

Eating with the dead in the nation of Georgia

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Abstract: *This articles has two focuses, one is what eating with the dead in the nation of Georgia significates for the family members and loved ones that are still here, another focus is on the traditions and habits surrounding the meals with the beloved parted ones.*

Keywords: Georgia, religion, tradition, history, death, meals, gastronomy

JEL codes: Z00, Z12.

1. Introduction

There is a saying in Georgia—that God took a supper break while he was creating the world, and then became so involved in his meal that by accident he tripped over the peaks of the Caucasus, and as a result he spilled some of his own food onto the land below. The country blessed with the scraps of heaven’s table was Georgia. That saying gives an indication of how important food and beverage are for the Georgians, both in daily life and on feast days. It is also an indication of the importance of God and religion in the country. My focus for this text is to reveal the importance of food in Georgian orthodox Christian memorial feasts for the dead and to illustrate, through fieldwork and interviews, how the deceased are both remembered and celebrated through three main feasts: the Supra, the Easter Celebration, and bread.¹ The overall question is therefore: how are beloved deceased family members remembered and celebrated through the Supra, Easter Celebration, and bread?

2. A Brief Religious History of Georgia

Georgia (Sakartvelo) is a transcontinental country in the Caucasus region, situated at the dividing line between Europe and Asia. Its geographical location borders with the Black Sea, the modern Russian federation, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan, positioning the country as a crossroads between the East and the West, from pre-historic to modern times. Many times over the course of its history Georgia has been invaded by the Greeks and Persians, as well as the Ottoman Turks, creating a unique cultural situation, incorporating

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¹ I have collected the information for the text during my research trips in Georgia from 2011 to 2014. The fieldwork was conducted in forms of interviews as well as personal observations. Most of my informants from my field research have asked to be anonymous, and therefore I have outlined the traditional customs but have not quoted informants directly. However, in my fieldwork in Georgia, I attended *Supra* meals and was able to observe these customs up close.

both Muslim and more traditional western views, as the country assimilated the culture of its various invaders. The invasions have left their imprints on Georgia's foodways, resulting in the existence of many different gastronomical and culinary branches in Georgia today. Eating and dining, in general, remain very important activities in the country.

Georgia has a long and complex religious history. If we focus on the monotheistic religions, the Jewish population came to the country after King Nebuchadnezzar II conquered Jerusalem in the year 597 B.C. The Jewish population and its descendants have since that time counted Georgia as a second homeland, and they have always been free to practice their religion and customs there.² Georgia is one of the first Christian countries—the country had representatives present at the First Council of Nicaea in the year 325, while the official year for the country's baptism is 337, an event credited to Saint Nino and her work. At that time, the country was a part of the Roman Empire under Constantine the Great.³ During the latter part of the 4th century AD the Persians invaded the Caucasus, and there was intermittent persecution. In the year 482 the Georgian King Vakhtang Gorgasali, with the Byzantines as his allies, defeated the Persians. In the year 645 the Arab-Muslims stood outside the city gates of Tbilisi, and shortly thereafter the whole country was under Arabian political rule.⁴ During the reign of King David the Builder (1089–1125), the Orthodox Church became very strong. During the fourteenth century the country was under constant attack from the Mongolians. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 was followed by about 300 years of very bloody battles and invasions. The Russian army freed Georgia from the Muslim incursions at the end of the eighteenth century, but in religious terms the country was ruled by the Georgian Orthodox Church even under Muslim rule during the period 1804–1910. During the following 106 years the Georgian Orthodox Church was governed by a Russian synod. Services and masses in the Georgian language were forbidden, the frescoes were painted over, and a large proportion of the country's icons were destroyed and sold. In the year 1917, in the aftermath of the Russian revolution, the country gained some independence, which was lost again in 1921, this time to Bolshevik Russia. During the era of Communist Party (1921–1989) many of the churches were closed. Twenty-five thousand churches were active in 1921, but in 1945 only 50 remained.⁵ During the 1970s the Orthodox Church started to recover again. Under the present Patriarch over 600 churches have been restored, along with 70 monasteries, two theological academies, six seminaries, and the Academy of Sciences in Gelati.⁶ In 2004 one of the largest churches in the world was inaugurated. Jews, Christians, and Muslims live side by side and have their sanctuaries very close to each other in the old part of Tbilisi.⁷ As of today Georgia's population is approximately 4.5 million and the major part of the population confess themselves to be Georgian orthodox, while approximately 10 % confess Islam and there is also a well-integrated Jewish group in the country, concentrated to the cities of Tbilisi and Kutaisi.⁸

². Margvelashvili, Armen, *The Temple* (Tbilisi: 2000), 46; Sukhitashvili, Dimitri, *The Coat of Christ*, (Tbilisi: 1999), 78.

³. Lang, Marshall, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, (London: Allen & Unwin; Macmillan Co, 1956), 13.

Machitadze, Zakaria, *Lives of the Georgian Saints*, (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood 2006), 18,

Silogava, Valer, & Shengelia, Kakha *History of Georgia*, (Tbilisi: Caucasus University Publishing House, 2007), 43.

⁴. Machitadze, 19–22.

⁵. Machitadze 2006: 27.

⁶. Machitadze 2006: 29.

⁷. Machitadze 2006: 23–29.

⁸. <http://www.landguiden.se/Lander/Europa/Georgien/Befolkning-Sprak>, Last accessed: December 19, 2016, The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, the article is only in Swedish,
<http://www.landguiden.se/Lander/Europa/Georgien/Religion>, Last accessed: December 19, 2016, The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, the article is only in Swedish

3. The *Supra* Meal: Honoring the Dead

The *Supra* meal is a phenomenon in Georgia that usually takes place in the evening that goes on for hours; the word *supra* roughly translates as tablecloth. The term originally derives from the Arabic word *sufuratun*, which means a cloth spread out on the floor for eating. At least 10 dishes are included in a *supra*, and they are all placed on the table simultaneously. There is an assortment of traditional dishes included in a *supra* meal: fried eggplant with tomato and paprika (*ajapsandali*), walnut sauce (*bazje*), meat soup (*chartjo*), baked bread dough with cheese filling (*Khachapuri*), pickled Caucasian nut (*dzjondzjoli*), porridge made of corn flour and *sulguni* cheese (*elardzji*), cornbread (*mchadi*), whole roasted suckling pig (*gotji*), brown beans in garlic sauce (*lobio*), a mixture of chopped spinach, leaves of beetroot or similar (*mchaki/pchali*), barbeque (*mtsvadi*), whole fresh herbs such as estragon, coriander, mint, dill, parsley dipped in salt (*mtsvanili*), eggplants with walnuts (*nigvziani*), bread (*puri*), turkey or chicken with walnut sauce (*satsivi*), marinated mushrooms (*soko*), a relatively salty cheese that can also be served fried (*sulguni/suluguni*), and a chicken in a tomato and onion sauce with herbs and sauce made from prunus divaricate (*tjachochbili*). The fruit is called *Tkemali*, and it is a kind of prune that comes in three colours: red, green, and yellow. The listed dishes for a *supra* are dishes that are considered to be Georgian and therefore have a given place at the table.



Fig 1 and 2. Eggplant with walnuts on its plate to the left and to the right walnut sauce is in the making. © Author, 2011



Fig 3. Khachapuri in the making, © Author, 2011



Fig 4 and 5. Whole roasted suckling pig waiting to be cut up for the supra meal on the left, on the right lobio (beans) are being made. © Author, 2011



Fig 6 and 7. Mtsvadi over open fire and tone bread fresh from the oven. © Author, 2011



Fig 8. Yellow Tkemali fruits waiting to be harvest. © Author, 2011

The different kinds of dishes are served on communal plates. Each dish is placed on several different serving plates and placed out on the table. Each guest then takes the dishes he wants. At the end of the *supra*, Turkish coffee is served along with fruits, such as figs and quince in syrup.⁹ This plethora of dishes should be seen as a minimum of dishes for a *supra* meal, and a normal *supra* goes on for several hours. A traditional *supra* can be given and celebrated on any given day of the year. It can be given as a celebration of a special occasion, such as a birthday, or simply because one wants to have a nice time with friends and family.

Close family members, extended family, and friends typically gather for a larger *supra* on a special occasion that honors a deceased loved one 40 days after his or her death and after one year of the passing. This gathering marks the completion of the 40 days of wandering that Georgian Orthodox followers believe departed souls travel in order to be judged by God. The judgment is based on the person's actions during one's lifetime, and Georgian Orthodox Christians believe it takes 40 days before the judgment is over and the soul is released to go to heaven and no longer be earthly bound.¹⁰ Though it is generally unknown where the departed souls travel, the important aspect of the large *Supra* is the shared belief that the soul has reached its final state and no longer wanders about. The preparation for this occasion and large *supra* takes days in which the family members cook both day and night in order to get ready for the event. The core dishes mentioned earlier are a mere sample of those prepared for the larger feast, and no expense is spared in order to place as many dishes as possible on the table in remembrance of the loved one that passed away.

The final journey of a beloved one is indeed supported by a large meal. It is not clear, however, if the meal in itself is a send-off for the departed, if it is a symbolic meal for the mourners in order to celebrate the departed person's final ascent into heaven, or if it is simply an excuse for having a large dinner party. The answer to the question as to why the *supra* is held varies depending upon whom one asks. Some say that it is stated in the New Testament that Jesus declared that it takes 40 days for the soul to be judged and sent to Heaven. The interpretation of this scripture is that the *supra* meal comes from heaven and therefore is a very important ritual to have in releasing the beloved one to Heaven. Other Georgians that I interviewed believe that even if they are deeply religious and well rooted in Georgian orthodoxy, they find the celebration of a 40 day *Supra* tedious, and therefore prefer to observe these customs in private, a celebration to remember the family.¹¹ However the custom with the *Supra* is so strong that they attend the occasion without complaint. Still, others argue that the *Supra* has nothing to do with Christian orthodoxy. Instead it is an excuse for having a great feast and meeting family members and friends whom they have not seen for a very long time. These different views indicate that the 40-day *Supra* celebration is a complex phenomenon in the religious life.

3.1 The *Tamada*

It is not possible to talk about a Georgian *Supra* without mentioning the *tamada*. In Western Europe the *tamada* is called "toastmaster". The *tamada* is a male guest elected to function as the *supra* host and is generally chosen to be the *tamada* at the beginning of the meal. Considered to be a great honor (especially at large *supras*), the *tamada* is elected from the male guests because traditionally only men attended the *supra*. Normally one of the oldest male guests is chosen, often the host holding the *supra*. Even if girls and women

⁹. Enwall, Joakim& Söderlind, Ulrica, Den georgiska matkulturen, *Medea från Georgien- skatter från antikens Kolchis*, (Värnamo, Medelhavsmuseet: 2009), 109-110.; Chatwin, Mary Allen Tamadoba- drinking social cohesion at the Georgian table, *Drinking- Anthropological approaches*, (Cornwall: 2002), 181.

¹⁰. Secretary of Father Adam, Georgian Orthodox Church, Tbilisi, Georgia, March 11, 2013.

¹¹. Interviews with anonymous believers of the Georgian Orthodox faith, Tbilisi, Georgia, February 13, 2014, March 10, 2014, April 16, 2014, May 2, 2015.

take part today as guests at a *supra*, it is not a custom to choose a woman as *tamada*. It takes years of training from childhood for a boy to be a good *tamada* when he grows up. *Tamadas* are expected to be effective and innovative, simultaneously drawing upon tradition while striving to make their *supra* unique and memorable. The *tamada* begins the *supra* with the first glass raised, joined by all the other guests at the table and continues the process with successive statements at frequent intervals during the entire meal. The wine consumption varies from two to six litres of wine per person during a normal *supra*. It is considered an insult to the guests to serve a bad wine. The wine at a *supra* is usually a red domestic wine of very high quality. Since wine is such an important part of the Georgian food culture, the majority of the Georgians know their wines very well. At the *supra* no wine drinking takes place between the toasts made by the *tamada*. Non-alcoholic beverages are served throughout the whole *supra* that one can drink at any time.

One does not propose a toast if one is not the *tamada* except under certain conditions and with the permission of the *tamada*. Additionally, no one can change the theme of the proposed toast. Sometimes at large or grand *supras* the *tamada* has a helper, a so-called *merikipe* (*keipe* derives from the ancient Persian word for joy), who is responsible for serving the wine. The *merikipe* has an important role at the table as the *tamada*'s helper. The *merikipe* sees to it that no wineglasses are empty and fills them up so that no guests are without wine when the *tamada* proclaims a toast. Sitting with an empty wineglass is considered to be an insult to the guests. Women and foreigners around the table, however, are allowed to decline refills if they wish. In the toast the *tamada* sees to it that the word *Gaumardjos*, which means victory, is utilized in reference to the deceased.¹² A toast in Georgia is never allowed to end with death, but always with a form of life. This is therefore a symbolic victory over death.

Depending on the size of the *supra*, the number of toasts varies from five toasts to twenty or more. Toasts are usually given to honor acquaintances and friendship, to thank the guests and their families, to toast the health and well-being of attendees, to thank parents and the older generation, to remember the dead and the saints and those who died before their time, to toast the new born and the unborn, to toast the women around the table (here the women are addressed as the veiled ones), to toast love, to honor the mothers of the guests, to hope for world peace, and finally, to thank the hostess and *tamada*. The toasts made by the *tamada* during the *supra* are an important way to manifest the Georgian culture and the basic national values along with traditional virtues, both for the living and the deceased.

The toast for the deceased loved ones is a very special toast, and it is not uncommon for wine to be poured onto a piece of bread or for bread to be dipped in the wine during the toast. According to personal choice, the bread can be eaten or not eaten. Opinions differ among Georgians as to where this custom comes from and what it means. Some say it is the symbol of the body and blood of Christ while others say it comes from the mountain areas where wine is poured into the ground during this special toast. In the cities, the ground itself has been substituted by pieces of bread. Guests often feel that they are directly sharing wine with the deceased person and that the bread is the material form of the deceased. This emotion and belief harkens back to Jesus' words during the last supper, when he proclaimed that the bread was his body and the wine his blood. The men generally stand during this toast while the women remain seated.¹³ At the large *supra*, which takes place forty days after the death of a loved one, the number of toasts usually exceeds the twenty previously mentioned. It is not uncommon for the *tamada* to pass the toast on to the next male guest who continues the same theme, then that guest passes the toast on to the following male guest and so forth, until all of the male guests have had their turn. It is essential to have a large amount of wine at this *supra* because it would be considered an insult to run out of wine. Serving good wine in large quantities symbolizes

¹². Enwall & Söderlind, 2009, 110; Chatwin 2002, 181,184-186; anonymous Georgian Orthodox believer, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 10, 2010.

¹³. Chatwin, 2002, 185; Enwall & Söderlind, 2009, 111.

great hospitality on the part of the host.



Fig 9. Blessed so called Kvevris for fermenting sacred wine in. © Author, 2013

3.2. The *Kolio*

One dish that is more or less obligatory to serve at the 40-day *supra* is *Kolio*,¹⁴ a dessert made from wheat, honey, walnut, sugar, raisins, and water. The history of this meal traces back to saint Teodore Tironi, a knight from the fourth century C.E., when many Georgian Christians were in a transition period between the old beliefs in many different gods and Christianity (i.e. the beliefs was moving from polytheism to Christianity). The rulers of Georgia at the time, Maksimiane (305-311) and Maksimine (305-313), decreed that all who would not pray to the pre-Christian gods and who would not make a sacrifice to them would be punished. Teodore Tironi, an early Christian, answered the decree by burning down some temples dedicated to the pre-Christian gods, and for this action, he was captured, tortured, and burnt. Fifty years after his martyrdom, when fasting days became popularly celebrated by Christians, King Ivliane told the governors that they should pour blood sacrifices on the foodstuff in the markets, since then the Christians would not be able to eat the food because it would be a sin to break the fasting rules. The legend also states that the main bishop, Evdoksis, saw Saint Teodore, and the saint told the bishop to tell the people not to buy food at the markets since it was contaminated by blood. Instead, they should buy wheat and honey from other places and make the dish now known as *Kolio*. Regardless of the legend of its origins, *Kolio* became an important dish eaten on holy days in the Georgian orthodox faith and especially after a person died. It was considered to be a symbolic victory over the old beliefs, since the Georgian orthodox faith soon became the official religion in the nation. *Kolio* has ever since been a dish served and eaten in connection with a person's passing. In due course, it found its way onto the *supra* table that is served forty days after a person's passing. In the Georgian Orthodox Church, the feast day for Saint Teodore Tironi is February 17.¹⁵

Kolio takes approximately two days to make. The cook cleans the whole wheat by rinsing it in water and boiling it. The ration of water to wheat is two to one. After it is boiled, the pot is taken off the stove and

¹⁴. Secretary of Father Adam, Georgian Orthodox Church, Tbilisi, Georgia, March 11, 2013.

¹⁵. <http://www.orthodoxy.ge/tveni/tebervali/17-teodore-tironi.htm>, Official website for the Georgian Orthodox Church, the article about Saint Teodore is only in Georgian, Last accessed: December 19, 2016

placed in the middle of several blankets, covered, and left to rest until the following day so that the wheat can absorb the remaining water. When the blankets are taken away the following day, the pot is still hot. Sugar, honey, chopped walnuts, and raisins are added, and the dish is stirred. If it is in need of more boiling water, it is added. The desired consistency of the dish should be light, not sticky and very sweet. The sugar, honey, and raisins stand for the sweetness. For a foreigner the dish might seem a bit too sweet. Many Georgians, however, have a sweet tooth and like very sweet desserts. The *kolio* is presented in either a deep bowl or a plate and eaten with a spoon.¹⁶



Fig 10. *Kolio* in front of an icon together with Holy Bread. © Author, 2011

3.3 Easter

The Easter celebration in Georgia holds a very special place for all Christian believers because Georgian Orthodox Christians celebrate and commemorate Jesus' death and resurrection as Christ. During the Lenten season, a Christian Orthodox season of repentance that takes place the 40 days before Easter, many Georgian Christians ascribe to the proscriptions forbidding the eating of meat, dairy products, or sugar, and breaking the fast on Easter day after forty days of not eating these foodstuffs is a cause of celebration itself.¹⁷ Even if the believers visit the family members' graves year round with food and drink, Easter Monday is a very special day for visiting the graveyards, as the resurrection of Jesus gives more reason to presume that one's deceased relatives are also sharing in eternity with him. A connection exists between the visits to the graves of the deceased and the Orthodox Christian idea of Easter as a rebirth of humankind. The visit to the graves begins with the living family members greeting the souls of the deceased with the words "Christ is risen." Prior to Easter, eggs are coloured red at home in remembrance of Christ's blood that coloured the earth during the torture and crucifixion. It is also a symbol for Jesus' victory over death in the resurrection from the grave and his becoming the Christ, and in that way visiting the grave becomes a symbol for new life.

¹⁶. Observation and participation of making Kolio, Rustavi, Georgia, July 3-4, 2011.

¹⁷. Secretary of Father Adam, Georgian Orthodox Church, Tbilisi, Georgia, March 11, 2013.



Fig 11. Easter egg in preparation to be boiled along with peels of onion and a red root in order to colour them red. © Author, 2013

Wine is then poured over the grave in the form of the cross of Saint Nino, the symbol of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The original cross of Saint Nino was made out of vine branches tied together with the hair of Saint Nino, and it symbolizes the Georgian orthodox faith and hope that death is not the end of a person. The cross of Saint Nino is an indicator of how important wine is for the believers, as it is considered to be a heavenly beverage. No one in Georgia denies the sacredness of wine. The wine is usually a red domestic wine of high quality since it is a symbol for the blood of Christ. Family members taken part in these visits from early childhood.



Fig 12. Saint Ninos cross that is made out of vine branches. © Author, 2011

After toasting the deceased family member(s), the visiting family toasts and eats with each other. One very important item is the Easter Cake, called *paska*. The *paska* cake contains egg, butter, and sugar (ingredients forbidden during Lent). One can either make the *paska* at home or buy them in stores and bakeries. The *paska* cake derives from either Italy or Russia, and there is some difference between them. The texture of the cake should be very light and the taste sweet or slightly spicy. The cake is always baked in a high round tin mould. The Italian inspired *Paska* in Georgia have more candied fruit in it than the Russian version. The Russian version contains some spices that the Italian version does not have. The eggs, the wine, and the *Paska* cake are always present at this occasion, and the rest of the meal depends on what the family has at home. The visit to the graves takes most of the day, so eating something more than an egg and a *paska*

cake is often necessary. During Soviet times, the government forbade visitation graves during Easter because religion was also forbidden. The people therefore visited the graves the day after Easter instead so that the tradition was kept alive even if it was not allowed, for there was no way the Georgians would not pay respect to their beloved ones.¹⁸



Fig 14. Making of Easter cake (Paska) by mother and daughter at their home. © Author 2013



Fig 15 and 16. To the left food is left on the graves for the loved ones who have passed away so that

they have something to eat when the visit is over. Here Paska cakes and eggs have been left at the grave for the beloved ones to feast on, along with some flowers. The wine is already poured onto the ground and to the right table and a bench at a grave site in central Tbilisi. © Author 2013

Since it is traditional to bring food and wine to the graves of the deceased throughout the year, it is also customary to find a table of some sort at the grave. The table is used for the placement of food, both for visitors to the grave and for the dead. Sometimes flowers are left at the graves. The main thing, however, is to leave food (or a meal) at the graves. The family members always toast with the beloved passed person and eat with him or her on these occasions. In this way, the living reintegrate the beloved deceased ones through a shared social space on sacred ground. Through eating at the graveside, the dead are once again invited to take part in the realm of the living, while the living also acknowledge their relationship with the dead. The visit at the graves takes hours before it is over, and the living tell the deceased what is new in their lives since

¹⁸. Anonymous believer, Tbilisi, Georgia, May 15, 2015.

their last visit.

3.5 Bread and the Religious Significance of Wheat

Bread is a staple food in Georgia, and bread accompanies every meal except when dumplings (filled either with minced meat, potato, cheese, or mushrooms) and cheese-filled baked bread are served. Even at a large table such as the *supra*, bread is present and completes the *supra*. Wheat is the main crop for bread making in Georgia and it plays a special role in Holy days that celebrate abundance and fertility in the church. On these Holy days, grains of wheat are placed in a special bowl during the mass. The meaning of the wheat is two-fold in that the wheat simultaneously symbolizes death and life. In my field research, a Father (who wants to remain anonymous) in the Georgian orthodox church stated that the wheat has a symbolic dual role—it symbolizes death through the dead seed and life and prosperity through the possibility of new life and growth.¹⁹ The sacrament of bread in the Georgian Orthodox Church is made out of wheat flour. Like the wheat seed, the bread also has two meanings. It represents abundance according to Jesus's miracle in Galilee, where he fed a large number of people from two fishes and five loaves of bread, and it represents Christ's two natures, human and divine. The sacrament of bread is made in two shapes: one for the deceased, decorated with a cross, and another for the living, decorated with the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus.



Fig 17. In the Georgian Orthodox Church two different stamps are used for the bread for the Divine Service. One with Virgin Mary with baby Jesus (on the left) for the ones that are alive and not yet born and another one with a cross (on the right) for the ones who has passed away. © Author, 2013

The worshippers buy the holy breads and write the names of deceased and living persons on pieces of paper. The priest then prays for these people during mass.²⁰ The Holy bread takes seven hours to make in the church bakery, and only young men are allowed to work in the bakeries. Sometimes, a whole loaf of bread is left in the churches with prayers and lit candles for the deceased. The bread is called tone bread because it is made in a bevel-shaped tone oven designed to provide very high, dry heat. Fuel for the fire is provided by charcoal, which lines the bottom of the structure. In order to produce temperatures approaching 900 degrees Fahrenheit (480 degrees Celsius), bakers maintain a long vigil to keep the ovens coals continually burning. At such high temperatures, bread made in this oven develops a very crisp outer layer without sacrificing moistness on the inside.²¹ In order for the bread to get the distinctive long shape, the baker uses a mould in which he places the pieces of dough on top and pulls the dough to the desired shape. The dough for tone bread is made out of wheat flour. In fact the Georgian word for wheat flour translates into English as “bread flour.”

¹⁹. Father, Georgian orthodox church, Tbilisi, Georgia, July 20, 2011.

²⁰. Father, Georgian orthodox church, Tbilisi, Georgia, July 20, 2011.

²¹. Tuda, R, *Georgian Soviet Encyclopaedia*, vol 4, (Tbilisi: 1979), 692.

The custom of using wheat in special masses in the Georgian Orthodox churches and the twofold meaning of death and new life may also have its origin in ancient civilizations. In Egypt during the feasts of Isis, baskets full of wheat and barley were carried in the procession in memory of the benefaction of the Goddess. Husks from the grain were isolated from almost every sample of intestinal contents of pre-dynastic Egyptians both in Egypt and Nubia, and as late as the Christian period. In the tomb of a royal fan-bearer who lived in about 1500 B.C.E. (in the Valley of the Kings), a mattress of reeds covered with three layers of linen was found resting on a bier. On the upper side of the linen a life-size figure of Osiris was painted, and the interior of the figure, which was waterproof, contained a mixture of mold, barley, and sticky fluid. The barley had sprouted and sent out shoots two or three inches long, and debris of *triticum dicocum* (Egyptian spelt) was also found.²² These findings are one example of how Osiris was worshipped both as the God of the dead but also as a God of resurrection, and in the latter he was depicted with a green face as a symbol for life and rebirth. Since Egypt was of great interest to the Greeks, they may have come across this custom during their stay in the country. In ancient Greece Persephone was the daughter of Zeus and the Goddess Demeter who was the Goddess of Vegetation. According to the myth the earth opened up one day when Persephone was picking flowers and Hades abducted her into the world of the shadows. When Demeter became aware of what had happened she withdraw from the world with the consequence that all vegetation ceased. This could not go on and finally Zeus ordered Hades to send Persephone up into daylight again, Hades obeyed after he had persuade Persephone to taste a pomegranate which bound her to the kingdom of the dead. She had to spend a third of the year there and the rest of the year among the Gods of Olympus. When she was in the kingdom of the dead the soil was cold and not fertile, while she was on Olympus the vegetation prospered and gave wealth and crops that was turned into food by the humans. The ear of wheat and other grains that were placed in the soil in order to once again come to life during the spring and summer were symbols for the hope of humanity arising from decay and corruption into something better and brighter. Persephone usually was portrayed with a sceptre, tiara, an ear of corn, a pomegranate, torch and poppy. Persephone and her mother were celebrated in Eleusis where she was known as *Kore* (the girl).²³ It is feasible that they found the idea of re-birth and resurrection of interest and took that interest with them when they later colonized other geographical areas such as Georgia.



Fig 18. So called tone bread (*puri*) left with a candle and prayers for different people in a church in Tbilisi. © Author, 2013.

²².Ruffer, Armand, *Food in Egypt* (Le Caire: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale 1919), 52-54.

²³. <http://www.ne.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/l%C3%A5ng/persefone>, Swedish national encyclopaedia, word: persefone, Last accessed December 19, 2016, The article is only in Swedish.

4. Conclusion

This text has discussed select special occasions in the nation of Georgia in which the followers of the Georgian Orthodox faith dine with the deceased, such as the large *supra* and at Easter. Georgia is a nation with a complex and sometimes bloody history, as invasions are familiar to its inhabitants and many families have a long history of loss and death. Since death has been present for many generations in Georgia, death is traditionally considered to be a part of life and remembrance of the dead an important and integrated aspect of Georgian culture. Eating and drinking continue to be an important aspect of culture in Georgia. All women take great pride in the art of cooking, and most dishes are made from scratch in a Georgian kitchen, with recipes handed down from one generation to the next. This connection between the living generation and the ones that have passed via recipes, taste, and food is of great importance since the living feel a strong connection with the family members that have gone before them, and they are always remembered by the tastes they left behind. Wine is a typical accompaniment to any meal, but a guest is not obliged to drink wine if he or she does not want to. Many times when I have been invited as a guest to eat, regardless of the occasion, wine and bread are often spilled on the floor. When I have asked if one should not pick it up, the answer has been that it should be left for the dead. This answer has always been intriguing to me, no one will clean up during the meal or event. The following day I have asked the meaning of the answer, sometimes I have been greeted with a smile, other times the answer has been that what falls on the floor stays there for the dead. This is not a Christian tradition, and it may have pre-Christian roots, perhaps even of a Greek origin because of ancient Greece's interest in Colchis, the territory of modern western Georgia.²⁴ Greece colonized the coast of Colchis and established trading posts in Phasis (modern-day Poti), Gyenos, and Dioskuria (modern-day Sokhumi). Phasis and Dioskuria became splendid Greek cities dominated by mercantile oligarchies. The cities became very important trading centres along the Black Sea coast, trading wine in large quantities. Indeed, wine amphora have been discovered near Poti showing that there was a developed export and import wine business.²⁵ The city of Vani came to be an important religious center during the 7th to 8th centuries B.C. In ancient Greece it was common to offer wine to the dead in different forms.²⁶ It is feasible that the contemporary Georgian custom of spilling wine on the floor has its roots from Greece, since the Greeks themselves brought their traditions and customs with them to the new country, but no one today really knows the origins of this custom. It is however, still appreciated in Georgia today. Bread was also offered to the dead in Greece,²⁷ and it is not impossible that the custom of pouring wine over bread in order to honour the deceased also has its origin from Greece, even if it may have been modified over time and syncretized within the framework of the Georgian Orthodox Church. It is indeed very likely that the customs and traditions that now are practiced within the framework of the Georgian Orthodox Church have their origins in a pre-Christian era.

²⁴. Lordkipanidze, Otar, *Phasis: The River and City in Colchis*, (Tbilisi: 2000), 11-12.

²⁵. Gamkrelidze, Gela, *On The Archaeology of Phasis Valley*, (Tbilisi: 1992), 108.

²⁶. Alcock, Joan P., *Food in the Ancient World*, (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 117; Robert I. Curtis, *Ancient food technology*, (Leiden: 2001), 295-296.

²⁷. Marchant, John, Reuben, Bryan and Alcock, Joan *Bread—A Slice of History*, (Stroud: History Press, 2008), 23; Curtis, 2001, 290; Alcock, 2006, 154.

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