Part 1: Wine

Chapter 1: Dictators at dinner and democracies of drink

“At the table everyone ate what he pleased and as he pleased, but God forbid he should cheat and omit the required glass. That the Leader did not like. The democracy of food at his table was balanced by the despotism of drink.”

-- Fazil Iskander, Belshazzar’s Feasts, from the novel Sandro of Chegem, p. 178.

Stalin at the feast: Ritual, politics, everyday life.

If a foreigner knows two things about the country of Georgia, they know that Stalin (“the Leader” in the above quote) was a Georgian and that Georgians are not only fond of wine and drinking it in feasts called supras, they even claimed to have invented wine as well as the best way of drinking it (the supra). A curious pair of “firsts”, it would seem that no two things could be further apart, on the one hand, a ruthless and paranoid dictator, on the other, a happy-go-lucky, somewhat drunken, convivial expression of love and friendship. And yet, as the quote above shows, Georgians continuously draw attention to parallelisms between the political order of the state and the convivial order of the table: according to a Georgian proverb, the toastmaster (tamada) who leads the feast (supra) is “the dictator of the table”, for example. For example, in Fazil Iskander’s novels about his mythical Abkhazian character Sandro of Chegem, Uncle Sandro’s legendary abilities as a tamada at the table are frequently compared to Stalin’s abilities as leader of the USSR. The narrator of the novel calls “Uncle Sandro ‘the greatest toastmaster [tamada] of all times and nations’, which parodies Stalin’s ornate titles ‘the father of all nations’ and ‘the greatest leader of all time’” (Kanevskaia 2004: 145). Uncle Sandro himself, whose semi-fabulous personal adventures involve many run-ins with the famous Georgian dictator, opines that
Stalin too might have become a pretty fair *tamada* had he not been so busy with politics. Here Uncle Sandro stopped and looked slyly around from his high pillow, as if trying to see whether his far-reaching innuendo had reached his listeners. Whether it had or not is hard to say because at that point Tengiz tore himself away from his bone and gave Uncle Sandro a scornful look, asking ‘So, if you hadn’t spent so much time at the table you might have become a great leader?’ (Iskander 1983: 273)

If the metaphoric comparison of dictatorships and feasts is so good to think for Georgians and Abkhazians alike, since, all disagreements aside about ethnic origins and territorial integrity of historical states aside, in these matters their customs and terminology are very similar, how much more food for thought is there if the legendary dictator is actually a guest at such a feast? This is the conceit that Iskander uses to explore the role of the paranoid personality and emerging personality cult of Stalin in the Great Purges, by imagining him at an Abkhazian feast (see also Kanevskaya 2004, especially 137-145). The result is a jarring contradiction between the inability of a ritual feast, a mere convivial scene, to encompass the immense and fractious personalities of the persons on the guest-list. The feast is an important image, because, for Stalin, feasting is both a ceremony that is an image of his own paternalistic rule of the Soviet empire, but also an event of everyday life where he can relax and give over his authority to someone else, the *tamada*, or toastmaster, the “dictator of the table” (Stalin chooses his dear old friend and local representative of the Abkaz communist party, Nestor Lakoba, as *tamada* (p.176)). So this story (also made into a film in 1989) plays with the opposition between the dictatorship over everyday life in the USSR that Stalin has as Secretary of the Communist Party, and the dictatorship over everyday life at the table that the *tamada* (Nestor Lakoba) has. Stalin, himself, is presented as someone who takes joy in escaping
the world of the state, of politics, and finding in small things, the world of everyday life, a world unpolluted by politics:

[Stalin] was gladdened by the sight of these well-built dancers, tightly buttoned in their black cherkeskas. At moments like this, he loved anything whose value was both obvious and irrelevant to politics, which sometimes worried him. Seemingly irrelevant, that is, because subliminally he associated this obvious value and perfection with the cumbrous, crawly thing that metamorphosed from his every political act, and he interpreted it as a material, if small, proof of the thing’s innocence. Thus the twenty well-built dancers metamorphosed into flourishing delegates for his ethnic policy, just as the children who ran into the Mausoleum where he stood on holidays metamorphosed into the heralds of the future, its rosy kisses. And he could appreciate these things as no one else could, stunning those who surrounded him by his unparalleled range—from demonic mercilessless down to tenderness over what were, in point of fact, very small joys. Noticing that those who surrounded him were stunned by his unparalleled range, he more keenly appreciated his own ability to appreciate the small joys of life that lay outside history (Iskander 1983: 177)

In this novel, then, the metaphoric relationship between the supra and the state, the everyday and the political, are brought into metonymic alignment by having Stalin as a guest at a supra. And yet, at the same time, this novelized Stalin desires to separate out the transparent innocence of the feast, the “small joys of life that lay outside history”, from hidden political agendas and intrigues. As I show in this chapter and the next, the ambivalent reception, on the one hand using the supra as a central metaphor for politics, and on the other hand as something completely innocent of and irrelevant to politics, is typical of Georgian discourse about the supra. Certainly contemporary Georgians can find in the supra a ritual which provides a stability missing from the political order, in which Georgia is anything but stable and secure, characterized by a wild array of revolutions, wars, and experiments in political form including democracy, anarchy, kleptocracy, and dictatorship in the last two decades. On the other hand, there are signs that the supra itself, like any good dictatorship, presents itself as an eternal and
immutable fact, part of a “life that lay outside of history”, but is actually a constantly changing historically. Uncle Sandro notes that Stalin would have made a good tamada, but misses the tragic irony that “if Stalin had spent more time in simple human pleasures and used his organizational genius as a tamada, the world would have been a much better place” (Kanevskaya 2004: 145). But for many Westernizing “civil society” reformers, the institution of tamada is far from being an innocent compensatory refuge from politics in the “small joys of life outside of history”, but represents if anything the source of Georgia’s political backwardness. Therefore, the key to reforming Georgian politics is to reform everyday life, to abolish the supra.

For other, less reform-minded Georgians, however, it is impossible to imagine Georgian life without the supra. After all, nothing is more characteristic of Georgians in general as the supra. Comportment at the supra is likely the first thing a foreigner will need to learn in order to function in Georgian society, and no foreigner will escape a visit to Georgia without encountering a supra. It is ubiquitous and distinctive and easily recognizable from afar. If someone wants to represent Georgians, and draw attention to the fact that they are Georgians, say, in a picture, they will usually represent them as seated and toasting at a supra.

For example, in this cartoon from the turn of the century, a commentary on the dire problems resulting from the lack of available seats on the Transcaucasian railroad shows how this forces passengers to ride on the roof. But to show that these are Georgians or other Transcaucasian populations (Armenians, for example) who share this ritual riding on the roof, the cartoonist shows them passing their voyage in the most typically and
distinctively Georgian pastime imaginable, seated at a supra, even though most of what they are doing would be impossible on the roof of a train in motion:

Figure 1: “Trains on the Transcaucasian Railway. Because of lack of spaces they frequently are on the roofs of wagons”

The cartoon is not about the Georgian supra, but it uses the supra as a convenient image to identify the train, the passengers, the locality in general as being a Georgian or Transcaucasian one. The supra is a convenient stereotypical visual idiom that can be used to represent Georgianness, because of its easy recognizability, but also because of its qualities as a ritual that make discourse about life in Georgian intimately connected to discourse about the ritual idiom, the supra. In this ritual, a certain kind of drink, wine, plays a central role, for one can scarcely have a supra without large quantities of wine.
One cannot really drink wine without falling into the ritual idiom of the supra. Wine, the supra, and enactments of stereotypical Georgianness are all inter-related. One reason the supra has attracted so much attention by would be political reformers, then, is the way it seems to stand for everything that is Georgian, the entire existing political and social order they want to change finds its stereotypic emblem in the supra. For exactly the same reasons, traditionalists who oppose these Westernizing reformers rush to the defense of the supra as though it incarnated everything that is distinctive about Georgia and Georgians.

Therefore, as I did in the introduction, in the next two chapters I examine (non-animated) cartoons as a way of looking at ritual, criticisms of ritual, and representations of Georgian everyday life. Ritual and cartoons are both stereotyping genres. Both magnify the minor differences latent in everyday life. But they differentiate themselves from the everyday in opposite aesthetic and epistemic directions: the cartoon banalizes, materializes, makes grotesque, while ritual elevates, idealizes, and creates models and paragons. While cartoons and rituals both stereotype the messier categories of everyday life, cartoons and rituals are opposed to each other on another epistemic axis: cartoon stereotypes take the supra and reduce it to the grotesque material banalities of everyday life. The supra instead seeks to idealize everyday life and elevate it, idealize it. Satire and criticism are as alien to the supra as maudlin sentimentality and pious homilies are alien to the cartoon. By looking at ritual through the lens of cartoons, we add a missing dimension to an otherwise idealized version of everyday life represented by the supra. One might object that cartoons are an unusual choice, but even my Georgian friends point out to me that a supra that has a foreign guest is different, more idealizing, than a supra
with just Georgians: the private jokes shared between Georgians (and not with outsiders) about the supra, jokes which cannot be uttered at a supra, become visible in cartoons.¹

These cartoons are primarily from a Socialist state organ, the satire/humor magazine *Niangi* (“Crocodile”). They cover the whole period of the active life of that publication (1920s-1990s), a period which is essentially identical to Socialism. Consequently, often the satire is on state-directed themes with state-directed lessons. Often a pious socialist homily can be found floating somewhere around a cartoon that makes explicit its social activist implications. But even as I add that caveat, we must also remember that the Soviet state, often presented in popular discourse as an inscrutable alien entity, opposed at every point to “the people”, was a leviathan whose body (and mind) was made up of Soviet people. It doesn’t matter how “representative” any of these opinions were at the time, the point is that they were thinkable, enunciable, and once enunciated, recognizable even by those who rejected those positions (as I have verified time and again by showing these cartoons to Georgians). But what I primarily address in this chapter, the supra as a fact of quasi-private, quasi-public life, provides precisely an arena in which relations between the socialist state and the people, public and private life, could be imagined.

In both the private and the public, the everyday and the political, no single aspect of Georgian life and culture has attracted as much attention as the Georgian feast, or *supra*. The supra provides an image both distinctive of utopian Georgian everyday life, but also, as I will show, for the dystopian world of Georgian politics. But what is the *supra*? Moving from its most material manifestation to its most ideal, the *supra* is a feast, ideally characterized by an extremely abundant display of traditional foodstuffs. At
the same time, the *supra* is an occasion for ritualized drinking, involving the consumption of large quantities of wine (an average of one or more liters per participant). Lastly, the drinking of wine at the *supra* is attended by ritual toasts, directed by the *tamada*, in such a way that the ability to consume large quantities of alcohol while speaking eloquently are brought into alignment. As we move from the material supra of food to the ideal supra of words, the personnel of the supra changes too. We move from the foodstuffs purchased, prepared and served by the largely invisible labor of the women of the household, to the wine which will be consumed in highly visible masculine labors of toasting (including, of course a toast to the women of the household in repayment for their labors).

Within broader social contexts, the image of the supra appears to serve as a shifting bellwether, or janus-faced boundary marker, of imagined relations between state and society, between private and public life. The final period of socialism in Georgia, as elsewhere, was characterized by an “antipolitics.” As Gal argues, the idea of “antipolitics” was based on a certain recursive quality to the public-private distinction under socialism (Gal 2002). The recursiveness of the categories of public and private under socialism, as elsewhere, Gal argues, is inadequately handled by the analogy of a “shifting boundary” between separate spheres. The public/private distinction is a recursive one, so that the opposition public-private can in turn be re-applied to public or private spaces. For example, the street is public with respect to a private home, but within a home, there are in turn spaces that are relatively public and relatively private. As Gal argues, this recursivity has important consequences for understanding Socialist dissident politics in relation to categories like politics/everyday life, public/private,
masculine/feminine. In the case of “anti-politics” elsewhere, dissident “publics” under socialism were created within the intimate “private” sphere, a kind of “kitchen politics.” Unlike dissident activity created through external networks and samizdat publications, which constituted a non-state form of “politics”, such kitchen politics was understood as a kind of “antipolitics”, in a manner similar to what Georgians would later claim about the supra.ii

While “antipolitics” might be conceptualizable along the lines of such a recursive opposition between public and private, I want argue in this chapter that the more relevant opposition is between the world of the state, of politics and history, and the “life that lay outside of history”, what is usually called in Georgia “everyday life” (Georgian qopa, cxovreba, qopa-cxovreba, Russian byt), a term that includes “everyday life”, “daily life”, “domestic life”, and carries connotations of ethnographically specific “way of life” or “lifestyle” (Buchli 1999: 23), as an unanalyzed moral high ground from which to criticize the manifest illegitimacy of the Russian, socialist state. I note parenthetically here that while “everyday life” seems a concrete enough topic by now in Western cultural theory since at least World War 2, a much longer and livelier Russian and Georgian intelligentsia tradition of theorizing everyday life as both the real conditions and domain of revolutionary transformation predates this discourse by at least a century (for example Boym 1994, Kiaer 1997, Buchli 1999), though in Western readers and treatments of the theoretical category there is at most a reference to the tail end of this tradition in the Russian revolution and nothing more (e.g. Highmore’s Everyday Life Reader [2002] contains an excerpt from Trotsky 1923, while the surveys in crook 1998, Hubble 2006 do not so much as mention this tradition).iii
The categories of state and society, history and life, while everywhere overlapping and recursively interpenetrating, were imagined as bounded and opposed entities. And everyday life was imagined as one of the key battlegrounds, perhaps even more so than the economy, both a barrier to and the object of creative socialist revolutionary transformation, the unenlightened past in the way of the bright socialist future (Trotsky 1973; Boym 1994, Kiaer 1997, Buchli 1999):

Daily life [byt], i.e. conditions and customs, are, more than economics, ‘evolved behind men’s backs,’ in the words of Marx. Conscious creativeness in the domain of custom and habit occupies but a negligible place in the history of man. Custom is accumulated from the elemental experience of men; it is transformed in the same elemental way under the pressure of technical progress or the occasional stimulus of revolutionary struggle. But in the main, it reflects more of the past of human society than of its present. (Trotsky 1973: 29)

In part the importance of everyday life as the ground of late socialist antipolitics is a legacy of the socialist state’s own ambiguous attitudes towards it (Buchli 1999), including, in the case of Georgia, its most salient and ethnographically obvious part, the supra, a topic which I discuss in the next chapter. With collectivization of agriculture and creation of a socialist planned economy, the state prized a portion of production from everyday life and made it part of the socialist political economy. Everyday life remained as a recalcitrant residuum, as a private world of consumption, whose specifically Georgian form was the supra. Under socialism, particularly in state-sponsored discourse, the image of the supra was often mobilized as an image of society as opposed to the state, an image of undesirable aspects of everyday life such as immoderate consumption, an obstacle to production. It was also used to represent political corruption and the colonization of the state bureaucracy by personal networks and kinship. However, there was also no question that by the late 1960s, at least, socialist conditions had produced an
unprecedented ‘golden age’ of the supra. Therefore, beginning with Stalin’s recuperation of everyday life, the image of the supra could also represent the goal of production, the achievement of a cultured private life of socialist consumption served by technocratic socialist state production. So far from being a traditional Georgian ritual at every point opposed to the modernizing socialist state, the supra itself becomes a modern socialist form of sociality. Therefore, a ritual that is represented as timeless tradition opposed to socialist modernity, or a category of everyday life or civil opposed to the socialist state, has, upon further inspection, been thoroughly remodeled, even strengthened, under socialism.

Even the way the supra has become a sacred exponent of timeless Georgian national tradition in the post-socialist and anti-socialist discourse mirrors the way that the socialist state set up the supra as a model of the recalcitrant world of everyday life. In this antipolitics discourse, the supra is often said to have been a compensatory private locus of expression of religious values, of civic values, of personal freedoms, of Georgianness, which had been denied expression under socialism. As such, it could be connected to terms like “civil society”, which equally eludes definition in post-socialist discourse or anywhere else.

However, as new Westernizing elites have appeared and, like many before them including the socialist state, sought to place their imprint on Georgian life, the supra again appears as a holdover, which serves as a barricade to Westernization. Years after independence, this critique of the political from the authentic perspective of everyday life (symbolized by the supra) has been replaced in some circles by a return to the political critique of everyday life itself, in particular the supra. Here the perceived shortcomings
of Georgian political and public life are grounded in a critique of Georgian private "everyday life", especially the supra. Thus, in post-socialist discourse, the supra could be represented as a form of anti-colonial, anti-socialist resistance of an inauthentic public life by an authentic private life, or, the supra could represent a nefarious private world which systematically undermined the creation of a progressive and orderly political life modeled on the West. In many ways, the shifting, recursive, opposition between private life and public state life, of ethnographic particularity and socialist universality, of Georgian intransigence and Western progress, are all symbolizable by the supra.

What is it about the supra that makes it “good to think”? The supra is as ubiquitous a social form as it is obligatory. The supra is the single mold into which are poured all secular rituals, all social occasions, formal and informal, celebrations of all holidays from New Years to Christmas and all life cycle transitions from birth to death. The ubiquity of the supra more than anything explains why the supra is good to think as an image of Georgian society: the supra is good to think (and challenge, change, or preserve) as an image of society, because it is seemingly coterminous with Georgian society. Georgian social life presents itself as an endless series of supras.

In addition, the formal organization of the supra itself as a ritual makes it extremely visible, memorable, and easy to describe. The supra has all the formal properties of entextualization that oppose ritual performances to everyday life, such as conventionality, rigidity, condensation, repetition, redundancy, and boundedness (Tambiah 1979). Entextualization produces a strong opposition between a text or performance and its context as a well-delineated, bounded, and therefore visible figure from a ground (Bauman 2004). Since rituals are lavishly overdetermined in structure,
leaving nothing to chance, they are the visible tip of the iceberg of otherwise invisible, seen but unnoticed, “imponderabilia of everyday life”, to use Malinowski’s phrase. In content too, supras are like most rituals in that they are exemplary moments where the normative categories of that inform everyday life are performed. Rituals are performative in both senses of the word perform, that is, as in a performance on a stage, or as in performance of an action, they both represent and act upon everyday life. The supra is a traditionalizing form of discourse: it performatively creates that which it presupposes to be immutable. Because it is a traditionalizing and yet very visible aspect of the social, it presents itself as an ideal and idealized model of the social. Metacommentary about Georgian “society” tends to use the supra as a privileged image, both in the post-socialist Georgia of today as well as that of Socialism.

**Supra versus “Democracy”**. In contemporary Georgia, to talk about society is to talk politics, and vice versa. The ghost of socialist paternalism haunts the discourse of everyday life. Any talk, about any problem, will inevitably come to the same conclusion, a unified source for all social ailments resides in the government: All social problems, and even a few natural ones, like earthquakes, have political sources, usually hidden ones. With this government, this state, how can life get any better?

In November 2001, I am sitting at a supra, a guest of my neighbors; it’s a birthday party. One of the guests seated beside me is another neighbor, Tsitsino, who has heard there will be an American guest with whom she can practice her English. After verifying that her English is as good as she says it is, we talk a bit in our secret code. The conversation turns to the supra itself and she confides in me that she is not especially
fond of supras. Later, in another conversation, she tells me that she has recently celebrated her birthday. Remembering that she, like most Georgian women, dislikes supras, I jokingly ask her what sort of supra she had for her birthday party. She said: “We didn’t have a supra, we had a ‘democracy’”. I asked her what a “democracy” was, and she said in a “democracy” there was no tamada, or toastmaster, to tell people what to do. Therefore there were no “stupid rules”, as she put it, and hence, people just did what they felt like doing, drank, danced, whatever. She identified this as a “European” mode of behavior, like a cocktail party.

What would the opposite of the supra, which, is after all, first and foremost an event of eating and drinking, be called a “democracy”? What is it about a ritual like the supra that it can both be used as an image of civil society, of everyday life as opposed to the state, and at the very same time be used as an image of a (Russian, Georgian) authoritarian discourse opposed to (European) democracy?

In order to answer these questions, we need to know some things about the ritual itself. On the one hand, the ritual seems to create an internal political model, centering on the tamada or toastmaster, that is the very image of a political autocracy. At the same time the thematic progression of toasting creates a model of the social networks of individuals that under socialism that allowed them to navigate this universe. It was a model of everyday life and a model of the relevant others and kinship categories that inform the “second economy” (Mars and Altman 1983, 1991; Jgerenaia 2000). By contrast, the newly emerged non-ritual of drinking “democratically” opposed to the supra is a practical implementation of the emergent political critique of the supra located within new Westernizing elites, part of a broader turn to the political critique of everyday life.
In the next chapter, I will show how this same “democratic” political critique of the supra emerges from state discourses under socialism, where supra was mobilized as an image of society, of “everyday life”, in its manifold relations, both negative and positive, to an encompassing socialist state.

The supra and its others. The supra, as the hegemonic ritual form of alcoholic consumption in Georgia, organizes all other forms of consumption into a field of different practices, unified only by the fact that they are not supras. Each such “other” of the supra is at once the opposite of the supra, and at the same time able to be overwhelmed and absorbed into the hegemonic ritual form of the supra, which “trumps” all other opposed non-ritual forms of informal conviviality. In Tbilisi, the capital of the land of the vine, beer gardens and cafes proliferate, but one searches in vain for wine by the glass except in for restaurants that cater to foreigners. This is because wine is a ritual drink, while beer is an informal, non-ritual drink. (As we will see in the chapter on vodka, there are places in the mountains of Georgia where beer is the ritual drink). According to a self-consciously urban custom, one may toast with beer, but a beer toast is always humorous and always insincere, and almost always political. What is meant by a toast with beer is always the opposite of what is said. Wine toasts are always treated as being serious, sincere, and are never political. “Here’s to President Shevardnadze”, “Here’s to President Saakashvili”, drunk with beer, means “Down with President Shevardnadze!”,” “Down with President Saakashvili!” But the humor of this ritual inversion never lasts long. Seldom is more than a single “anti-toast” drunk at such an “anti-supra”. However, one cannot necessarily escape the supra even in a beer garden: if wine cannot be drunk with beer, vodka can be (a combination I found nauseating). Those who want to overlay
a semi-formal recognition of their fellow beer-drinkers, and who in addition want to actually get drunk, via toasting need only order vodka, and suddenly the occasion is in effect a supra, and the beer is now merely a chaser, no different from mineral water or soft drinks at a proper supra. The frequency with which this happens is, perhaps, an index of the way that the supra ritual represents a kind of interactional terra firma for many Georgian men: sociability without ritual underpinnings, and, of course, proper levels of inebriation, is not a positive thing, but an absence, radically incomplete, and perhaps not a little awkward. By contrast, women will sometimes sit alongside the table where the men are drinking wine and toasting and drink beer and talk among themselves, because, after all, drinking beer is socially inconsequential, much as their own participation at the ritual is felt to be.

The supra is explicitly contrasted with another such anti-ritual, more common amongst academics and intelligentsia, which bears the name alapurshet’i (derived, it is thought, from the French phrase a la fourchette (Tuite 2005)). This is a cocktail party reception especially associated with presentations of academic publications (Igerenaia 2000). Resembling a so-called “democracy”, but without its revolutionary aims, the alapurshet’i is distinguished from supra first of all by the fact that at a supra one sits at a common table, while at an alapurshet’i one stands. With this simple stipulation, the entire ritual order of the supra becomes impossible, for without a group seated at a table, there can be no dictator of the table, no tamada. In an alapurshet’i, the ancien regime of the supra is beheaded. If the “democracy” is a revolutionary innovation of recent years championed by, among others, young women like Tsitsino, then the alapurshet’i is a ritual patiently endured by men of the older “supra generation” as part and parcel of the
public, alienated realm of work. If the “democracy” belongs to the realm of freedom, the alapurshet’i belongs to the kingdom of necessity. As often as not, the alapurshet’i is simply created by the lack of money necessary to have a supra, as one friend ruefully noted to me. But, as with the informal sociability of beer gardens, the supra is no respecter of other genres, it never rests content with the sovereign boundaries of these other genres of behavior. In observed practice, an alapurshet’i, an abnormal, unsettled, unhappy compromise genre, constantly teetering on the boundary of becoming a supra. It begins in corners of the room, where men gather, standing, in twos and threes, and deliver half-hearted toasts. Finally, a table is brought in, a tamada is appointed: the revolutionary experiment is over, the alapurshet’i is dead, long live the supra!

The “democracy” of drink, adopted by the younger generation, is simply another anti-supra, a borrowing from the world of work into the world of leisure, from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom. Georgians who might find themselves at home in an alapursheti would represent a new kind of Georgian, what one observer has called “the reception-fourchette Georgian, the subject of the future Georgian democracy, who have washed away from their brain both supra toasts and sentimental details from the history of Georgia” (Jgerenaia 2000: 38). As a structurally opposed form of anti-supra, the alapursheti does indeed illustrate a utopian model of a very different Georgia, which is why it has assumed so much importance in the writings of Georgian civil society theorists (for whom, as intellectuals, it assumes a much more salient role in everyday practice). However, in real terms, this anti-ritual surely too marginal to serve as the basis for any future social revolution, the “democracy” of the younger generation appears to be a more direct opponent, since it is a form chosen willingly. The alapursheti
and the “democracy” are anti-supras, they are rivalrous with the hegemony of the supra, since they involve consumption of ritual drinks in a non-ritualized manner. By contrast the world of non-ritual drinks, beer, cocktails, coffee and soft drinks, sidestep the question by drinking fluids other than wine or vodka. For example, bottles of mineral water, usually the Georgian *Borjomi* named after the springs at a famous Georgian spa of the same name, are traditionally present alongside the (usually non-branded bottles of) wine, but hardly elicit notice. The wine is there to make the hang-over, the Borjomi is there to cure it, as Fazil Iskander notes, the bottles of Borjomi stand next to the bottles of wine “like vigilant hospital orderlies” (Iskander 1983: 177). Of these non-ritual drinks, drinking beer casts a sideward glance at the supra through the genre of “anti-toasts”, Borjomi, the medicinal drink, does so by casting a sideward glance at the capacity of the wine to produce hang-overs, but none of these drinks is rivalrous with wine.

**The moral and material supra.** Since the Renaissance, it has been a commonplace that feasts have mediated the opposed spheres of cosmology and social life, uniting talk and consumption, the moral and material, the spiritual and carnival, and the individual and the social (Jeanneret 1991: 38, Valeri 2001:10). Feasts like the supra are multidimensional performances, including matters of talk and comportment, drinking, and eating. For the supra, however, not all of these features are of equal social importance or individual interest. The aspects of the supra that are normatively salient for Georgian men may be of little interest to Georgian women. Those that are salient for Georgians may pass unnoticed by foreigners. And of course, different genres of representation may produce
different images of what aspects of the supra are visible: visual representations like cartoons, in particular, draw attention to the visible, material aspects of the supra.

The European writer Alexandre Dumas in his early description of a Georgian supra, deemed food to be a “very minor consideration” at a supra when compared to the quantity of drinking, “The important thing is how much one can drink. Even the most moderate drinkers usually manage five or six bottles of wine, and the average is twelve or fifteen” (Dumas 1859: 189).

Figure 2: ‘Logic’

‘Logic’

-- Drink from this q’ants’i, it will do you good.
-- I can’t, even dumb animals have a sense of proportion!

-- For precisely this reason we must drink more, so that we can be distinguished from animals. (Niangi 1940, 9]

The Georgian ideal of masculinity in the supra ritual is expressed quantitatively, both in terms of body size and drinking capacity of the drinker and size and capacity of drinking instruments. Correspondingly, the classic image of normative masculinity in cartoons about supras plays on the often very unequal capacities for drink of those brought together at a supra. In the cartoon above the ‘logic’ represented is a parody of the logic of the supra: The immense man on the left (a parodic idealization of quantified masculinity) is prevailing on the smaller man to drink from a large drinking horn (q’ants’i). The smaller man protests with dismay that “even dumb animals have a sense of moderation.” The larger man parries this seeming good sense with the unassailable logic of the supra: “Then we must drink more, so that we can be distinguished from animals!”

Dumas omits any reference to the toasting that justifies this excessive drinking. There has been, in fact, some argument that this absence may not be an omission, that the contemporary form of toasting at the supra in fact seems to be a ritual innovation (Bregadze 2000). However, in contemporary supras, masculinity at a supra is expressed quantitatively in equal and paired measures of word and drink. One must underline the seriousness of one’s well-chosen words with heroic deeds, specifically of drinking. The more one drinks, the more one “means” what one is saying; but at the same time, eloquence and capacity for drink are both expressions of masculine self-mastery. The
amount one drinks to the toast indicates amount of respect towards the object of the toast, while the size of the glass one is offered for the toast indicates the importance of the toast. The quantity one drinks indicates how one values the object of the toast. It is not uncommon, for example, for a host to pick up the half-full glass of a guest after a toast in their own honor and say ruefully “This is how much you esteem me?” (ai ase mapaseb?). Not drinking, therefore, for men is an act of disrespect towards the object of the toast, and can be sanctioned in the limiting case with physical violence; for women, on the other hand, the question of drinking or not drinking is essentially irrelevant, as far as the men are concerned, as is their participation more generally in the supra after the food is served.

The two acts, drinking and speaking, are linked by their mutual resemblance. A recent guide to supra etiquette begins with this observation:

A Georgian toast should resemble a moderate sized drinking-bowl (piala) filled with good wine-- neither with long words should you tire your listener, nor should you drink like a drunk, alone, without words. (Kinkladze 2000:3)

At the same time the mutual quantitative and qualitative resemblance of drinking and speaking are underlined by their reflexive relation of contiguity; at a supra one may never drink without first completing a toast, which “blesses” the wine. The form of the toast almost always reflexively draws attention to the co-presence of drink: “With this little glass, I want to drink a toast to….” At the same time, the importance of the toast in general or the commitment of the speaker to the toast, how they value the object of the toast, is measured by the quantity of wine that is drunk (Kinkladze 2000: 20).

One does not sip, one finishes one’s toast and then (ideally) finishes one’s drink “to the bottom”, then places the cup on the table. If the drinking vessel is one that cannot
stand up unaided, as for example, a q’ants’i or drinking horn or wooden goblets made especially without bases, the table cloth will be besmirched by the red wine from unfinished toast. Therefore, when drinking from such a vessel one must drink to the bottom (Kinkladze 2000: 20-21).

Not only does the supra calibrate relationship of drinking to speaking in quantity, but it also foregrounds the qualitative manner of drinking. This is expressed by a proliferation in the realm of the technology of drinking that borders on a poeticization of the otherwise functional domain of drinking vessels. Dumas notes that “They have a bewildering variety of drinking vessels of all shapes and sizes, even the smallest holds at least a bottleful--gourds, silver-mounted drinking horns two or three feet long, bowls with the head of a stag painted inside them in such a way that the antlers seem to move as one drinks” (Dumas, 1859: ibid). Drinking with such a special drinking vessel, which for the duration of a single toast replaces the standard unmarked glass, is called drinking “different” (gansxvavebuli). But qualitative difference is also quantitative, “different” drinking vessels almost always at least seem to involve drinking more, if not absolutely, at least dramaturgically. Such a poeticization of the means of consumption is a motif of Niangi cartoons about the supra, as this one, in which the standard toast of the form “Friends, with this little glass…” is replaced with, “Friends, with these various (gansxvavebuli) drinking implements.”

Figure 3
“Different” drinking vessels are not only “different” in form and aesthetic design, but also in size and capacity. Thus, with the poeticization of the drinking performance comes the possibility of theatricalization of the drinking performance, dividing the performance in two, between appearance and reality, front stage and back stage. As one crafty Georgian acquaintance pointed out to me, “different” drinking vessels differ from a normal wine glass not only in having a much greater apparent volume, but also almost all “different” drinking implements are (unlike the usual wine glasses) all made of opaque materials and also all appear to hold greater volumes than they actually do hold. Only the pourer and the drinker really know how much wine was in the drinking horn.

**Figure 4: Notary**
"If you are a brother, witness for me, that for a toast to our viniculturalists and tea-workers I emptied this q'antsi’ (Niangi 1981.1)

This Niangi cartoon gestures at the possibility of a falsified performance of drinking by having the drinker appeal to a public notary to witness that the drinker did indeed empty a very large full drinking horn. Each individual act of drinking at a supra is both moral and material. A public material enactment or display of private moral “valuation” (dapaseba, in the sense of “value, evaluate”, but etymologically related to concepts of “pricing” [shepaseba], pasi “price”), it is frequently used to evaluate delinquent drinking at a supra. The moral value of respect can be read off the amount of drink.

But what of the food? While it is true, following Dumas, that food, in descriptions of a supra, is given “minor consideration”, it hardly follows that it is any less essential than drink and toasts. In descriptions of the supra, the quintessentially male
activities of the supra (talking and drinking) are presented “as if” they were the main, indispensably, and indeed, independent part of the supra, just as female activities are relegated to the relatively uninteresting role of the presupposed but backgrounded “base” (Nizharadze 2000: 22). A kind of latent masculine “idealism” opposed to a feminine “materialism” is detectable here. And yet the “formality” of the supra depends, more than anything else on the almost theatrical display and presentation of foodstuffs, a matter assiduously attended to by an exclusively female staff. The presentation of the food is absolutely presupposed, but seldom commented upon as such, and its consumption, unlike wine, is theoretically unregulated (at least by men, just as the tamada orders his guests to drink, the hostess will sometimes enjoin a guest to eat more). As the Abkhazian author Fazil Iskander points out, in the quote that begins this chapter, a Georgian (or Abkhazian) supra could be called indeed a dictatorship of drink, but a democracy of food.

Figure 5
A supra is a democracy of food, at least in terms of consumption, where the guests must be allowed to eat whatever they may want, whenever they want it, but this freedom of the guest is subtended by a vast amount of female labor in the household which is seldom recognized and repaid by the men by more than a single toast. This immense asymmetry is parodied in this Niangi cartoon, where a woman is shown in three frames assembling a meal (including going shopping, returning with heavy bags, and
cooking) as her husband sits idly by, finally taking up the glass to perform the focal moment of making an 8th of March (International Women’s Day) toast to praise her. Aside from using the occasion of the 8th of March to critique the “double shift” worked by women under socialism, the very unequal exchange between the largely unsung material labors of the woman (which, after all, take up three frames of shopping, carrying, and cooking) and the ritually focal moral labor of proposing and drinking performed by the man is in focus.

**Figure 6**

“Move aside these plates and suckling pigs so the guests can see me!”
The supra ritual has very little to say about the food which it presupposes, but the supra cannot succeed as an act of hospitality without it. In a “proper” supra the table must display an inexhaustible abundance of traditional dishes must be available, so much so that the table-cloth (supra) from which the ritual takes its name should be almost invisible. Ideally, there should be no room on the cloth any new dishes. A Niangi cartoon parodies “three-to-four storey supras” with food piled so high that only with difficulty can the toasters clink each others’ glasses. The tamada (toastmaster) is depicted as saying “Remove these plates and suckling pigs so the guest can see me!” The moral commentary (a common aspect of any moralizing Niangi cartoon addressed to reforming existing practices to form a “cultured” form of socialist consumption) explains that “Frequently we greet guests with ‘three-to-four-storey’ supras, but with this we cannot merit the name of generous host, for at such times we convert human relationships into a competition in pigging out”.

Paradoxically, the feast should also be ever young, it should always appear in a state of perfection, every serving dish should always be full, every plate should always be clean. Yet, the very act of consumption destroys this state of perfection. The intersection of these imperatives of display and consumption generates a vast amount of bustling work for the female staff, who replace the plates of guests with fresh ones, ensuring all dishes are always as full as if they had never been touched, or, at least, spreading the existing food more evenly across the dish:

None of the food is served in courses; rather dishes are gradually added to the table and people help themselves to whatever they wish, usually in small amounts, nibbling at different things over the course of the supra….During the supra women hover over the table, refilling serving dishes, bringing more water, soft drinks or wine, serving the warm dishes, fruits and sweets, and changing the
plates of the participants as they get dirty. (*How to Arrange Georgian Supra*: 9-10)

**Supra and Society.** The supra is everywhere in society, so it is not surprise that it can become an image of society. Not only is the supra in its occasions coterminous with society, with everyday life, since every major holiday and every major life transition is recognized in a supra. Within the supra, the toasting itself produces a reduced model of society, a ritual microcosm of social macrocosm. If the spatial organization of the supra organizes co-present persons into hierarchical categories of participation, centered on the paragon of masculinity, the tamada, followed by the male adults, and then the optional participation of women and children, the temporal organization of the supra, reflected in the order of toasts, produces a separate ritual fade out from focal participants to outer darkness. The spatial fade out of participation is based on relations of resemblance between participants and the *tamada* in terms of age and gender, while the temporal fade out principle emanates from a single celebrant (for example, the bride and groom at a wedding) who serves like the *ego* of a kinship diagram, the toasts mapping out their social network from close kin to humanity in general.

In general, the toasts of the contemporary urban supra recognize only certain kinds of social relationships, ones focusing on durable kinship categories, and those moral categories of relevant others constitutive of the shifting category of “society”, of “everyday life”. The ordinary Georgian supra is a reduced model of society without the state, a private world without a public, just as supras among political elites under Tsarism and Stalinism would instead replicate the state hierarchy in their supra toasts, the state without society. In either case, what is perhaps most unusual is to have supra toasts mix
the two categories of relationality: official supras recognize official relationships, everyday supras recognize everyday ones. The everyday supra ritual delineates a model of “private” forms of relationality. Official supras, by contrast, which create with ritual toasts diagrams of institutional hierarchies, public categories of relationality of a specific institutional whole (an imperial hierarchy, a state hierarchy, an institutional hierarchy) that the supra toasts step by step delineate. In each kind of supra, oppositions between different spheres (political, everyday) of modern socialist and post-socialist life are erected, delineated and reinforced by recognition of distinct qualitative categories of moral relationship in toasting. The supra, functioning as a ritual in both “private” and “public” contexts, serves to delineate a diagram of a universe of social relations, “a social network made manifest” in Mars and Altman put it in their classic article on the supra (Mars and Altman 1991: 277). The ritual thereby serves a crucial role in bounding the domains of everyday life and the state (as a whole or in its separate institutional guises), precisely by ritually delineating them and objectifying them as entities.

The supra not only ritually delineates, but also sacralizes, or at least strongly typifies and objectifies, the social relations of everyday life. And yet, the cosmology of the supra is by and large a secular one. However, except in the opening or closing toasts, explicit recognition of religious cosmology is rare (though explicitly religious toasts are rising in number in my observation), when compared, for example, to toasts amongst Svan mountaineers, which follow a purely cosmological hierarchy moving downwards from Xosha Gherbet “Great God” down to Lamaria “Mother of God”, with categories of humans only recognized through their corresponding patron divinities. While many authors, and some Georgians, have seen in the supra a lay practice that mirrors the last
supper and the eucharist, most Georgians do not comment on the supra in this way in my experience; even if, for example, there are toasts that make explicit reference to cosmological premises, such as toasts to “places of prayer” (salocavebi). The reference to the last supper or church eucharist would seem as much a learned reference as references to the Greek symposium, which equally invites comparison. The increasing prevalence of religiously themed toasts in recent years represents something of an innovation in what was a fundamentally secular socialist ritual, and like all innovations, it is one that increasingly is being represented as a return to tradition, though there is no evidence that religiously themed toasts were a major property of the urban supra in the past.

The progression of the supra and toasts within it has been memorably compared to a wound-up spring (Chatwin 1997), which as it relentlessly unwinds becomes less tense and also moves outwards, from formal categories of ascribed status to informal categories of achieved status, from categories of relationship with absent types of others to specific relationships of sociability with co-present individual others. I speak, of course, of a certain idealized form of supra, the sort someone might reconstruct from memory, how they might describe it to an ethnographer or lay out the rules in an etiquette manual, as most informal supras are much messier. I am not trying to produce an account of the pragmatics of the supra (see for example Kotthoff 1995, Mulhfried 2005ab, Tuite 2005), here I am only interested in the “metapragmatic supra”, the kind of supra that is described when people talk about supras in general, whether while participating in them or reporting on them. vii
The idealized contemporary supra is divisible in indigenous terms into two blocks of toasts, the former of which are the so-called “obligatory” or “general” toasts, the latter of which are the so-called “personal toasts” (How to Arrange 15, Nizharadze 2000). We can call them general toasts because they recognize general classes of absent others (parents, children, Georgians, etc.), rather than specific persons seated at the supra, who are recognized by personal toasts. The obligatory or general toasts come in differing degrees of abstraction from context. Some serve to link one focal participant of the supra to ever widening circles of categories of kin-based relationship, drawing indexical connections between a present participant and their absent social universe, making this person’s otherwise invisible “social networks manifest” in a manner not unlike a traditional elicitation of a kinship diagram in social anthropology which is always indexically centered on an ego. Others, more “abstract” toasts, recognize very general classes of others, without linking them to anyone present explicitly (ancestors, predecessors, children in general, women in general). By contrast, the personal series of toasts recognize informal interpersonal ties between co-present participants. Obligatory toasts, one might say, diagram the abstract ontology of the social universe, personal toasts the concrete relational universe of those gathered, the sociable. The opposition here resembles the kinds of relationships mediated by beer, and those mediated by vodka, among the mountain-dwelling Khevsur below in the chapters on vodka. 

Generally, the first toast is a toast to those in whose honor the supra is convened, the birthday celebrant, the couple whose marriage is being celebrated, the person who died, or, in the absence of any more specific cause, the mere fact of “our meeting here” is celebrated as the pretext of the supra. In the absence of a focal participant, those present
serve as the focal participant. This focal participant becomes the indexical point of origin (a kind of “here and now” centering on someone who is actually present at the feast) for the next block of “general” toasts. Moving outward from the focal participant, the general series of toasts demarcates an expanding set of horizons of ascribed social relations, beginning with the kinship universe of the focal participant. (1) This begins with the immediate household of that person, followed by the siblings and then the grandparents of the person. The transition within specific named kin relations calibrated to the focal participant moves from closer to further, natural to artificial kin. (2) The toasting then moves to from specific to general categories of kin others of the focal participant, in increasing social distance: relatives, friends, neighbors. (3) At this point there is another qualitative transition from egocentric categories to sociocentric categories, that is, extremely general “abstract” toasts that recognize whole social categories. These include obligatory toasts to women (obligatory, as this is sometimes considered to be a toast to love), as well as ancestors, and children. These latter two are very strictly ordered, the toast to children always follows the toast the ancestors, the one is a toast to the dead, the other is a toast to life. These three toasts produce a very general map of the generalized others that are relevant to a very generalized male subject, the supra-goer in general. There will also be toasts to very general categories of others, Georgia and Georgians, perhaps a toast to “all good people”. One principle that is invoked for the transition from obligatory toasts to more abstract toasts or more personal ones is quite simply physiological drunkenness, a change in the mood provoked by alcohol consumption. As one friend of mine, a practiced observer of the supra, Elizbar pointed out, “some toasts just sound stupid and maudlin when you are sober, to
understand those toasts, you need to be a little drunk”. As a Georgian macrobiotic cookbook points out, a tamada could not simply memorize an entextualized series of toasts, the contextual moment of mood and drunkenness plays a crucial role in knowing when to make these transitions in practice:

There is a special moment at the supra, after people have started drinking but before they are very drunk, when they feel less inhibited and are particularly susceptible to appeal to emotions. The tamada should recognize when this state has been achieved and propose more abstract toasts. (How to Arrange Georgian Supra 13)

These toasts might be conceived of as a block as obligations that must be paid by those present before they are free to engage in “free toasts” or “personal toasts”, which constitute a separate ritual obligation, the obligation that each person present be recognized in a toast (How to Arrange Georgian Supra 15). This block of toasts shows a fade out from the focal participant to their specific close kin, to increasingly general and increasingly distant categories of kin, to a very abstract world of generalized others relevant to a Georgian male, predecessors, successors, potential affines. In a “sad supra” (a funeral wake), the main difference is that toasts to the dead (predecessors) must go through this entire cycle before toasts to the living (contemporaries): in this case, what will be created is not one “social network made manifest”, but two, one between the dead person and the dead, followed by one between the dead and the living (Kinkladze 2000).

Fade out from ritual order to disorder: the personal series. When the first block of toasts is terminated those present have fulfilled their ritual obligations to pay respect to society and may now toast each other. The supra as “ritual” moves to the supra as an expression of mutual affection between the participants, marked by a transition to the
“personal block of toasts”, where we see again a recursive transition within a “private” supra between recognition of persons in terms of abstract “public” status and concrete “personal” relationships. One diagnostic of a relatively “public” (wedding, funeral) or official supra, then is the absence of this block of toasts (though this is often partly a result of the immense size of the feast, so that in such circumstances the grouping of personal toasts under general rubrics, such as a toast to “friends of x” where all the friends stand to show their inclusion, is resorted to). This section of toasts follows no set order and there is comparatively lax regimentation. The only specification is that each person present must be recognized in a toast (How to Arrange Georgian Supra 17).

Also, status distinctions between those present may be recognized depending on age, importance, or foreignness in the order in which personal toasts are drunk (How to Arrange Georgian Supra 16).

Here the relationships recognized in toasts are between specific copresent persons, between the celebrants themselves, individually amongst themselves. The relations recognized are particular relations between intimates. At the same time, extremely abstract toasts to general classes of social others, which do not constitute an obligation to some specific group of general others, are also drunk and can equally be the focus of displays of emotion. The relaxation of the ritual at this point is marked further by changes along other dimensions. At this point in the supra mostly men are present, somewhat tipsy if not drunk (How to Arrange Georgian Supra 13, 16). This is the point in the supra where men become openly demonstrative of their emotions in the wording of their toasts, which typically include extravagant expressions of praise, and also hugs and kisses between men. This section of the supra is a gradient progression from
“authoritarian” ritual towards “anarchic” chaos. There is an increasing relaxation of the ritual aspects of the supra as it moves to the third stage, a stage which, unlike the others, has no recognized name and which is never, in general mentioned as being part of the ritual:

After the “personal” stage the supra becomes confused, the tamada loses his function, all order is lost—every obligation has been discharged and the supra imperceptibly grows into a carnival or bachannal.... Thus, a supra does not always have order; [order] dominates in the “ritual” stage, weakens in the [personal toast] stage, and disappears in the stage of “carnival” (Nizharadze 2000:29)

As we will see below, this stage is sometimes singled out under the name of “orgy” (ghreoba), a stage which a respectable, cultured supra seeks to avoid entirely. In fact, sometimes this stage internal to the supra is externalized as being a kind of “anti-supra”, an index of personal or social degeneracy.

**Supra and civil society.** As we have seen, the supra contains within itself both moments of authoritarian ritual ordering and moments of almost anarchic chaos, which gives the supra possibilities to stand as models for radically opposed political orders. The supra, as an image rather than as a ritual, can stand on the one hand for a kind of dystopian model of the state as an authoritarian and patriarchal anti-democratic political order. On the other hand it can stand as image of society, civil or otherwise, par excellence in opposition to the state. In part these two possibilities arise from different qualitative possibilities within the formal structure of the ritual itself. The tamada, the dictator of the table, is the symbol par excellence of the supra as a kind of Stalinist mini-state (Nodia 2000). On the other hand, the supra produces a diagram of “everyday life”, of the network of social relations that each individual supra helps to create, the network
of social relations which, under socialism, is precisely the equivalent of Russian informal networking going under the name of *blat* (Mars and Altman 1983, 1991; on blat see Ledeneva 1998).

The quote we opened the chapter with, from a story about a supra with Josef Stalin (the most famous Georgian), with its talk of “despotism of drink” and “democracy of food”, shows how the metalanguage of the supra itself is explicitly political. The institution of the supra is the authoritarian discourse of ritual, full of “rules”, many of which are “obligatory” (“the twelve obligatory toasts”, for example), many things are “forbidden” (discussion or debate about the content of toasts, for example). Although the tamada, the toastmaster, who enforces the ritual order, is initially “elected”, the election is always rigged, there being but one candidate, and the outcome of the plebiscite always unanimous. After the election, the tamada becomes “the dictator of the table”. At first glance the supra looks very much like a failed democratic transition in miniature. The tamada even has a monopoly of legitimate violence at the table, for the tamada (particularly in Western Georgia, it is said) or his “deputies, representatives” (*moadgilebi*), can force people to drink (violently), sometimes having a henchman whose job is to force drinking (*ghvinis dadzaleba*). In the following cartoon, the tamada, holding a huge drinking horn, which is emblematic of forced drinking, is saying to the terrified guests: “As my deputy in the branch of forcing people to drink wine I appoint my Jimsher”, a hulking bruiser of a fellow.

**Figure 7**
“As my deputy in the branch of forcing people to drink wine I appoint my Jimsher”

(Niangi 1974-17)

This threat of violence is something very real, though Georgians, when asked about it, will usually claim that it is more characteristic of some other region. In many rural regions of Georgia, it has been traditional to drink a toast to the the most famous Georgian native son Josef Stalin. A friend of mine reports that in 1986 he had the misfortune to refuse to drink the Stalin toast in the region of Borjomi. The hosts were preparing to give him a sound beating for his impertinence, when it was observed that he had sprained his ankle the previous day. It was concluded that it wasn’t proper to beat a man with a sprained ankle, and he was saved.
If the supra has become a privileged resource for talk about politics, it is also true that talk about the supra is often cast in political terms. Alternatives to the traditional supra are called “democracy”, as if the “failed” democratic transition in public political reality can be amended by a transition effected in private life. A common Georgian saying goes that “We Georgians do not have as much order in the state as we do in the supra” (Kinkladze 2000: 31). Just as Georgia has experienced, depending on whom one talks to, in the last ten years, socialism, civil war, anarchy, feudalism, and democracy, talk about the supra, informal criticisms of somewhat informal versions of the supra, will also sometimes be expressed in terms of “anarchy”, “parliamentary systems”, “democracies” and so on. The supra stands, then not only as a condensed image of Georgian traditionalism standing opposed to Georgian modernity, but also as a condensed image of Georgia political society. To think about the supra is to think about the relationship of state to society, and perhaps change it.

As a result, Georgian print culture has produced in the last few years rather a lot of metadiscourse about the supra, in forms as diverse as supra etiquette manuals, Georgian cookbooks, and NGO position papers entitled “The supra and civil society” (Nodia et al. 2000), and even new rituals to replace the supra with suggestive names like “democracy”. These discourses divide themselves into two basic recognized opposed tendencies within Georgian elite urban culture, a traditionalizing discourse and a modernizing one. The traditionalist discourse on the supra is current among traditional socialist elites of the older generation, the so-called “old intelligentsia”. The liberal modernist discourse on the supra is associated with new third sector elites, what are now called the “new intellectuals”, as well as young professionals like my neighbor Tsitsino.
The two discourses are lodged in disciplinary discourses that have different institutional locations, genealogies, epistemologies, and prospects for the future. The traditionalist discourse is one that grounds itself in traditional socialist period “intelligentsia” disciplines like archeology, ethnography, history. The modernizing discourse is a critique emanating from NGO personnel funded by Western grants, and young, often Western-educated, professionals and academics. (After the Rose Revolution of 2003, it should be added, some of these NGOs have become, in effect, organs of the government (Manning 2007)). Arguments between the two groups have not been cordial. Traditionalist intelligentsia criticize the “new intellectuals” of the NGO world for being unpatriotic as Georgians, or dilletantish as scholars (Gocoridze 2001, Pruidze 2001). They identify the world of NGOs as being a world of corruption paralleling that of the state itself, but in which krtamich’amia, “bribe-eating” associated with state agents is replaced with grantich’amia “grant-eating” (Muhlfried 2005a).

The hegemonic discourse of Georgian traditionalism about the supra matches very nearly the traditionalizing tendencies internal to the ritual itself. This discourse presents the supra as a ritual present in various local forms in Georgian culture since time immemorial, often going further to link the origins of the ritual variously to the Last Supper, to quasi-parliamentary tendencies and in particular oath rituals during the reign of Queen Tamar, the golden age of Georgia, or the Mediterranean cult of Dionysius (Tezelishvili 2000:138-143). Hence, the supra is not merely an image of Georgian society, but a specifically traditional society, which ethnographers and historians seek to preserve.
This discourse seeks to critique actually existing supras in the name of the idealized supra ritual supposedly preserved in the ethnographic and historical record. The irony here was that the ethnographers who now write traditionalist books of etiquette for the supra had been at the same time agents of a socialist state, state ethnographers intent on building a new socialist person, homo sovieticus, who found many good reasons to criticize the supra ritual, in the name of creating (or restoring) a putatively more “cultured” (refined, civilized) version of the ritual that had apparently existed at some point in the glorious past. One now traditionalist ethnographer (responding to NGO-based critiques of the supra collected in Nodia 2000) recalls times when, in the 1960s, the beginning of a period of relative prosperity in Soviet culture, precisely the deleterious material consequences and uncultured aspects of the supra were the object of critique corresponding to a period when Niangi cartoons heavily critiqued the same tendencies in the supra:

In every such family we saw the tables, chairs, dishes and entire collections of drinking vessels in many shapes and sizes necessary for a big supra. This exaggerated display of hospitality, which took the form of a meaningless competition, was censured by me and my colleagues, we appealed to the population for moderation. We also censured the practice of forcing drinking, the throwing of supras for purposes of self-interest, the immoderate drinking and eating, using tradition as a cover for drunkenness, etc... (Pruidze 2001: 12)

What is striking about the traditionalizing discourse of such ethnographers is that, both under socialism and post-socialism, they set themselves up as an expert class of ritual commentators, meta-specialists on matters of tradition and ritual, first under the aegis of a socialist state, latter day writers of etiquette manuals. This employment of ethnography as a normative description is not uncommon amongst ethnographers in Georgia. It is not
uncommon, for example, for a Georgian ethnographer to lecture his informants on their traditions rather than interview them.

But all this ethnographic normativity is only possible if tradition itself is unchanging since time out of mind. The discourse of the new elites seeks to undermine such primordialism, instead presenting the supra as an “invented tradition”, initiated by members of the Georgian gentry of the nineteenth century as a reaction to Russian colonial rule. According to this thesis, for the Georgian gentry, the supra became a kind of compensatory private locus of traditional authenticity in opposition to the Russian rituals of the imperial court society, an “inner sphere” of authentic traditional Georgian “society”, opposed to the “outer sphere” of the Russian state (the opposition between “inner” and “outer” spheres in colonial cultures in India is adopted from Chatterjee 1993).

The Georgian supra is primarily described, as a unique socio-cultural constant, a tradition rooted in the distant past and the most proper express of ‘traditionalness’ itself. Its extreme rituality should fix (time) for us in premodern roots. But Leven Bregadze in a series of letters published in the paper Arili asserts with serious arguments, that the Georgian supra is a product of approximately the middle of the last century by present-day, fairly hardly structured form. It is this thus, then the following hypothesis can also be formulated: for the last two hundred years, when the socio-political life of Georgia developed under the sign of the domination of a ‘foreign’, ’dictatorial’ order, the order of the supra became a symbol of true authenticity: ‘We still have this’, the sacralization of the structure of the supra was society’s response to the shock of modernization (Nodia 2000: 5).

According to this argument, the supra is an indigenous Georgian form of civil society that grew up in opposition to the Russian dominated political sphere under colonialism. Thus, the “invented tradition” of the supra was the only Georgian institution that met the formal definition of “civil society” (nebulously defined as a form of
association independent of and between both the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the state) during the long march from Tsarism to Socialism:

Bregadze’s thesis [gives us] the means to connect the theme of the supra to the theme of civil society: The supra is a form of the free self-organization of persons, in it society embodies its autonomy in opposition to a repressive context dictated by the state, at the same time, the unit of self-organization is typically bigger, than the family. (Nodia 2000:6)

Bregadze’s thesis has been the subject of a great deal of criticism, and I am primarily interested in it as a contemporary intervention in the interpretation of the supra, and not its historiographic validity. I will note here only that Grigol Orbeliani, the aristocrat that Bregadze credits with inventing the supra, was himself likely to be found at two kinds of supras that Bregadze does not mention. On the one hand, the urban “Oriental” supra where the young aristocrat Orbeliani slummed with low level traders in the gardens of Ortachala which is the basis for a great deal of Orbeliani’s urban, “oriental” poetry, and on the other hand, Orbeliani presided over imperial “European” supras with toasts to the Tsar drunk with champagne (Manning N.D). The supra, then, taken as a whole, is not a compensatory private locus of authentic cultural self-expression, an Asiatic-styled subaltern private sphere opposed to European-styled public courtly official sociability. Rather, the supra ritual itself came to reflect in its internal disemic differentiation the complex personae of these subaltern elites, there being both Europeanized “public” supras (with champagne and a tablecloth on an actual table) and Oriental “private” supras (with table-cloths on the ground in a garden or an oriental balcony, and the plaintive notes of “Oriental” city music). Aristocrats like Orbeliani expressed his ambivalent identity by presiding over, and writing poetry associated with, both kinds of supras. To the extent that Orbeliani “invented” the tradition of the supra, it
might be said that he “invented” the opposition between the supra as a private compensatory locus of private expression versus the supra as expressive of a certain kind of aristocratic, courtly sociability, and aristocratic face-to-face public. In this sense, perhaps, the supra indeed did serve as a kind of “civil society” for the face-to-face urban public of the Georgian aristocracy. Or rather, the supra, divided now into “official” and “private” versions, could express the same sorts of oppositions that are found, for example, in Orbeliani’s poetry (between classicizing adaptations of European works and his more “Oriental” city cycle of poetry (Manning 2004)). It is clear that the supra as ritual is expressive, if not of European bourgeois “civil society” avant la lettre, but rather of changes in Georgian urban aristocratic “society” (sazogadoeba) as they transformed themselves into an imperial elite (Manning N.D.).

In one way or another, the supra can be adopted as a symbol of “society” or “everyday life” oppose to the state. But at the same time the specific content of the supra, now as an image of a political and not social order, is downright Stalinist:

But we can also look at the matter from a completely opposed angle. The Georgian supra has many things about it that are obviously ‘uncivil’. It is characterized by the autocratic dictatorship of the (it is true, elected) tamada, unacceptability of pluralism and criticism of ideas, a predetermined routine, the obviously subordinated position of women.... In short, the supra is a model of authoritarian relationships. With its ritually-stabilized form, the supra reflected the repressive nature of its existing surrounding social life, and by creating an illusion of ‘authenticity’, it made it easy for society to accept it. Nothing could better serve to inculcate the legitimacy of the Communist order than the toast to Stalin and the ‘Stalinization’ of the institution of the tamada itself. (Nodia 2005: 5)

Perhaps the supra might serve, in some contexts, as an image of all that was opposed to the Stalinist state, a kind of subaltern discourse opposed to the colonizer, a hidden discourse of the “missing” sphere of civil society. On the other hand, the supra
would seem to contain within it an almost exact metaphor for socialist state itself.

Between these discourses of absolute opposition and complete identification lies an unexplored territory, one in which the supra can play many roles in a far more complex and ambivalent articulation of the world of “the state” and the world of “everyday life”.

The discourse of the state about the supra is, I will argue, not entirely extrinsic, it is an important, and I will argue, constitutive, internal dimension of what the supra is.

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1 For a similar methodological use of cartoons to explore Russian blat (informal influence networks) that inspired this study see Ledeneva 1998, Ledeneva et al. 2000.

2 “A parallel development (in this case tolerated though certainly not encouraged by the state) was the growth of small dissident political organizations, voluntary groups of various kinds including samizdat publication ventures. Again, these were understood by actors as “politics,” and hence public. Once again, the private was imagined as subdivided, having a public embedded within it. Like production within the household, which was labeled and discussed under the rubric of the “second economy,” this kind of politics was heavily theorized by those engaging in it. They considered this public-inside-the-private as a significant dissident gesture and famously called it “anti-politics.” For my purposes here the significant fact about antipolitics was that it created what everyone called public spaces within the private household. Incidentally, this form of politics was supported by the labor of women who did the scrubby work of antipolitics. In the process, they often became invisible as political actors exactly because they were understood to be in the private part of the private household, not its public part.” (Gal 2002: 88-89)

3 Originally a term embedded in the Tsarist and socialist intelligentsia political imaginary throughout the 19th century, delineating the very domain of social transformation, but also denoting the real conditions of life that are obscured by superstition and custom, the category of “everyday life” has been absorbed and dehistoricized in Western European social theory, becoming a theoretical term invested with a spurious concreteness haunting our social scientific common sense (see Crook 1998 for a survey). There really is very little parallelism in the political meanings attached to the two concepts in Europe and in Russia and Georgia (see Kiaer 1997). While the Russian term byt stands as the material pole to the spiritual term for existence bytie, the Georgian the term “everyday life” (qopa, cxovreba, qopa-cxovreba) does not have such an etymologically transparent opposite.

4 “The current situation of our culture when all is said and done is characterized by the fact that everydayness has become the object of critique. More attention is paid to phenomena of everyday life (qopa), such objects, whose serious analysis a decade ago would have been difficult to imagine” (Shatirishvili 2000: 16).

5 Earthquakes in Georgia during my fieldwork in 2002 were widely blamed on Russian or Abkhazian earthquake machines (Manning 2007: 208 note 18).

6 While I could not even begin to enumerate what might be present at what is, after all, a display of overabundance, the dishes at a supra often differ from the dishes served as components of normal meals. Supra dishes are often versions of normal Georgian dishes that can be served as appetizers, cold, on small serving plates, over a period of six hours. There are relatively few hot dishes.

7 In general by “pragmatics” I will mean whatever the specific function of a specific utterances is relative to its contexts, assessed in terms of appropriateness to the context or creativity in the context, while
metapragmatics will, refer to utterances that stand in a meta-relationship to other utterances, for example, descriptions of the pragmatics of utterances are metapragmatic statements.

The distinction between the two sets of toasts is not merely thematic, but also one of meta-awareness, descriptions and recollections of the first set of toasts is often clearer than the second. However, the metapragmatic opposition between the two kinds of toasts is not as clearly delineated in pragmatic practice. The two metapragmatically opposed kinds of toasts, general and personal, can be combined, linking the type of other recognized in the general toast to a specific token of that type who is present at the supra: a general toast can be made into a personal toast by recognizing a general class of persons (i.e. children), and recognizing some person(s) who are present as named representatives of that class (tamadadobit) (How to Arrange Georgian Supra 17). Also, at a large supra, where the obligation to recognize each person in a separate toast would be impossible, groups of people present can be recognized in a personal toast that takes a general form (i.e. classmates of the deceased) (How to Arrange Georgian Supra 15). It emerges that between the apparent polar opposites, toasts recognizing general abstract (non-localized) social others and those recognizing individual copresent consociates, there are various kinds of possibilities for abstraction and contextualization.