

Natia Phiphia

Assistant Professor,
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia

Ketevan Tsimintia

PhD Student
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia

COMMENSALITY IN THE AGE OF DAVID AGMASHENEBELI AND QUEEN TAMAR

Commensality in feudal Georgia took many forms. Feast and banquets could be held by different reasons or even without a particular reason. Sources about the issue are not abundant however, they still are quite enough to make some conclusions. The following questions are the focus of our study: 1) what were the reasons of commensality in the age of David Aghmashenebeli and Queen Tamar? 2) what was the format of the feast, i. e. to what extent it was “ruled” like modern Georgian feasts are? and 4) to what extent gender differences can be traced during feasts, i.e. whether sexism was present or not?

First of all, we need to identify the primary sources which give us information about the feast. The most important source is “**Life of Kartli**”, specifically the following works are useful for our study: 1) “**Life of David, King of the Kings**” written by an anonymous author, 2) “**History and Laudation of the Sovereigns**” written by another anonymous author, 3) “**Life of Tamar, King of the Kings**” written by Basili Ezosmodzghvari. Other non-fictional Georgian source useful for our study is “**Regulations of the Georgian Royal Court**”. Despite the fact it was created in 14th century, the earlier reality seems to be reflected in it. Also, several Armenian authors give us information about commensality among Georgians, namely **Gregory of Akner** (13th c.) and

Kirakos Gandzaketsi (13th c.). One Georgian fictional text is also quite useful, specifically, Shota Rustaveli's "**The Knight in the Panther's Skin**". Several feasts are described in this poem.

The value of these sources are that the majority of them are authentic sources, some of them are primary sources quite closely related to the age of King David and Queen Tamar. Fictional text should be treated carefully, Shota Rustaveli depicts Georgian reality however, he set the events in non-Christian world and in some cases his aim was to focus on celebrations of Muslims not Christians. Although, forms of commensality among Georgians still can be reconstructed based on it. Limitation of these sources is that they mostly discuss the feasts of upper classes, lower classes are not focused at all. "Regulations of the Georgian Royal Court" also focuses the feast held at royal court, but it is hard to differentiate the cases when is the commensality documented and in what cases just the ritual of king's eating is described.

Why did Georgians have the feasts, what were the reasons, i.e. in what occasions they held the feasts, banquets or sometimes carouse? Several occasions might be the reasons of celebrations: 1) wedding, 2) feast after funeral, 3) feast after great victory, 4) welcoming the guests, especially the foreign guests, 5) feast without any particular purpose and reason. However, the reason of the only feast, documented as latter, is disputed – it is possible that it was held in order to prepare the conspiracy and the celebration served as an excuse for Georgian nobles. Other reasons of feasts could be the celebration of religious holidays and celebration of New Year. The last two are documented by Shota Rustaveli and since this is a fictional text we are still cautious with this text. Later, in the 17th century some other reasons of the feasts are documented. We can speculate that feasts were held because of those reasons even during the reign of David Aghmashenebeli and Queen Tamar, but there are no direct evidences of them. The banquets documented in the 17th century, which reveal some different reasons to feasts, are mostly held not by noble but by commoners. Since the historians who preserved the evidences about the feasts during the reign of David Aghmashenebeli and Queen Tamar mostly focus on the lives of nobles and royal family, it is quite possible that they would not even mention the reasons why commoners might hold it. For example, food consummation after some sacrificial rituals and prayers documented in 17th century should be characteristic to lower classes only. Such rituals usually have

pre-Christian influence¹ and mostly are practiced by the commoners. Also, smaller feasts could be held after field works in 17th century which also seem to be practiced by commoners.

Forms of commensality are very interesting. Majority of the sources, fiction and non-fiction texts agree that commensality was always accompanied with games, hunting, music, gift exchange or just giving away the gifts.

The first reason of feast we mentioned, was wedding. Both weddings of Queen Tamar are described in “History and Laudation of the Sovereigns”. The description of Queen Tamar’s wedding with Yury Bogolyubsky (also known as Giorgi Rusi) is as follows: “...and as there was fate and custom for monarchs, they hold unprecedented and indescribable wedding, and they had a lot of games, gave a lot of jewels and pearls, also goods inlaid with gold and without, and other riches – luxurious cloths. Joy, feast and giving away the gifts lasted for one week”². Her second marriage is describe rather briefly but some interesting details are still mentioned “...Guests were happy, cottars³ became rich, bards and singers sang a lot and countless people came to watch”⁴.

Other reason of commensality could be funerals. Such practice is documented by the anonymous author of “History and Laudation of the Sovereigns”. He describes the feast during and after the funeral of Giorgi III: “During this time of despair, sorrow and grief and when they wore mourning cloth, they gave away immense food”⁵. So, it seems, during the time of mourning it was a regular practice to feed many people which in fact is not unusual for Georgians even today.

Basili Ezosmodzghvari mentions one feast after victory in Gandza, which is extremely interesting: “When god was merciful, they came to Gandza/Ganja and citizens came out to meet them, asked for peace and gave the city voluntarily. They took David [Soslani] in a palace, put him on the

¹ N. Phiphia. K. Tsimintia. Some Practices Connected with Faith and Beliefs in Samegrelo (“Khvama”: “Okhvameri” and “Dunapiri”). Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Faculty of Humanities, Institute of Georgian History proceedings. vol. 12. 2017. Tbilisi. Mediriani publishers, p. 427-452 (in Georgian with a summary in English).

² S. Kauhchishvili, “Life of Kartli”, Text established based on all major manuscripts, Tbilisi. Sabchota Sakartvelo Publishers, 1959. p. 37 (in Georgian).

³ The word in Georgian used here is “glaxakni”. If we take into consideration their social status, they should correspond to cottars mentioned in “Domesday Book” of William the conqueror.

⁴ S. Kauhchishvili, “Life of Kartli”, Text established based on all major manuscripts, Tbilisi. Sabchota Sakartvelo Publishers, 1959. p. 47 (in Georgian).

⁵ S. Kauhchishvili, “Life of Kartli”, Text established based on all major manuscripts, Tbilisi. Sabchota Sakartvelo Publishers, 1959. p. 25. (in Georgian).

throne of sultans, gave him royal gifts, and had a great feast with pork"⁶. Basili Ezosmodzghvari usually is not interested in such topics and in fact this is the only commensality attested by him. The feast happened not in Georgia but in Ganja and was held to honour David Solsali or celebrate the victory of Christians over Muslim rulers of Ganja. This should be the reason the author in purpose mentions "*a great feast with pork*".

The author of "History and Laudation of Sovereigns" documented the official reception of the suitors of Queen Tamar: "*[She] hold an official reception for him [Mutafradin, son of Saldukh], let him sit on a throne (chair ?), and there was a inexpressible happiness as it is supposed to be during feasts and commensality of the lords of this house, and countless different games [were hold], singers and players [attended feast], [and they] gave away the gifts and cloths*"⁷. Another such reception was hold to honour another suitor of Queen Tamar – Amir-Mirman: "*Then they decided to eat and after eating they started to feast... and there was a joy, bards and signers sang, and they also received luxurious cloths, and the guests also [received cloths] and those who accompanied them, and the joy - giving gifts, hunting and games continued for one week*"⁸. The other excerpt informs us also about the meeting with Amir-Mirman: "*They had a reception, and Amir-Mirman and Shirvan-shah all sat on their places, and every vizier – Mandarturtukhusesi, Amirspasalari and others sat according to rules (customs)... and they had feast and commensality appropriate to their times*"⁹.

A commensality without a particular purpose and reason is documented by Gregory of Akner, an Armenian historian: "*and Georgian king David had a feast always in his capital Tbilisi. One day there was a great feasting and joy before the king. Georgians have a custom of being arrogant and talk a lot [during the feast] ... and when they were feasting and drinking, they counted the army of Georgians and Armenians and assumed that they could beat Mongol army. They even appointed the leaders. And they did it not rationally and in purpose but just for the joy, because they enjoyed a leisure time and nothing*

⁶ S. Kaukhchishvili, "Life of Kartli", Text established based on all major manuscripts, Tbilisi. Sabchota Sakartvelo Publishers, 1959. p. 127 (in Georgian).

⁷ S. Kaukhchishvili, "Life of Kartli", Text established based on all major manuscripts, Tbilisi. Sabchota Sakartvelo Publishers, 1959. p. 43. (in Georgian).

⁸ S. Kaukhchishvili, "Life of Kartli", Text established based on all major manuscripts, Tbilisi. Sabchota Sakartvelo Publishers, 1959. p. 66 (in Georgian).

⁹ S. Kaukhchishvili, "Life of Kartli", Text established based on all major manuscripts, Tbilisi. Sabchota Sakartvelo Publishers, 1959. p. 73 (in Georgian).

bothered them, since there was no enemy in the east, except for the Mongols”¹⁰. However, N. Asatiani assumed, that the commensality was held with a specific purpose – to prepare the revolt against Mongols.¹¹

A commensality without reason is described in “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin”. A leading fictional character, Tariel, holds a feast without reason:

*“We made a feast at home that day for those who had been in the plain; the singers and minstrels were not dumb; the king gave away many precious stones praised as unique; none of those present were left dissatisfied that day I strove, (but) could not keep myself from melancholy; I thought on her, the fire burned into a larger flame in my heart. I took my comrades with me, I sat down; they called me an aloe-tree; I drank and feasted to hide my misery and grief. I rose up; those sitting at the banquet prepared to depart. ‘By your leave!’ said I, ‘do not rise; I shall not tarry long.’ I went forth and entered the chamber, a slave stood on guard at the door, I nerved my heart to suffer shame.”*¹²

The other reason of commensality could be the celebration of religious holidays, also of New Year. Muslim holidays are mentioned in the same text as a reason to feast:

“In this city it is a rule that on New Year’s Day (Navrozoba – N.Ph.; K. Ts.) no merchant trades, none sets out on a journey; we all straightway begin to deck and beautify ourselves; the sovereigns make a great court banquet “We great merchants are bound to take presents to court; they (the sovereigns) must give gifts befitting us. For ten days there is heard everywhere the sound of the cymbal and tambourine; in the public square, tilting, ball-play, the stamping of horses “My husband, Usen, is the leader of the great merchants, I lead their wives; I need none to invite me; rich or poor, we give presents to the queen; we entertain ourselves agreeably at court, we come home merry “New Year’s Day was come, we gave our gifts to the queen; we gave to them, they gave to us, we filled them, we were filled. After a time, we went forth

¹⁰ N. Asatiani. Sh. Darchiashvili. About the Rebellion of David, Son of Rusudan (Narini) against Mongols. part II. *Saistorio shtudiebi*. Tbilisi. 2004. p. 12 (In Georgian).

¹¹ N. Asatiani. Sh. Darchiashvili. About the Rebellion of David, Son of Rusudan (Narini) against Mongols. part II. *Saistorio shtudiebi*. Tbilisi. 2004. p. 21 (in Georgian).

¹² Shot’ha Rust’haveli. The Man in the Panther’s Skin. A Close Rendering from the Georgian Attempted by Marjory Scott Wardrop. London. The Royal Asiatic Society. 1912. pp. 57-58.

*merry, at our will; again we sat down to rejoice, we were not of their company. "At eventide I went into the garden to sport; I took the ladies with me, it behoved me to entertain them; I brought with me minstrels, they discoursed sweet song; I played and gambolled like a child, I changed veil and hair"*¹³.

Despite the fact that the author intended to describe holiday and commensality of Muslims, in our opinion, celebration of the New Year was pretty much the same among noble Georgians too.

The other interesting question is what was the format of the feast, i. e. to what extent it was "ruled" like modern Georgian feasts are? There is no evidence that the feasts had a "ruler" like modern Georgian feasts usually have. The king is implied to be in the center of commensality, however it does not mean that lower classes celebrated in the same way. The word "Toast" (*Sadghegrdzelo*) is not mentioned in the dictionary of Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani. L. Bregadze suggested that this is the evidence of its absence. He also pointed out that no other Georgian texts reveal its existence, including Sayat-nova's poetry. It is not mentioned also in King Archil's "Georgian Customs".¹⁴ L. Bregadze actually mixes existence of Tamada (ruler of the feast) and Toast. Toasts existed but the existence of Tamada is less possible. Institute of Tamada seems to be a later phenomenon. Toasts can be seen in Don Cristoforo Castelli's paintings (№318, 319, 320, 321),¹⁵ therefore toasts at Georgian parties existed as early as 17th century at least, but Tamada is not known. Institute of Tamada supposedly existed at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, but it became widely popular in Soviet era. G. Nodia outlined an interesting reason of this: "*Georgian supra has many aspects "non-civil". Tamada is a dictator, no pluralism of ideas and criticism is allowed, routine is normal, women's lower status is regular (men usually "get rid of them" with the toast of ladies in the beginning so to eliminate them from the block of personal toasts). To sum up, supra is a model of authoritarian relationships. Stalin's toast and "stalinization" of the Institute of Tamada was establishing legitimacy of communist regime better than the network of communist party education*".¹⁶

¹³ Shot'ha Rust'haveli. The Man in the Panther's Skin. A Close Rendering from the Georgian Attempted by Marjory Scott Wardrop. London. The Royal Asiatic Society. 1912. pp. 178-179.

¹⁴ L. Bregvadze, Toasts and its Compensatory Nature. in: Georgian *supra* and Civil Society. Tbilisi. CIPDD publishers. 2004. p. 11 (in Georgian).

¹⁵ Teramo Cristoforo Castelli, Information and Album about Georgia. Editor: B. Giorgadze. Tbilisi: Metsniereba Publishers. 1976. (in Georgian).

¹⁶ G. Nodia. Georgia *supra* Against Democracy – introduction of an editor. in: Georgian *supra* and Civil Society. Tbilisi. CIPDD publishers. 2004. p. 6

Form of commensality is quite well documented in “Regulations of Georgian Royal Court”, however this is the commensality held at royal court, so we can imply that other nobles and commoners hold it in a different way. According to the source, the commensality at the royal court was accompanied with a complex ritual and every vizier and lesser officials had specific task to do which were prescribed in details¹⁷.

Another question is to what extent gender differences during feasts existed and whether sexism can be traced in evidences? The Age of Queen Tamar does not reveal any kind of gender differences during feasts, however it does not mean that this was the rule for medieval Georgia in general. Later ethnographic sources (17th century) suggest that women and men may be sitting on the same table during a feast but on separate sides and in fact, the reasoning behind such practice is not known, therefore we cannot by default argue that this is the evidence of sexism. However, in some cases, men and women might be feasting in separate houses¹⁸. In general, no major gender differences, which would imply inequality between sexes can be traced.¹⁹ The only differentiation which can be traced according to sources, is that men and women both had to follow the rules about age differences – they sat based on their age but not their gender²⁰.

¹⁷ “Regulation of Georgian Royal Court”. Edited by E. Takaishvili. Tbilisi. Tbilisi University Press. 1920. p. 1

¹⁸ T. Ivelashvili, *Etiquette of Georgian Feast*. Tbilisi: Metsniereba Publishers. 1995. p. 11. (in Georgian).

¹⁹ T. Ivelashvili, *Etiquette of Georgian Feast*. Tbilisi: Metsniereba Publishers. 1995. p. 11. (in Georgian).

²⁰ T. Ivelashvili, *Etiquette of Georgian Feast*. Tbilisi: Metsniereba Publishers. 1995. p. 11. (in Georgian).