

INTERVIEW

Florian Mühlfried on the Georgian Table

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We discussed the “supra” – the Georgian table – with German anthropologist Florian Mühlfried on the occasion of our special food-themed issue (October 2015). Mühlfried, who teaches in the Caucasian Studies program of the University of Jena, speaks about his personal history with the Georgian table, and shares his thoughts on how food reflects artistic and political trends...

Your dissertation [“Post-Soviet Feasting: The Georgian Banquet in Transition”] addresses the culture of the supra (the Georgian table), a rather exotic topic. What led you to Georgia and the supra in particular, and what motivated you to deal with the supra in a scientific way rather than in your spare time?

That has to do with my studies. I studied anthropology in Hamburg in the 1990s and was in search of a regional focus. Most students were interested in African or Indian cultures and I was looking for something less worn. Coincidentally, a Georgian lecturer, Rezo Kiknadze, was at that time giving a course on the Georgian language and cultures. In the end I was pretty much his only student: we actually needed another four people to formally register for the course as it would only be financed by the university if at least five people took part. Kiknadze really enthused me. He is a musician – he’s now the director of the Conservatory in Tbilisi -, and so he introduced me to some music and of course taught me the basics of the Georgian language. And then, and this is crucial, he took me to Georgia with him, personally acquainting me with the country. In addition, I attended a language course at the state university which was coupled with excursions to the countryside. It was during that summer, the summer of ’96, that I got to know this odd phenomenon that would occupy my mind for so long and in fact still occupies me today, that very particular way that people feast in Georgia. What I found more intriguing than the extensive and lavish *supras* that are often talked about – where dishes are piled and people spin a yarn -, was the way the rules of the *supra* structured very everyday gatherings. I was in the park one day drinking a coffee in the afternoon, and at the adjacent table were two young men who had ordered dried fish I think, which they were having while drinking vodka and beer.

And although they seemed to know each other well, they settled who would be their toastmaster and structured their conversation via toasts. I found this striking.

Do you still take part in supras in your spare time, or have you, like many people you cite in your work, grown tired of them?

I do still take part in *supras* in my spare time, though I've noticed a decline in *supras* in the last few years. Supposably, though this is a conjecture, there were even more banquets in Soviet times. I still see banquets as occasions that can be both very boring and immensely touching. The former is what critics of the *supra* usually emphasize, and it is true that many banquets are extremely strict and formalized – toasts can be put across formulaically and any private interaction is immediately stifled by the toastmaster. Such banquets are indeed deadly and resemble what one would imagine a Soviet party congress to be like. But there are also occasions for real intimacy at the *supra*, when there is a readiness on the participants' side to cater to the content of each other's toasts. That can lead to very intense experiences...

Would you say that experiencing a supra in your free time is very different from taking part in it as a researcher?

Well anthropologists generally have a problem with keeping a distance to the phenomenon they're observing. Our cardinal method is participatory observation, which is of course a paradoxical notion, because if you're really participating you can only observe to some extent, and if you're really observing it becomes difficult to keep participating. This paradox is felt very intensely at the *supra*, where it is of course rightly expected that you play a part in the *supra* even as a scientist, that you say toasts and generally show a degree of emotional investment. That's why I've never had a completely removed experience of the *supra*.

Have you observed the supra being used as an instance of cultural codification in art?

What I can observe is a strong rejection of the Georgian table as both culture and tradition. If anything, I see it being used as a negative contrast for practices that are generally preferred, and that has many reasons. One is the entry of neoliberal optimizing logic, on the basis of which it is simply a waste of time to spend so much time at banquets. But I think artists rather see a patriarchal tradition in the *supra* which they seek to reject. And that is true – of course the *supra* is patriarchal, and of course it is oppressive and not democratic. So there are certainly good reasons to get away from the *supra* and I personally think that at my age and with my interests I was only fascinated with that tradition because I come from Germany and not from Georgia.

Even if there was an effort to critically address the loss of collectivism through art, I

don't think that critique would be waged via the *supra* precisely because the young, intellectual elite sees the *supra* as a representation of crusted and patriarchal Georgia.

Was this already the case in Soviet times? I have the impression that back then directors at least partly tended to use the *supra* as a way of reminding Georgians of something they've lost - a sort of collectivist, communitarian spirit.

By all means. I think this is very clear from the opening sequence of [Falling Leaves](#), the pathos of which I think is only bearable because it is broken through Iosseliani's cinematic language. The way he deals with sound or editing helps the viewer to distance himself from the images. If you only had the images you would probably take it to be an instance of the romanticizing pathos of what you just described - what we've lost, the community etc. Iosseliani probably does mean that as well, but I personally think that message is partly broken by his use of film language.

Would you say that neoliberal values have also entered, perhaps less uncritically, contemporary films from Georgia? Don't new films also try to appeal to Western audiences through ruin tourism, by distancing themselves from their national identity rather than by showing what, say, urban Georgians have lost or neglected?

I do think that, in contrast to recent films, in former representations of the *supra* like those in Iosseliani's films you can see the *supra* being used as an oppositional symbol to optimizing logic, only that back then the optimizing logic was not neoliberal but that of the Soviet regime. Obviously this was a somewhat paradoxical position - we all know how much time Soviet Georgians spent at banquets -, but on the official level the aim was always to "improve" and work on the Soviet citizen. And in the light of this vision of the homo Sovieticus the *supra* may indeed mark a contrast, a sort of utopian vision that recurs to the past, to "what we've lost".

Has the perception of the *supra* on screen changed since the fall of the iron curtain? In the popular Georgian telenovela "My Wife's Friends", the *supra* is associated with patriarchy and marks a constant source of conflict between husbands and wives. Would you agree that filmmakers have also generally had a more negative attitude in recent years?

I can't think of many depictions of *supras* in recent films, though you could say that this also points to a decline in interest in the *supra*...

There is a tension in your book that also relates to the Soviet Union's ambivalent stance on the *supra*. On the one hand, you claim that the so-called red intelligentsia, members of the institutional elite who represent Soviet

Georgia today, tend to endorse the supra, on the other, in the historical part of your book you point to many policies enacted by the Soviet regime that aimed to curb that tradition. How are we to understand that tension?

I think we can understand it by noting that every time has its syntagm of what is culturally permissible and of what isn't. What was a harmful custom to Soviet functionaries in the 1970s – which is precisely how it was defined then when the campaign fighting harmful customs, which included the *supra*, was launched –, can be reinterpreted by those very functionaries from today's perspective, becoming a remnant of Soviet times and thus a marker for a particular culture that they identify with.

Were there discontinuities during Soviet times in the regime's attitude towards the supra? The Soviets were also interested in granting Georgians a nominal, superficial patriotism which could theoretically be reconcilable with a celebration of supra culture. Was the table ever intentionally given to the Georgians as a space where they could live out their strongly restricted national identity?

That may play a role when it comes to national culture, but I suspect that the social practice that lies behind that – hanging around at the table and getting drunk for hours – was not unique to Georgia. When Shevardnadze became First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, shortly after which the campaign against harmful customs began, the country was marked by jogtrot. That's why he was essentially brought to Georgia, to discipline people and fight corruption, and I think that the *supra* was part of this – people just weren't behaving the way they were expected to behave, but were instead wasting financial and personal resources. The fact that this was met with an official campaign shows how widespread these practices really were. This is addressed comically in Eldar Shengelaya's *Blue Mountains*, in which the collective's boss deems it more important to go to meetings at *supras* than to be in his office.

I would also argue that towards the end of the Soviet Union, a specific way of feasting had come to be associated with a Soviet type of hospitality that differentiated itself from what was perceived as an undercooled, Western way of welcoming guests. If you travel to Central Asia, you will see that wedding banquets are also led by toastmasters. So in a funny way this Georgian custom of the *supra* turned into a Soviet custom.

The group who were in large part responsible for the introduction of neoliberal ideas and policies to Georgia, the United Movement of former president Mikheil Saakashvili, were also very nationalistic in their rhetoric. Did they, too, have an ambivalent stance on the supra by refraining from denouncing the tradition in public while privately seeing it as a waste of time and money, as you suggest?

In my article *A Taste of Mistrust* I quote a statement by Sandra Roelofs, Saakashvili's

wife, made during a TV interview in the early 2000s – before the United National Movement came to power – in which she says that she really likes Georgia except for the permanent feasting. Though I have never read an explicit condemnation of the *supra*, I would definitely say that in practice, a social change came about when Saakashvili's clan came to power. I experienced that first-hand at the university. Where it was common for the older professors to discuss academic matters at the table, Misha's generation explicitly distanced themselves from such practices. It's undeniable that the United Movement was very nationalistic, and you're probably right that the group's stance towards the *supra* did not crystalize ideologically because there were fears that this could scare people off.

In your book, you write that industrially produced beer is used to say inverse toasts - toasts that have the opposite meaning of what they normally mean when you say them with wine or vodka, thus exemplifying a hierarchy of drinks. But this imbalance has been relaxed since, following a statement by the Orthodox patriarch of Georgia who has allowed his compatriots to incorporate beer into the supra. Doesn't this suggest that political and religious figures do in fact influence rituals, and the supra in particular?

Yes, it really is the case that this directive of the patriarch, which encourages people to say toasts with beer as well, has played a role, and that inverse toasts have generally been on the decline as a result. So beer is not an anti-drink anymore, though that hasn't really led to toasts often being said with beer. It's worth noting that the diminishing popularity of the *supra* seems to have something to do with the growing popularity of beer. Public festivals are increasingly tied to beer as opposed to wine, as used to be the case – people also socialize differently as a result.

But wine, too, has experienced a reevaluation in Georgia. Though it is true that for large parts of the Georgian population, drinking wine normally involves saying toasts, the Western way of nipping wine – of drinking it for gustatory pleasure – will probably grow more popular in years to come. Thanks in part to the fact that Georgian amphora wine has recently been named a UNESCO world cultural heritage, more and more foreigners view Georgian wine as a delicacy, meaning that they drink it as such as well. I think that in the years to come drinking wine will have less and less to do with community and more and more with distinction, as we know it from elsewhere.

Is this an external observation, or would you say that Georgians themselves are finding fault with the growing individualization of society and the consequent decline in supras?

To be honest, hardly any of the people I know are too fond of the *supra*. It's my tic, my professional deformation. But on the countryside, where I also spend some time, *supras* are still quite common. When I return to familiar contexts outside the city, meetings usually proceed rather conservatively, with banquets being structured by

toasts. Those meetings I really enjoy, especially when they involve people I personally know.

So what was originally a myth - that, as you write in your book, it has falsely been assumed that supras originated in the countryside - is to be explained by contemporary reality, where supras that follow original patterns are organized on the countryside?

We don't have to go so far as to start discussing original and unoriginal behavior, but I do think it's safe to say that *supras* radiate more energy and life outside of the city...

Thank you for the interview.