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Georgian Supra as a Cultural Artifact

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Abstract

Culture as the basis of a human being's uniqueness creates a space, where we socialize and through which its significant norms, elements, and values are bestowed on us. The diversity of the contemporary, civilized world is ensured by those self-sufficient national cultures, unity of which forms a whole, complete panhuman culture. Georgian culture is the creation of Georgian, self-sufficient nation, being shaped for centuries as an uninterrupted chain of unity. A unique manifestation of this unity is Georgian Supra, bearing the national character, national worldview. Nothing unifies people more than a feast, where guests' social status and class are disregarded. Georgian Supra, as a subcultural artifact, is a vivid illustration of our national identity. And most importantly, it is a unity based on and oriented towards love. If we paraphrase Plato's words, "Eros" is what turns every feast from a mere physiological act of eating and drinking to a special, distinctive event. In the article below we do not plan to provide an in-depth analysis of the work written by Plato, one of the most eminent Greek philosophers of the Classical era. Instead, we intend to draw parallels between Plato's Symposium and Georgian Supra, both based on unity, dialogue, common understanding, and love.

Keywords: Georgian Supra, Cultural Artifact, Plato, Symposium, Eros

1. Introduction

According to an omnipresent assumption, uniqueness of a human being is exhibited not through his/her biological or social activities, but cultural and creative deeds that result in the formation of the world of culture. However, the above-mentioned should not be understood as if the importance of biological and social activities for a person is neglected. Everyone would agree that humans act preeminently to satisfy their basic physiological and biological needs and instincts. It is also evident that to achieve the latter, people have to interact with one another as without such interactions no one would be able to survive. It is a fact that a person lives not in the world full of abstract objects, "but in a reality that is being created and modified by him/her" (Kerkadze, 1984, pg.38). This reality is an amalgam of two worlds. The first one is the world of nature, into which a human being is introduced and the products of which he/she actively utilizes and recreates. As a result of this, the world of culture emerges. Therefore, the latter is created by a human and what makes it different from nature is that during the process of culture making a person develops, grows, socializes, and self-reflects. The world created

by a human is unique, original, and, most importantly, can largely define his/her life, behavior and actions, moralistic and aesthetic stances. Culture incorporates a value system, created and cherished by a person. This “openness towards the world” (as German philosopher Arnold Gehlen would say) accentuates the fundamental difference that exists between a person’s boundless potential and an animal’s limited capacity. Hence, a human being does not merely exist (as an animal, no matter how “developed” it can be), but he/she lives in the world that has a meaning granted by culture. “Culture is an objectified world. It can be understood through a value system. The latter unites standards, norms, ideals, ideas, projects, goals, and interests - everything that is a product of a person’s intellectual and physical work - and turns them into objects of culture” (Kerkadze, 1984, pg.4). Work completed by a human, as opposed to an animal’s work, is cultural and creative, as it is oriented not only on fulfilling basic quotidian, materialistic, and socio-economic needs, but also on implementing those values which help a person grow and develop,¹ act in accordance to “high” moral values and, in this way, discover sacred “humane strengths” (Kulijanashvili, 2001, pg.93) in himself/herself. Culture is pivotal for one’s self-appraisal. As a member of a society, it is essential for a person to evaluate his/her actions and behavior based on shared and acclaimed values² and, in this way, find “the meaning of life” (Jgerenaia, 2004, pg.69).

2. Discussion

Therefore, culture is the basis and the most prominent manifestation of human uniqueness. Besides, a human as a social being belongs to different unions such as a social class, ethnos, race, etc., which indicates that every person acts within and through the help of a specific union. Hence, culture as a fruit of human action is a social phenomenon and is connected to a particular social group³. National cultures, when combined, create a pan-human culture that becomes a foundation for the diversity of the contemporary civilized world.

Similarly, Georgian culture is the creation of Georgian nation that, like every nation, possesses a unique value system⁴, customs, and rules. A nation’s cultural life is based on traditions through which main values are transferred from generation to generation, creating unity and continuity of the national culture “(Kerkadze, 1984, pg.60). A distinctive example of this unity and continuity is Georgian Supra. Nothing unifies people more than a banquet or, as Plato would put it, a symposium. The symposium unites table-companions, neglecting their social status and origin. Georgian Supra is not a mere staged performance. As a sub-cultural artifact, it to this day remains as the most overt manifestation of Georgian identity. And most importantly: Georgian Supra is a communication based on love through which, attendees’ complete ... “education” (Berdzenishvili, 2004, pg.173) is evidenced. Table-companions are trying to make a good impression on others by displaying their oratory skills, knowledge, the sense of togetherness, etc. Coming from Plato’s words, “Eros”, love, is what turns a symposium into a special event, exceeding it over a mere physiological act of eating; into an event, during which people do not devour wine in massive quantities but drink gradually and enjoyably (Plato, 1964), as love is a strive towards virtue and righteousness. Likewise, Georgian Supra aspires towards kindness and mercy.

As we touched upon Plato, let’s understand the architectonics of Georgian Supra, its sonorousness and spirit based on Plato’s *Symposium*, which revolves around the symposium hosted by eminent tragedian and poet - Agathon. His guests are illustrious Athenian intellectuals, including wise Socrates, sophist Pausanias, doctor Eryximachus, comedy writer Aristophanes, and bashful Alcibiades. They discuss and argue about God of love, Eros.⁵ After making a toast as an expression of their admiration towards God, the members of the symposium agree upon drinking wine for pleasure and praising Eros, instead of consuming it like “people, who are mad about wine” (Plato, 1964, pg.67). Even though it cannot be gleaned from the text that Eryximachus was chosen as a toastmaster, he is the one advising the guests not to imbibe too much alcohol (on what he receives a unanimous assent) and choosing the topic of conversation: extolling Eros. And prior to addressing the first

¹ We would like to once again emphasize: it is extremely important for a human being to satisfy his/her basic needs and demands. Though, a type of a person as well as his/her value system should be taken into account. For a Homo Faber, it is crucial to satisfy psychological and physiological demands that are vital for existence. While a Homo Culturus strives towards fulfilling “high”, spiritual needs and acts according to these urgings.

² However, it should be noted that this topic is debatable, not universal or agreed upon, and needs further consideration.

³ As English philosopher Steve Bruce (2012, pg.39) notes: “We socialize through culture and its important elements are transferred to us.”

⁴ Every single culture is a unity of values specific to this culture” – Buadze, 2016, pg.29.

⁵ According to notes taken by Bachana Bregvadze: “Words pronounced by each of one of them are individualistic, complete, and independent, and can serve as a hymn dedicated to Eros.” Plato, 1964, pg.5.

speaker of the symposium, we would like to note that “a toastmaster (“Tamada” in Georgian) is the most significant structural element of Georgian Supra” (Berdzenishvili, 2004, pg. 174), who does not merely manage Supra, but unifies it, and a united Supra subordinates to the will of the toastmaster. Just like in the *Symposium*, Georgian Supra begins with the toast raised in honor of God, which is followed by “strictly determined discourse” (Berdzenishvili, 2004, pg. 174) - sequence of toasts (despite the fact whether Supra is hosted for joyful or mournful reasons).

Let's return to the *Symposium*. The first person to speak about Eros is Phaedrus - Athenian aristocrat and politician of his time. He believes that Eros, love “bestows the greatest benefits” (Plato, 1964, pg.17) on a human being; that “only love shows a true path to a person and not gentleness, fame, glory, or something else” (Plato, 1964, pg.17). In a similar way, Georgian Supra also intends to bring happiness upon people as it is governed by love, love that can overcome any impediment or social inequality. Georgian Supra is an institution, which brings together people of diverse origins and social status.

The next person to speak is Pausanias (a colleague of Phaedrus - a politician), who underscores the bilateral nature of Eros: a baser and a nobler kind of love - similar to Aphrodite's two-sidedness. The base lover is rampant and strives towards bodily, physical pleasures; as for the noble lover, he is lofty and does not concentrate on sexual gratification. The baser kind of love is “untrustworthy and inconstant” (Plato, 1964, pg.24), while the nobler kind of love, admires the beauty of a soul and remains loyal to it for the rest of its life, and it is eternal and uninterrupted” (Plato, 1964, pg.25). We can characterize Georgian Supra in the same way. Its earthliness is manifested through insobriety and repletion; and it can be noble when governed by love and admiration towards the beauty of this world.

The third person to make a speech is a doctor, Eryximachus, according to whom: Eros is the powerful, almighty God” (Plato, 1964, pg.31). God can be found in everything that exists in the world, indicating that love is spread across the globe and creates harmony: “Harmony is polyphony; and polyphony is an assent, which cannot be achieved through uniting dissonant, opposing sides” (Plato, 1964, pg.29). Correspondingly, Georgian Supra is a polyphony created by its members, who are connected with one another by love and who provide harmony at Supra. Given that polyphony does not exist, Supra will not be able to fulfill its main purpose - to unite its members through love.

The fourth speaker is Aristophanes, a great Greek comedy writer. In the beginning of his speech, he addresses the mystery of human nature and tries to elucidate it. Aristophanes maintains that there are three sexes: male, female, and “androgynous”, the latter possessing both male and female origins. As the androgynous people represented a threat to Zeus due to their strength and appetite, he decided to split them into two halves. The androgynous, separated from the second half, always strived towards finding and merging with the lost half. Ever since, humans have been yearning for one another. “The greatest happiness ... is finding your significant other, the second half” (Plato, 1964, pg.38). That is why, when we glorify God ... we justly praise Eros as well “(Plato, 1964, pg.38). The aforementioned can be applicable to Georgian Supra as it is a unity of soulmates; unity of people who enjoy each other's company; unity of significant others, governed by love.

The fifth speaker is the host himself, Agathon. He names Eros as the youngest God among Gods⁶ and lists all the virtues that Eros is known for: He is just, reasonable, and attractive. Everyone “obeys Him voluntarily” (Plato, 1964, pg.43). He supervises people during feasts and oblations. “Eros is a wise poet, who morphs others into wise poets as well” (Plato, 1964, pg.43). Eros helps Gods establish order and by doing so He “lessens our chances of becoming savages, connects us with one another, and creates friendships” (Plato, 1964, pg.44). Many parallels can be drawn between Agathon's speech and Georgian Supra. Georgian Supra, too, is a voluntary union of people; it also assembles friends and relatives; both during joyful and mournful times, people gather around Supra to talk, argue, and discuss. Georgian Supra is a symbol of eternal togetherness. It also detests the old age⁷ and thus is always young. Georgian Supra is oriented towards the future: after remembering the

⁶ Agathon says: “Eros wholeheartedly loathes old age and does not come in close vicinity to it. He is young and never leaves adolescents' company.” Plato, 1964, pg.41.

⁷ What is meant here is a soul's, and not body's, feebleness.

deceased, toasts are raised in honor of those, who are alive, as a symbol of eternal life, continuation of life, its immortality.⁸ “The definition of time at Supra is “timeless”, meaning that it is never present. That is why, a toast - a significant structural element of Georgian Supra - is never directed towards the present. Instead, it refers to the past or the future” (Berdzenishvili, 2004, pg.173-174).

Following Agathon’s brilliant performance, the patriarch of the Classical era - Socrates begins to deliver his speech about Eros. Remaining true to his method of dialogue, the philosopher states that Eros as love is directed towards someone or something and it desires what it lacks. “Eros loves what it does not possess”(Plato, 1964, pg.49). Love can be beneficial for a human being as it encourages a person to constantly yearn for beauty. One that longs for beauty also longs for well-being, and well-being is a guarantee of happiness. Hence, “Eros is love of beauty” (Plato, 1964, pg.59), “admiration of beauty” (Plato, 1964, pg.54), “is a desire of kindness” (Plato, 1964, pg.56), “love is ... a desire of immortality” (Plato, 1964, pg.57). Therefore, love is a strive for contentment and eternal life. Through love, a human being becomes an observer of “boundless ocean of beauty” (Plato, 1964, pg.62) and expresses his/her emotions with elevated words. By comprehending love, a person comprehends himself/herself. Thus, love is the basis of self-understanding.

Likewise, Georgian Supra, with its deep, sacral meaning, coalesces with beauty and magnificence. Each member of Supra is given an opportunity to make grand speeches, accept the truthfulness of his/her words, and step into the world of beauty. While doing so, a person can cognize himself/herself.

Plato’s *Symposium* is concluded by Alcibiades, who eulogizes Socrates, characterizes him as a person with high moral values, and thanks the host for a splendid gathering. Similarly, by the end of Georgian Supra, guests make a toast to honor the host/hostess and praise his/her hospitality.

Throughout the duration of the symposium, its members did not only discuss Eros. They also joked and feasted, which is similar to what happens at Georgian Supra⁹. According to Georgian publicist and writer, Levan Berdzenishvili (2004, pg.175): “Georgian Supra is a performance, a concert, accompanied by mellifluous singing and coordinated dancing, through which its members try to present themselves in a favorable way, and search for a collective harmony.”

3. Conclusion

To reiterate, we would like to say that our aim has not been to idolize or sacralize Georgian Supra. We realize that from time to time it may turn into a carnival or bacchanalia (Nizharadze, 2004); that it often resembles “an amalgam of Apollonian and Dionysian origins” (Nizharadze, 2004, pg.29); that it quite frequently becomes an instrument for achieving a “psychotherapeutic effect”¹⁰, etc. In recent years, many works have been dedicated to outlining negative features of Georgian Supra and, presumably, this will continue so in the future as well. However, in this essay, we have attempted to discuss Georgian Supra from a positive angle,¹¹ as it represents “a phenomenon necessary to preserve ethnic uniqueness” (Nizharadze, 2004, pg.26). It is a distinctive cultural occurrence that voluntarily assembles and unifies its members; it is a unity of like-minded people and hence is marked by love; it is constantly oriented towards future and is not merely designed as an activity to kill time; instead, it has an ambition to become “a platform for heroic, free words” (Berdzenishvili, 2004, pg.175). It creates a micro society with its rules and norms. That is why, we believe that Georgian Supra should be recognized as an intangible cultural heritage.

⁸ “Love... is a wish of immortality”. Nizharadze, 2004, pg.57.

⁹Excluding funerals, of course.

¹⁰ Please see Jgerenaia E., Social Philosophy of Georgian Supra and Some Other Things in the book “Georgian Supra and Civil Society”, Tbilisi, 2004.

¹¹ It is always easy to find, outline, and write about a negative feature of something.

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