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

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

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

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

Introduction: Framing the moralities of hospitality practices

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Moral consumption and personhood: a literature overview

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

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

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

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

Regimes of values at work in the making of personhood and in the drawing of moral boundaries are grounded not only in abstract thoughts of who and what is worthy and desirable, but also in the materiality of everyday life, including 'ideas on economy and commodity, [...] relationships between objects and property, as well as general imaginaries of public and intimate spaces' (Skeggs, 2011: 2; see also Fowler,

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

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

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

Modernising domination: Excessive hospitality after the Rose Revolution

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion: Overcoming domination? Building inclusive personhood through hospitality

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

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

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

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

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