of genders happens, it is not an enforced rule, but women’s choice. Teona explained to me that men’s conversation topics are of little interest to female tablemates, who prefer to sit next to their female friends and relatives and discuss other things.

However, in many other participants’ view, these divisions were neither unusual nor spontaneous. In my own experience, I often witnessed the separation of genders around the table, which, if not enforced upon women, seemed at least passively accepted. Rather than engaging in their own conversations, the female part of the table listened silently to the speech of the *tamada* and the other men without actually being involved. This lack of participation in table talk, rather than expressing women’s freedom of choice, was perceived by several women as a clear sign of female exclusion from the active making of *supra*.

A similar downplaying of the ‘discriminatory’ character of hospitality came from Ia (48, housewife). At a big *supra*, men and women sat at opposite ends of the table. The men followed the hectic pace of toasting and drinking set by the *tamada*, while the women sat quietly, ate moderately and drank no wine. Ia reassured me that these divisions were not compulsory. Of course, in her words, women were free to drink if they wished so. As for the separation at the table, men congregated at the same end simply in order to follow the *tamada*, but it was no problem for men and women to mix. Understanding symbolic violence as ‘violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004: 272), in these examples what could seem a blatant expression of women’s exclusion from all-male narratives and practices is expressed by women themselves through a discourse of self-empowerment. Gender divisions are framed either as occasional deviations from otherwise ‘good’ traditions or as a matter of free choice.

Habitus – which Bourdieu defines as ‘subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class’ - can also take the form of women’s passive but also uncomfortable compliance with traditional hospitality norms. In the abovementioned scene from the film *In Bloom*, the two female protagonists feel awkward in the male-dominated public realm of the wedding *supra*. To recreate a comfortable environment, they shut themselves in the bathroom, which becomes a private sphere where they can behave spontaneously and open up to one another. I observed this shift between public and private when I visited the home village of Tamazi (56, engineer), in the mountains of western Georgia, as a guest of him and his wife Lela (53, social worker). In the first few days, I shared the house just with Lela, her niece and some female in-laws, since the majority of men has stayed in Tbilisi busy working. In this all-female environment, women were not under pressure to cook meals for everyone or keep the house spotless at all times. We prepared and consumed food and wine together, with little distinction between hosts and guests and with no specific attention paid to *supra* conventions, which were often mocked.

However, when Tamazi and other male relatives arrived from Tbilisi for the *ormotsi* (a celebration held forty days after a person’s death) of Tamazi’s mother, who was a native of the village, the context shifted from private to public. My female hosts’ attitudes became awkwardly formal, not only towards the men, but also between one another. The domestic

space split along gender lines. Men congregated in ‘public’ areas, such as the living room and the balcony. Women spent most of their time in the kitchen, cooking all day, both to feed the men and for the forthcoming *supra* organised for Tamazi’s late mother. The interaction between public and private spaces was minimised. The women’s automatic yet radical change of attitudes is revealing of the habitus of shifting between public and private, embodying behaviours appropriate to each case.

Some of the women I met in my research expressed increasing awareness and criticism of gender discrimination in hospitality. In these women’s thoughts, words and actions, symbolic violence was pinpointed, exposed and rejected. The alienation and even hostility experienced by many women at *supra* was efficiently phrased by Lik’a (27, PhD student and activist). We were returning from a village where Lik’a’s family had organised a traditional *supra*. During the celebration, Lik’a barely sat at the table, and left soon saying that she wanted to visit some childhood friends in the village. Later, she apologised to me for her absence, explaining that she could hardly tolerate attending a *supra*. I confessed that, after an initial fascination with these events, I had realised that some *supras* are boring for many of the participants. Lik’a was surprised at what for her was an obvious observation: ‘Come on!’ she exclaimed. ‘Of course *supra* is not for women!’

Marina (25, student) had the same opinion. Living between Georgia and London, she told me that when she is abroad she enjoys meeting her co-nationals for food and drink. However, she felt relieved that on these occasions the traditional structures of hospitality are not necessarily followed. ‘In Georgia women are not allowed to toast traditionally’ – she explained – ‘They are supposed just to sit and eat and listen’. Women’s exclusion from *supra* is also detrimental to the good outcome of hospitality events, which supposedly aim at common enjoyment: ‘Since women can only talk to each other’ - Marina told me – ‘what happens is that they do so even when someone is toasting. So it gets really loud and men try to shush women. Women are excluded, you bet they don’t respect *supra*!’

In Marina’s view, *supra* is not a discriminatory practice *per se*. It is the crystallisation of traditional gender identities into such practices which prevents hospitality from being enjoyed in an inclusive and horizontal way. Similarly, Lik’a maintained that ‘traditions’ are taken for granted to the extent that people do not question whether they are right or wrong:

When I was a child I used to help my mum set up the *supra*, serve food and so on. Once my dad had guests, all men, and I said I wanted to sit with them because I wanted to enjoy what I had helped prepare. They were very happy with that, and everyone was nice and flattering to me!

The male-dominated *supra* is accepted and reproduced passively, without reflection on alternative models of hospitality. However, these alternatives can disclose ways in which hospitality is accessible and enjoyable for everyone. Such a possibility is expressed by Ana’s (31, academic) account of a *supra* organised by her father, to which her and her friend took part:

I went back to Georgia for summer. My dad wanted to organise a *supra* at our place to welcome me back. So he invited his friends and I invited mine, plus there were some relatives of ours as well. I never had so much fun at a *supra*, which in fact can be quite boring. But this time both me and my friends acted as *tamada*, and none of the

older men at *supra* thought that this was inappropriate. There was this very nice atmosphere in which everyone wanted to have fun with other people, eating, drinking, toasting and singing. And we chatted about different topics, involving everyone in the conversation.

As the thoughts and words of some of my participants indicate, gender norms enacted at *supra* may be internalised by women as a form of symbolic violence. Internalisation is expressed in two main ways: first, through the misrecognition of gender discrimination, with women attributing an empowered role to themselves in hospitality practices; and second, through a passive and often unconscious adaptation to gender norms, in the form of a female habitus which entails the shifting of social competence between private and public roles. However, women also criticise the gender divides at *supra*. Opposition to women's alienation creates room to envisage inclusive practices of hospitality. I identify two main ways in which women implement these alternative models, framing hospitality from their own perspectives: the reproduction of traditional hospitality features in the private sphere and the public reappropriation of hospitality practices.

Women's hospitality: private vs. private

Another scene in *In Bloom* features the celebration of Natia's birthday. Since the wedding, the girl has moved in with K'ote's family and is being suffocated by a bully of a husband and an intrusive mother-in-law. Her birthday is an opportunity to escape this everyday reality and, with her best friend Ek'a, enjoy a small *supra* prepared by her grandmother. The girls sit on the balcony of Natia's flat, surrounded by a gloomy landscape of concrete blocks. However, the atmosphere is merry as they enjoy being together and the consumption of food and wine without social pressure, free to eat, talk, drink and joke as they wish. In this relaxed context, the girls reproduce traditional models of hospitality practices. They toast in the *tamadoba* way, to 'all the grandmothers of the world', and then 'to us' (*chven gagvimarjos!*), emptying their glasses in imitation of male behaviour mixed with pride and mockery.

This representation of hospitality contrasts with Natia's wedding *supra*, where the girls were denied agency (see above). Appropriating traditional hospitality models, from which they are usually excluded, the young women enjoy conviviality without the anxiety entailed in rigid social rules. A similar scene occurs at Ek'a's place, when Ek'a's older sister and her female friends gather with Ek'a and Natia in the living room to drink small glasses of liqueur, smoke cigarettes, play the piano and sing love songs. As soon as they notice that Ek'a's mother is returning home, the girls tidy up hastily and sit quietly around the table pretending to study.

The scenarios reproduced in the film recall experiences from my research. Living in a house with women for a while, as the men worked out of town and only came home at weekends, I observed how my female hosts sometimes did not just want to feed me (and themselves), but meant to improvise a hospitality event which loosely followed the *supra* model. This was usually marked by the preparation of some 'special' food, such as *khink'ali* (dumplings) or *khach'ap'uri* (cheesy bread), and most importantly the consumption of wine. My hosts sometimes asked me, as well as other female friends and relative who occasionally were around, to sit around the table and drink 'a glass each' of homemade wine. Regardless

of the improvisation and the small size of the event, toasts were made properly and the glasses (of which we usually drank more than one) emptied and refilled, reproducing the *tamadoba* structure.

These examples show women approaching hospitality by reframing the usually male-dominated traditional models. Echoing Lik'a's and Marina's points (see above), rather than being discriminatory *per se*, hospitality practices can be recreated in a spontaneous fashion, even following traditional patterns. Yet, in the examples mentioned, recreation takes place in the private realm of the house, within an exclusively female circle. Both in *In Bloom* and with my female hosts, it is challenging for women to translate the sense of relaxation experienced in their privately reproduced hospitality moments into public claims against the way traditional norms work. Women's reproduction of hospitality practices in the private domestic sphere reinforces ties of solidarity and empathy between female relatives, friends and neighbours. However, reproducing home hospitality among female tablemates does not make practices such as *supra* more inclusive. The traditional male-dominated, hierarchical structure of hospitality is hardly challenged, leaving the public stage of hospitality largely inaccessible to women.

During my research, I came across several cases in which women appropriated hospitality traditions in ironic, critical or even subversive ways, exposing gender discrimination to the public. A friend of mine who works at an LGBT rights organisation in Tbilisi told me that some activists had reproduced *supra* with the *tamadoba* structure in a feminist fashion. Similarly, in 2014, art galleries in Tbilisi and other Georgian cities hosted an exhibition called 'Supra of her own' ('*Sak'utari supra*'), organised by a Georgian artist, a Polish anthropologist and a Georgian NGO. The exhibition, drawing upon in-depth interviews with women victims of gender-based violence, was 'about the invisibility of women's painful experiences and about novel ways of making these public'.²

An exhilarating example of the public exposure by women of the male-dominated hospitality tradition is provided by artists Sophia T'abat'adze and Natia Ts'uluk'idze's 2006 work 'Georgian Table Traditions'.³ In a video called 'Let's Drink to Love', a Georgian man (recalling the large dark-haired *supra* figures in Nik'o Pirosmeni's paintings)⁴ sits in a barber shop being shaved while holding a glass of wine. The man, covered in shaving foam, begins a toast 'to love' – *Siq'varuls gaumarjos!* – and continues to declaim odes to love for several minutes. When the barber warns 'Careful, I might cut you!' the man solemnly declares: 'What is a knife wound next to love?? Cut me, my brother, cut me!' At the end of the shave, the man terminates his toast and drinks the wine. Text accompanying the video provides excerpts from an 'Introduction' to the Georgian table traditions from a 'tamadaonline' website: 'Do you want to know where the Georgian man reveals himself in his entire splendour? This is the Georgian Table! [...] High-flown and magic words seem to help him

² Chabashvili, T. & Dudrak, A. (2014). *Sak'utari supra – A supra of her own*. Available at: <https://supraofherown.wordpress.com>

³ T'abat'adze, S. and Ts'uluk'idze, N. (2006). *Georgian Table Traditions*. Available at: <http://khinkalijuice.blogspot.co.uk/>

⁴ Nik'oloz Pirosmeni (1862-1918) was a Georgian painter whose fame, attained posthumously, mainly derives from works depicting Georgian food and wine culture in general, and convivial consumption at *supra* in particular (Söderlind 2012). Stereotyped images of Georgian men and women, with traditional clothes, headgear and haircuts (and long moustaches in the case of men), depicted in their allotted roles at hospitality events, are a recurrent feature of many of Pirosmeni's paintings.

(the *tamada*, author's note) to establish contact with Heaven...' At the end of a series of 'unwritten rules' for *tamada*, regarding sense of humour, hierarchy and timing, it is recommended to: 'Never forget the women in the kitchen [...]. Make sure the granny, aunts, moms and sisters are invited into the presence of the guests and toasted. [...] Praise the meal [and conclude the toast with] the traditional saying: "May we never lack your guidance and care" or "May your hands and arms always be healthy"'.

The reproduction of hospitality practices among women often re-enacts traditional patterns, possibly but not necessarily in an ironic way, remaining largely confined to the private domestic sphere within a circle of female relatives or friends. However, criticism and subversion of male-dominated hospitality are also expressed in a public way, as indicated by examples of certain artistic performances. Ties of female hospitality developing in the house can spread to the public realm of art, education, and social and political activism, demanding more inclusive practices of hospitality accessible to all members of society. Who are the women who internalise, reproduce or subvert hospitality practices? What are the dividing lines between women along which the passive internalisation, private reproduction and public reappropriation of hospitality unfold?

Women of the past and the future: Hospitality and gendered social cleavages

Different attitudes to hospitality can be investigated along with divides between women on the basis of age, social class, education and life experience. Generally, among my participants, women with deeply internalised gender roles belong to an older generation with respect to women who have a more critical approach to gender divides. This is a fairly expected feature, since intolerance of tradition and drive for change are usually prominent in younger generations (Sumbadze & Tarkhan-Mouravi 2006, 2003).⁵

The still fairly widespread habit of early marriage (for women earlier than for men) contributes to this generational divide. Many of my participants in their fifties had been wives and mothers for more than thirty years, with limited experience of other sides of womanhood. Although early marriage habits have far from disappeared, people are gradually getting married at a later stage (Roberts, Pollock, Rustamova, Mammadova & Tholend 2009). As a consequence, young women are 'dispensed' for a longer time from child-rearing and house-keeping, spending more time with their peers in schools, universities or workplaces, and being less likely to be extensively involved in *supra* mechanism since their teenage or early youth.

Women's marriage age and level of education, which are positively correlated, are in turn linked to class, intended both in its economic and social senses (Roberts & Pollock 2009). Women (and young people in general) with lower socio-economic status tend to follow the dominant sequence of family formation – (early) marriage, becoming parents, remaining married. This pattern is largely due to the impossibility of young people purchasing their own place. Moreover, many households, including those of young adults, are

⁵ The two researchers first published their survey on Georgian youth's transition to adulthood in 2003 in a paper for the Policy Documentation Centre at the Central European University. The survey was re-published with additional new data in an edited volume in 2006. I report both versions of the survey throughout the chapter because certain details which appear in the first were omitted from the second and vice-versa.

viable only due to multiple incomes (Roberts, Pollock, Rustamova, Mammadova & Tholend 2009, Sumbadze & Tarkhan-Mouravi 2006, 2003). Living with older generations is sometimes the only chance for young women to have a job outside the house. The loss of free nurseries and kindergartens after the end of communism, alongside the reluctance of private sector employers to finance maternity leave, makes the help of older women in child-rearing indispensable (Roberts & Pollock 2009). Yet, living at one parents' place also means being largely subject to the rules through which older generations run the household, which often include the expectation that all family members contribute to the making of *supras* organised in the domestic space according to socially established rules and norms.

The likelihood of attending university is also related to the socio-economic status of one's family. A 2007 survey conducted in the South Caucasus, dividing families into lower, intermediate and higher socio-economic groups according to their parents' degree of education and occupation, showed that young people progressing to higher education made up 21, 40, and 69 per cent of each group respectively (Roberts & Pollock 2009: 586). The majority of my female participants with an openly critical stance towards hospitality traditions were young unmarried women (usually under 30), most likely with experience living abroad, which was usually linked to attendance at higher education institutions.

These divides among women are reflected by a gap separating the private reproduction of hospitality practices in the female domestic sphere from the public reappropriation and criticism of *supra*. I could often observe a lack of connection between women's gatherings which 'domesticate' male-dominated hospitality (Smith & Rochovská 2007) and public expressions which denounce gender discrimination at *supra*. These instances, exemplified by the artistic performances mentioned in the previous section, are fundamental manifestations of rising awareness and changing attitudes among women, which should certainly be cultivated. However, these critical practices need to be connected to women's everyday lives, otherwise they risk becoming locked in enclosed circle of female artists, activists and intellectuals, losing potential for a wider social and cultural change.

The past/future opposition which pervaded post-Rose Revolution narratives had a large impact on ideas of womanhood. In some of my participants' view, Western models of sophisticated and independent women were epitomised by Sandra Roelofs, Saak'ashvili's Dutch wife, who was also seen by many as a further confirmation that the president was committed to Western values and lifestyle in the public as well as in the private life. Such allegedly 'Western' female characteristics contrast with images of 'traditional' Georgian women, oppressed and dependent on their men, resilient yet physically and psychologically demeaned by everyday life's hardships.

Many of my participants who proudly defined themselves as liberated from this condition – feeling independent of their husbands, with the possibility of travelling, living and working outside Georgia, and possibly in a comfortable economic situation - sympathised with their co-nationals who were still brutalised by a patriarchal system. However, this solidarity was sometimes expressed in a vertical way. For example, Tako (45, profession unknown), who had lived abroad and who openly criticised the patriarchal structure of Georgian society, referred to her fellow countrywomen in the following terms: 'Of course, these women see nothing beyond being a good wife, mother and daughter-in-law, which means cooking, cleaning, rearing children and serve their men the all day! The have

never left Georgia, and they have never had a life outside their houses'. This kind of statement reflects the depth of divisions which post-revolutionary modernisation narratives contributed to deepen across the population. In these narratives, 'typically Georgian' men and women were often essentialised in opposition to Western models: the former as despotic masters and/or brutal alcoholics, the latter as passive victims of men as well as of their own narrow perspectives. Post-revolutionary narratives depicted the marginalisation of women as a product of moral and cultural backwardness associated with the past, rather than as an attachment of social and economic inequality brought by the government's reforms.

Conclusion:

Criticism and reappropriation of hospitality practices create divides between women which follow differences in age, class, level of education and so on. The potential of women's hospitality practices to spread beyond the private domestic sphere and generate more inclusive expressions of conviviality and feasting is partially jeopardised by the clear-cut oppositions between 'old' – that is, 'typically Georgian' - and 'new', 'Westernised' women which post-revolutionary narratives emphasised. However, at the same time divides emerging from different approaches to hospitality may foster debate between different groups of women, which not only take the form of conflict but also of enriching exchange. In one of my host families, three different generations of women lived together. In the summer evenings we would sit on the porch having lively discussions, which often focused on the appropriate behaviour for women in the context of hospitality and beyond. In these debates, everyone was open to learning from other people's differences. Women from older generations, aged between 50 and 60, were usually more conservative and reluctant to accept younger women's non-conformist attitudes, emphasising their own deeper experience of the way certain things work in Georgia. However, mothers and grandmothers were also keen to listen to their daughters, recognising that this exchange with the younger generations had a significant impact on their own way of seeing the world. Similarly, young women were not dismissive of their older female relatives' lifestyle as a diminishing and oppressed form of womanhood. On the contrary, there was widespread awareness that women's discrimination and empowerment cannot be predicated upon superficial and misleading dichotomies such as 'Georgia'/'West' and 'tradition'/'modernity'.

Women's ambivalent attitudes towards hospitality tradition - as a dimension from which they are excluded and which therefore needs to be challenged, but also as a set of norms and dynamics playing an important role in women's everyday life – may create divisions, but also common ground for the exchange of opinions and experiences. This kind of interaction can bridge the gap between the private reframing of women's identities and roles and the public exposure of gender divides. In this way, hospitality practices, even in their traditional forms, may become a way through which to channel inclusiveness, solidarity and mutual respect across different social groups - men and women, but also women from different socio-economic milieus, with different life experiences, and from different generations.

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