

# Religion and diet in a multi-religious city

A comprehensive study regarding interreligious relations in Tbilisi in everyday life and on feast days

ULRICA SÖDERLIND

This article deals with the importance of foodways among the believers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Georgian capital Tbilisi, both on feast days and in daily life. It takes the form of an interdisciplinary survey in which interviews and written sources are used as well as personal observations from people living within the city.

## Introduction

A person's relation to their own and others' dietary and drinking customs constitutes a very important part of that person's identity. Personal food and drinking patterns represent for an outsider an opportunity for self-expression, the assertion of one's individuality, but food and drink is also a primary and fundamentally important way in to others' cultures. To be able to take part in foreigners' food and drinking habits in order to engage with their culture is easier than, for example, breaking the foreign linguistic code (Montanari 2006: 133). The culture of food and drink becomes a language of its own on these occasions (Soler 1997: 35). All humans live with and by symbols that help us to create order and give meaning to our existence. Identities that are of a religious, national or ethnic kind are strongly linked with food and drink, since the various groups manifest their own affiliations and dissociations with respect to other groups through their own specific eating and drinking patterns and habits (Civitello 2007: xiv). Food reveals much about the complex interrelations between self and others, object and subject, appetite and digestion, aesthetics, politics, nature and culture, and creation and divinity (Méndez Montoya 2009: ix). An individual's or a group's food and drinking patterns are a very important aspect of being able to feel an affiliation with or of dissociating from other groups or individuals. The consumption of food and drink is seldom as complex as it is in the context of religious worship (Andersson 2005: 154).

This article focusses on the importance of bread/baked sweets and wine/grape juice for the believers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam within the city of Tbilisi.

### Georgia's history of religion in brief

Georgia has a long and complex religious history. The Jewish population came to the country after King Nebuchadnessar II conquered Jerusalem in the year 597 BC. The Jewish population and its descendents have since that time counted Georgia as a second homeland and they have always been free to practice their religion and customs there (Margvelashvili 2000: 46; Sukhitashvili 1999: 78).

Georgia was one of the first Christian countries: the country had representatives present at the First Council of Nicea in the year 325, while the official year for the country's baptism is 337, an event credited to Saint Nino and her work. The country was then a part of the Roman Empire under Constantine the Great (Lang 1956: 13; Machitadze 2006: 18; Silogava and Shengelia 2007: 43). During the latter part of the fourth century the Persians invaded Caucasus and the Christian population was faced with two choices; either to convert to Zoroastrianism or suffer the death of the martyrs. In the year 482 the Persians were defeated by the Georgian King Vakhtang Gorgasali, who allied himself with the Byzantines. In the year 645 the Arab-Muslims stood outside the city gates of Tbilisi and shortly after the whole country was under Arabian political rule (Machitadze 2006: 19–22).

During the reign of the King David the Builder (1089–1125) the Orthodox Church became very strong. During the fourteenth century the country was under constant attack from the Mongols. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 was followed by *c.* 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 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. Independence was lost again in 1921, this time to Bolshevik Russia. During the era of Communist Party rule many of the churches were closed. Twenty five thousand churches were active in 1921, but in 1945 only 50 remained. 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 seminars and the Academy of Sciences in Gelati. 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 (Machitadze 2006: 23–9).

Georgia's population is approximately 5.4 million and during the 1990s 65 per cent of the population confessed to the Georgian Orthodox Church, 10 per cent to the Russian Orthodox Church, 8 per cent to the Armenian Apostolic Church and 11 per cent to Islam. The remaining 6 per cent includes Jews, Catholics, Lutherans, Yazidi Kurds and atheists. Although the Jewish group is one of the minority populations, they do constitute the largest of them. The Jewish population decreased in number in the 1990s due to emigration to Israel. The Jews that still live in the country and in Tbilisi belong either to the Ashkenazi and Sephardim groups or to a third group which identifies itself as that of the Georgian Jews; they speak only Georgian in daily life, Hebrew at ecclesiastical occasions. The Muslim population is divided into the Shiites and the Sunnites; both groups pray in the same mosque in Tbilisi, separated by a wall. However, the feast days for the two groups are not the same.

### Dietary regulations

Even though the focus of this article is on bread/baked sweets and wine/grape juice it seems to be important to state the general dietary regulations for the various religions which coexist in Georgia.

The most extensive regulations regarding food and drink among the monotheistic religions can be found in Judaism. A common feature between Judaism and Islam regarding food regulations is that both religions have divided food and drink into two groups; clean and unclean. Both religions also have rituals for slaughter where the name of God must be pronounced when the animal's throat is cut. Which foodstuffs are considered to be clean or unclean differs between the two religions and also between different groups of worshippers within the same religion. As mentioned earlier the calendar and the feast days for the Shiites and Sunnites are not the same and the feast traditions for the Ashkenazi and Sephardim Jewish groups also differ from each other (Westblom 1999: 83–7, 102–4). There is a big difference regarding the regulation of beverages, since alcohol of any kind is forbidden in Islam, whilst wine is very important in Judaism: the wine has, however, to be of kosher origin (*ibid.* 83–7). The regulations of food and drink in Judaism and Islam are not just related to the body; they are also considered to be concerned with a diet

for the soul. A common feature for both Judaism and Islam is that pork meat and food made from pig's blood is strictly forbidden (*ibid.* 101–4; Hjärpe 1998: 178, 180). Neither Christianity nor Islam has any feast day/celebration that is similar to the Jewish Sabbath which is celebrated every week (Westblom 1999: 107–12).

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all use different kinds of calendars and this means that their feast days occur at different times of the year. Judaism and Christianity have in common that the celebration of Easter has a unique position among the feast days, even if it is seldom celebrated at the same time (an



A page from the so-called 'Lalashi Bible', written in Hebrew and dating back to the tenth century. National Centre of Manuscripts, Tbilisi.





A so-called miniature depicting the Last Supper with Jesus and his disciples in a Gospel that dates back to the eleventh century. National archive of manuscripts, Tbilisi.

event which occurs once every seven years). Christianity and Islam on the other hand have in common the fact that fasting is very important at certain times of the year. The fasting periods are not fixed due to the use of different calendars and how time is measured. One example of this is that the major fasting period in Islam – Ramadan – can occur in any of the months of the year. For the Orthodox and Catholic churches Wednesdays and Fridays are the common fasting days. Apart from these there also exist some more extensive periods of fasting, the period before Easter being the most important one. Some of the fasting is ascetic and some not. Both Christianity and Islam have special regulations regarding diet during the fasting periods. Apart from the regulations for fasting periods the Catholic and Protestant churches do not have any other regulations concerning food or drink (Westblom 1997: 16–18, 107–12; Ware 2003: 303–7). For the Orthodox and Catholic churches the fasting days for different saints are very important, which is not the case in the Protestant Church (Machitadze 2006; Westblom Jonsson 1997: 60–3).

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is constituted of a combination of Mircea Eliade's *homo religiosus* (Eliade 1968) and my own theory about the 'gastronomic man' (Söderlind 2010: 6–30). In short it can be said that the *homo religiosus* strives to live as close as possible to the world's centre. One's home is therefore always holy since home is an image of the world and the world in itself is a divine creation, situated at the *axis mundi*. The city is its own cosmos and the religious buildings of a city, for a believer, are therefore of great importance, since they represent the threshold from which one can step out of the profane world into the sacred world. They are also a communicating doorway between these worlds (heaven and earth). This is the same for any religion. However large or small a cosmos might be – for example a country or nation, a city or a sanctuary – they are in the same way an image of the world, an *imago mundi* (Eliade 1968: 17, 29, 32, 35, 37, 43–4). Time is not homogeneous or continuous; there is an interval of holy or sacred time (such as one of the feast days) which is for the most part periodic, and there is also profane time; the 'normal' time span. Feast days always take place at the beginning of time, which means that the believer on these occasions behaves differently before and after feast days.

On the feast days the holy dimensions of life itself is reinstated to the full, and the holiness of human existence is experienced as a divine creation (Eliade 1968: 46–68). This means that on such days the believer eats and drinks, as it were, the very first meal which was the origin for every respective feast day and festival. To consume food and drink is not only a behaviour governed by physical necessity; it is also a very important religious activity since the believer eats and drinks what has been created by the Supreme Being and when the food and drink is consumed by the believer it is consumed in the same way as the mythological forefathers consumed it on feast days and festivals when the world was new (Eliade 1963: 59). For the profane human being the state of affairs mentioned above have been divested of any religious conditions or significance (Eliade 1968: 15).

In conformity with Eliade's theories regarding the existence of a *homo religiosus* I am of the opinion that a gastronomic man exists. The specific range of food and drink (the gastronomy) is established very early in the history of a nation (society) and its inhabitants. In short, factors such as necessity, eatability, availability, sensory experience, philosophical ideas, geographical and psychological limits, economic concerns, childhood memories, ideology, social structures, social class, gender, technology, experiences and sensations, all play a

vital part in human beings' choices concerning food and drink in daily life and on feast days.

A nation's gastronomy also consists of phenomena such as diet, provisions, culinary art, fare and nourishment. The choices are therefore very complex and never static. It gets even more complicated due to the fact that the factors mentioned above do not necessarily have the same meaning for all inhabitants within the same geographical borders. All these components constitute the gastronomical human being (Söderlind 2010: 6–30). These two theories combined create a complexity that holds important perspectives for believers in Tbilisi.

## Method

The method used in the study is interdisciplinary and consists of a combination of observations made on location in Tbilisi; interviews with believers from the different religions, religious documents and writings and artefacts. Some of the people that have agreed to be interviewed have done so on the condition that they are kept anonymous and I have agreed to that, so in some cases the references will state that the interview has been made with an anonymous person. The choice of method is based on interdisciplinary research which shows that it is important for a researcher to work with materials both from the past and the present in order to produce as broad a spectrum of response as possible to the questions asked in order to come to an adequate understanding of one's own present time (Andrén 1997, Söderlind 2006). This is particularly true for a region such as the Caucasus area with its very complex history (Bukhrasvili 2003: 226–7).

## Results

### Judaism

Italy, Spain and France are the three largest producers of kosher wines in the world, but for Jews in Georgia kosher wine is produced within the borders of the country. Both red and white grapes are used and the winemaking process follows the conventional pattern. However if a non-Jewish man is involved in the production, the wine is considered to be non-kosher. Although there are vineyards out in the countryside, many people make their own kosher wine at home in the basement, in so-called 'kvevris' (interview with Rabbi Meir Kozlovsky, Tbilisi, 20.2.2013 and the Rabbi, Synagogue, Tbilisi, 4.4.2013).

In order to care for the non-wealthy members of the community the larger synagogue in the city gives away the *maza* bread needed for the Passover celebration for free. The other more wealthy members pay a symbolic sum for the bread since it is imported from different countries such as Israel and Ukraine. Previously there was a Jewish bakery close to the larger synagogue in the city. However it is closed now due to the difficulty of the process of making *maza* bread (interview with the Rabbi, Synagogue, Tbilisi, 4.4.2013).

The word 'Sabbath' derives from the Hebrew word *shavat*, frequently translated as 'rest' or 'ceasing from work'. The Sabbath is a symbol of the connection between the Jews and God. Since the Sabbath is a day of rest it requires a lot of preparation. Traditionally the Jews prepare enough meals for the Friday evening dinner and for all of Saturday. The most important attributes of welcoming Sabbath are; tableware (preferably white), a candlestick with two lighted candles, two loaves of braided bread (*challah*), a *challah* cover, wine, a *kiddush* cup for wine and a prayer book. After lighting the candles, the wife waves her hand over the flames three times and covering her eyes with her hands says 'Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who sanctifies us with his commandments and commanded us to light the Sabbath candles'. At this moment when the family is gathered the woman says a little blessing for her family and finishes the prayer with the words: '*Shabbat Shalom*' ('May your Sabbath be peaceful'). When the family is gathered at the Sabbath table, the father of the house fills up a glass with kosher wine or grape juice. He then places it on a palm leaf and recites a blessing, called a *kiddush*, over the wine. Every member of the meal remains standing to listen to the blessing standing up and when it is finished each and every one should reply with 'Amen'. When the blessing is done, everyone sits down. The person leading the blessing then drinks at least two ounces of wine or grape juice in one or two swallows. The remains of the *kiddush* wine or grape juice are then distributed in little glasses or cups to all those who were included in the *kiddush*. The head of the family picks up both the *challahs* with the bottom one slightly closer to him and pronounces the blessing. As, during the 40 years walk in the dessert, manna fell from the sky and a double portion of manna fell on Friday so that the Jews did not need to work to collect it on the



Maza bread for the Passover celebration, imported from Israel. Photograph by Ulrica Söderlind, 2013.



Sabbath, so this miracle is commemorated by blessing the two loaves of *challah* at the Sabbath meal. After the blessing, the person who recited it should take a slice first, dip it in some salt, take a bite and then dip the other slices in salt and pass them around for others to follow. The salt is used in order to symbolize the sorrow of not having a temple. The Sabbath should be welcomed with the best of meals and it is customary to eat three festive meals; dinner on Sabbath eve (Friday night), lunch on Sabbath day (Saturday) and a third meal (*Seudah Shlishit*) in the late afternoon on the Sunday. Sabbath ends the following evening with a Havdalah blessing. This ritual involves lighting a special candle with several wicks, called a Havdalah, blessing a cup of wine and smelling sweet spices. (Iosebashvili and Mikadze 2012b: 1–3)

In Georgia during the celebration of Purim it is tradition to eat small biscuits (interview with the Rabbi, Synagogue, Tbilisi, 4.4.2013). The feast is called *seudah* and it is customary to drink wine and on this day. The Talmud allows people to drink until they no longer can distinguish between the phrases ‘*arur Man*’ (‘cursed is Haman’) and ‘*baruch Mordechai*’ (‘Blessed is Mordecai’). On Purim it is customary to make triangular pastries called *hamantaschen* (‘Haman’s pockets’) or *oznei Haman* (‘Haman’s ears’). A sweet pastry dough is rolled out, cut into circles and traditionally filled with a poppy seed filling. It is then folded into a triangular shape with the filling either hidden or in full sight. More recently prunes, dates, apricots and chocolate fillings have been introduced (Iosebashvili and Mikadze 2012a: 1–3).

The celebration of Hanukka begins on the 25th day of the month of Kislev and lasts for eight days, and in Georgia it is customary to eat nuts and dishes made with plenty of oil (preferably olive oil) in order to commemorate the miracle of a small flask of oil keeping the flame in the Temple alight for eight days. Traditional foods include potato pancakes (known as *latkes*) with a thin, crisp crust and ball-shaped doughnuts with jam inside (interview with the Rabbi, Synagogue, Tbilisi, 4.4.2013; Iosebashvili and Mikadze 2010: 1–4).

The New Year (Rosh Hashanah) occurs at the end of September or in the beginning of October. As on every Sabbath and other holidays the celebration starts with a *kiddush*, pronouncing a special sanctity on the wine. The hands are washed



An example of Sabbath bread.  
Photograph by Ulrica Söderlind, 2008.

afterwards and the bread is blessed. On the Sabbath the bread is an ordinary white *challab*; during Rosh Hashanah however the bread is of a special round shape as a symbol for unity. After the bread is blessed it is put into honey in honour of a new sweet year (interview with the Rabbi, Synagogue, Tbilisi, 4.4.2013; Iosebashvili and Mikadze 2011: 1–2).

During Passover no leavened bread is eaten, only the *maza* bread, which is unleavened flatbread. Families gather at home under the auspices of the head of the family and a glass of wine is served (interview with the Rabbi, Synagogue, Tbilisi, 4.4.2013).

In May 2013 a new kosher restaurant was opened, located very close to one of the two synagogues in central Tbilisi. The bread for the restaurant was made in a bakery within the city walls and was *lavashi* bread (a thin, round flatbread) and in order to make it possible to serve at the restaurant Jewish men visited the bakery and started the fire for the baking (interview with three female cooks at the Jewish restaurant, Tbilisi, 16.5.2014).

In ordinary everyday life bread and baked sweets, as well as wine, play an important part in Jewish meals.

## Christianity

Within the frame of Christianity in Georgia there are several different branches; the Georgian Orthodox Church (the official church), the Armenian Catholic Parish of Holy Grigol Illuminatore, the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Holy Church, the Assyrian Chaldian Catholic Church of the East, the Baptist Church, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church, the Holy Trinity Church, the Lutheran Church, the Pentecostal Church, the Salvation Army, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, The New Church (Swedenborg), the Word of Life and the Molokans. The Russian Orthodox Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons are also represented in the country and in Tbilisi, however none of them agreed to meet or talk to me regarding my research so therefore I have no information about them in this matter.

Sacramental wine and the *kveveri* are regarded as being part of a special phenomenon. In Georgia a sacramental wine, or *zedashe* wine, is a wine used during religious ceremonies, for example the celebration of the Eucharist and weddings. Some claim that the best wine is the sacramental wine that is reserved for religious holidays and feast days. The sacramental *kveveris* and wine are most frequently encountered in eastern Georgia, especially in the region of Kakheti. In the past more or less every *marani* kept a sacramental *kveveri* for wine intended to be donated to churches and monasteries and for their

own consumption during secular or religious holidays. The sacramental *kvevris* served as a reference point and always occupied their own distinguished place in the *marani*. Other *kvevris* were placed in relation to the sacramental *kvevri*, depending on its location in the *marani*. The sacred *kvevri* did not necessarily occupy the central place among other *kvevris*, it was placed separately from other *kvevris* for quality storage in a cool, dark and somewhat secluded place (Ekana 2011: 30).

To the best of our knowledge today we are lacking information regarding the differences between the ordinary and sacramental *kvevri* making technologies; so far there have been no observations regarding differences in the liming and/or waxing of the *zedashe kvevris*. Having said this, it would seem that the sacramental *kvevris* undergo a more thorough washing than do the profane *kvevris* (Ekana 2011: 30). Making sacramental wine requires special attention and care, starting with the washing of the *kvevri* and *marani* hygiene and ending with the fermentation, ageing and storage of the wine. During the alcoholic fermentation the pomace needs to be regularly stirred inside the *kvevri*; this must be repeated at least five times a day. However it is advisable that the pomace be agitated in the *kvevri* at least once every two or three hours, especially during fermentation (Ekana 2011: 30). When the fermentation is over, the pomace and wine are separated and the latter is decanted into another



Making the holy bread for the Georgian Orthodox Church. Photograph by Ulrica Söderlind, 2013.

*kvevri*. Then the sacramental wine should be given a complete rest for a certain amount of time. The first drawing of the wine is dependent on the location, region, and vintage year. In making sacramental wine, only native red grape varieties are used. It is prohibited to use white grape varieties or to add white grape juice to the sacramental wine. Blending red and white wine is inadmissible even in the smallest of proportions. Additionally, the red sacred wine should not have any contact with water. Due to this all the washed wine vessels used for the sacred wine can only be used for the purpose when they are very well dried. (Ekana 2011: 31)



Stamps used for making the bread for the Georgian Orthodox Church. Photograph by Ulrica Söderlind, 2013.

When the sacramental wine is made at home no treatment such as filtration, refining or chemical additives, or the use of a pure culture yeast during the fermentation is either required or recommended; the main idea is that the wine should go through all the necessary stages in a natural way. The only thing that may be added to the process of making homemade sacramental wine is the burning of sulphur in the *kvevri* in order to disinfect it before use. (Ekana 2011: 31)

In the Georgian Orthodox Church wine is served every time the Eucharist has been celebrated (usually every Sunday). The holy bread that is used during the Eucharist is baked in a bakery close to the major Orthodox Church in Tbilisi and the bakers are all virgin young men. The bakery is open 24 hours a day and approximately 30,000 breads are baked a week. One batch of bread takes almost five hours, from preparing the dough until the loaves are baked, and for ordinary purposes two different kind of stamps are used; one of the Virgin Mary with the Baby Jesus and one in the shape of a cross. The first stamp is for the living and as yet unborn and the other one is for those that have passed away. For celebrations like Easter and Christmas other, special occasional stamps are used. The bread is sanctified following a blessing by the priest at the church (interview with bakers at the major church bakery, Tbilisi, 20.5.2013).

The service of the Eucharist is celebrated once a month (on the last Sunday) within the Word of Life and the wine that is used is homemade red wine, which it is permitted to dilute with water. Grape juice is also used for the purpose since there are members with drinking problems, and the breads that are in use





The Last Supper at the Assyrian Chaldeans Catholic Church as it is depicted on the altar icon. Assyrian Chaldeans Catholic Church.

are either baked by the members or shop bought (interview with anonymous member of Word of Life, Tbilisi, 20.3.2013). For the followers of the teachings of Swedenborg there is a Swedenborg Society and to this day there is no church in Tbilisi. Reverend Göran Appelgren from Sweden has visited the members annually, when the Eucharist is celebrated with wine and bread. The holy bread is made in and brought from Sweden by Rev. Appelgren and one per believer is distributed (interview with anonymous member of the Swedenborg Society, Tbilisi, 14.5.2013).

The Lord's Supper is celebrated once in three months for the believers in the Seventh-day's Adventist Church and the unleavened bread that is used in the service is made by the pastor's wife or the lay worker of the church. The bread is made out of flour, water and virgin olive oil and the bread is sacred from the beginning – if some is left over, it is buried in a place where no one can step on it. The bread is eaten at the same time by all the members during the celebration. The beverage that is used in the celebration is grape juice and it should be the juice of a dark red grape, such as the Saperavi grape, as a symbol for the blood of Christ. The juice is served in small cups (interview with Pastor Grigol Tsamalashvili, Seventh-day's Adventist Church, Tbilisi, 12.4.2013). Within the Salvation Army there are no sacraments (interview with the Salvation Army, Tbilisi, 26.3.2013).

The main service at the Pentecostal Church is held on Sundays; they celebrate the Eucharist once a month with undiluted red wine and members of the congregation make the wine at home. The bread is also made by the members and it is a flatbread made out of wheat flour and water; it is plain without any symbols. The bread is served first, in small pieces, then the wine in bowls; it becomes Corpus Christi during the service and they try not to have any leftovers (interview at the Pentecostal Church, Tbilisi, 27.3.2013). In the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia the Eucharist is celebrated on Fridays at a service that is given at 6 p.m. The wine is a homemade red wine from one of the brothers in the church; the bread is shop bought and is usually *lavashi* bread. The wine is served from a communal cup in order to commemorate Jesus' death and resurrection (interview with Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze, Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, Tbilisi, 17.3.2013).

In Tbilisi there is one Armenian Apostolic Holy Church and one Armenian Catholic parish of Holy Grigol Illuminatore (for the latter there is a chapel). The holy bread for the Apostolic Church is made by the fathers themselves and is holy from the beginning. The bread is made during silent prayers. The bread for the Catholic parish is made in the Catholic church and is in the form of a round flatbread. The wine in the Apostolic Church is a pure, undiluted wine. The church has some vineyards, but members of the church also bring bottled wine for the services. In the Catholic parish church red wine is preferred for the service but white wine is not forbidden. It is only essential that the wine is pure and that the sacraments are given every day in the Armenian Catholic Parish Church (interview with priest Narek Kushyan, Armenian Apostolic Holy Church, Tbilisi 13.3.2013 and Father Miqael Khachkalian, Armenian Catholic Parish of Holy Grigol Illuminatore, Tbilisi, 22.5.2013).

Every Sunday the Eucharist is celebrated in the Assyrian Chaldeans Catholic Church of the East in Tbilisi, where Father Benjamin makes the holy bread himself, consisting of water, flour and salt. It is a flatbread and there is one for each member. Father Benjamin also makes the wine that is used in the



Making holy bread in the Armenian Apostolic Church, Tbilisi. Photograph by Ulrica Söderlind, 2013.



An example of baked pastry with western European influences, Tbilisi. Photograph by Ulrica Söderlind, 2013.

service and it is a pure red wine from the Saperavi grape (interview with Father [Monsignore] Benjamn Bethyadgar, Tbilisi 17.4.2013).

The wine that is used in the celebration of the Holy Supper in the Lutheran Church is red; the bread is an ordinary white bread. The transformation of the items into Christ's blood and flesh is believed to happen through one's own faith; there is no special treatment of them if there are any leftovers. The Holy supper takes place twice a month (interview with the Priest of the Lutheran Church, Tbilisi, 25.3.2013). The wine that is used in the service at the Holy Trinity Church is made by the pastor himself and it is a pure red wine. During the fermentation process the pips and skin sit together for 10 days in

wooden oak casks in the basement. After ten days the fermented juice is moved into larger glass vessels where it continues to ferment until it is ready. The wine is made in the autumn for the whole year and the wine is not holy until the Eucharist. Only one drinking vessel is used during the sermon and it is cleaned after each member has tasted the wine. The holy bread is made by the members and is made out of wheat flour, water and is unleavened, a large flatbread served when the Eucharist is celebrated on the first Sunday of the month (interview with Pastor Besarion Megrelisvili, Holy Trinity Church, Tbilisi, 11.4.2013). The members of the Protestant Evangelist Church make the high quality red wine for the service themselves and they use tiny cups, one for each member. The service takes place on Sundays since that day is God's day. The members also make the bread themselves; it is unleavened bread made out of no particular kind of flour. One first takes the bread and dips it into the wine before consuming it (interview with Tamar Khukhunaushvili, Protestant Evangelical Church, Tbilisi, 21.3.2013).

The Eucharist is celebrated every day in the Catholic Church. The wine that is used is homemade, both red and white, without sugar or water. The wine becomes sacred during the mass, if there is any wine left after the mass the priest drinks it so there are no leftovers. The bread is made locally in Tbilisi by

a single woman who bakes the bread for all the Catholic churches in Georgia. It is a bread made out of flour and water and it is a white unleavened flatbread marked with a cross. One bread is used per person and if there are any left over they are given to the birds (interview with priest student, Catholic Church, Tbilisi, 22.3.2013). Red wine is served on Saturday and Sunday during the Eucharist in the Saint Peter and Paul's Church and the wine is pure without sugar, water or chemical additives. On other days the wine is white and the bread is thin and flat; the bread tradition springs from the Jewish custom of Maza bread (interview with Father Maciej Mamaj, Saint Peter and Paul's Church, Tbilisi, 17.5.2013).

The Molokans celebrate a service every Sunday; however there is no wine or bread served during an ordinary service. Bread along with salt is only displayed at special celebratory services. The bread is either homemade or bought at a bakery. After the service the bread is cut into slices and served to the members during the meal that follows (interview with Pastor Fjodor of the Molokans, Tbilisi, 15.4.2013).

On Easter day everyone belonging to the Georgian Orthodox faith visits the graves of his or her relatives and wine is poured over the graves before what remains is drunk. Red eggs are rolled on the graves and Easter cake is left for the loved ones. Forty days after a passing it is believed that the soul leaves for heaven and this is celebrated with a large dinner (*supra*) where a lot of dishes are served, depending on the economic means of the family, along with a good quantity of good wine. For New Year a special pastry is made that looks like a half moon (interview with the secretary of Father Adam, Georgian Orthodox Church, Tbilisi 11.3.2013).

During the celebration of a wedding wine is served to the newlyweds in the Word of Life community as a symbol of their union (interview with anonymous member of the Word of Life, Tbilisi, 20.3.2013). After a wedding service at the Seventh-day Adventist Church it is traditional to eat large cakes, usually within



Making special cake for Easter; so called *paska*. Photograph by Ulrica Söderlind, 2013.





A page from the Qur'an containing the fifth sura. National Centre of Manuscripts, Tbilisi.

environs of the church (interview with Grigol Tsamalashvili, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Tbilisi, 12.4.2013).

In the Pentecostal Church Easter is celebrated with eggs and cakes according to tradition (interview at the Pentecostal Church, Tbilisi, 27.3.2013). Wine is served during the blessing liturgy at a wedding in the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia (interview with Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze, Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, Tbilisi, 17.3.2013). The breaking of Lent is celebrated by eating Easter cake (*paska*) in the Armenian Apostolic Church along with other food items. When Easter is celebrated Easter cake (*paska*) is put on the table in the Assyrian Church (interview with Father [Monsignore] Benjamn Bethyadgar, Tbilisi 17.4.2013). On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday one only consumes bread and water within the Catholic Church; Lent is broken with the consumption of Easter cake and red eggs (interview with priest student, Catholic Church, Tbilisi, 22.3.2013).

In the daily life of Georgians belonging to the Christian faith bread is a staple item and if there is not bread on the table, the meal is not considered to be complete. There are a lot of bakeries in Tbilisi, but many Georgians make their bread themselves. A very popular bread is the so called 'tone' bread, another one is *dedas puri* ('mother's bread'). Both those breads are made in a special tone oven. There are other breads that may be eaten with or without filling; but a day does not go by without eating bread in Georgia, regardless of shape and size. Regarding baked sweets and pastry the selection of available goods has increased rapidly over the last few years, thanks both to newly opened cafés, stores and bakeries that have a

Western European influence. Wine in ordinary life is equally important if one doesn't have problems with alcohol or is a non-drinker, and is consumed on a daily basis in great amounts.

## Islam

Although dietary regulations are stipulated for the believers of Islam in the fifth sura of the Holy Qur'an, it is nevertheless the religion that has the fewest dietary regulations amongst the three religions studied here. Alcohol is forbidden, therefore wine is never drunk by a Muslim, either in the daily life or on feast days. However non-alcoholic wines and grape juice are permitted and are held in high regard in Georgia (interview with the Imam of the Mosque, Tbilisi, 8.4.2013 and with two Muslim students, Tbilisi, 12.3.2013, 15.3.2013).

When the Prophet's birthday is celebrated it is traditional to eat sweets. The nature of the sweets depends on the family's origin; however the Turkish sweet-meat *baklava* is very popular. This meal is considered to consist of a mixture of religious observance and folk tradition amongst Muslims in Tbilisi. A bread, called 'mother's bread' is also served at the New Year's meal, and every family has its own tone oven to bake the bread in. Baked sweets are also served at the meal, depending on the origin of the family. During the night of forgiveness baked sweets are given to everyone. During the 10 day grieving period (Ashura) everyone is expected to wear black clothes and pray all night and one drinks sweet water and tea and eats *lavashi* bread with other food items (interview with two Muslim students, Tbilisi, 12.3.2013, 15.3.2013).

Bread and baked pastries also play an important role in the daily life of Muslims in Tbilisi. Students often bring with them homemade bread to school to eat during the day. The bread that is eaten at everyday domestic meals is also mainly homemade and the kind of bread it is is very much dependent upon the origins of the families; the same goes for the baked pastries. It is common to rejoice in and give thanks for the bread on the table during meals. (Interview with two Muslim students, Tbilisi, 12.3.2013, 15.3.2013)

## Closing words

This article has dealt with the role of bread/baked pastries and wine/grape juice in the lives of the believers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Georgian capital Tbilisi. The city was chosen for the study due to its geographical location at the crossroads between the East and the West and because the three mentioned religions have all been represented there since early in the history of

the country. The results that are presented in the text come from my fieldwork, carried out in Tbilisi during 2013. The role played by bread and baked pastries and wine and grape juice in the daily lives of believers are one aspect of a larger research project in which the entire range of foodways of believers are studied from the theoretical perspective of the religious and gastronomical man. The limited amount of space here means that it is impossible to present all of the results from my research work: this will be done at a later stage.

In Judaism wine, bread and baked sweets play a very important role, both on feast days and in daily life. When it comes to the making of both the wine and the baked items there are special rules to ensure that the final product is kosher according to the regulations stipulated in the scriptures. Great care is taken in the making of the products by Jewish members; this means that the items can only be made within the community of believers, apart from outsiders, and so in a way are very exclusive.

There are several branches of Christianity present in the country, comprising the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant faiths. Within the communities that use wine and bread these items are of great importance, since they are considered to be sacred for most of them. Just as great care is taken within the Jewish community when making wine, the same can be said about the holy wine within Christianity. It is very important it is made in the right way, either by fathers within the church vineyards or by members at home. In general wine is also of great importance in daily life; large volumes of wine are consumed on a daily basis in the country. If one has one's own vineyard, the cost is limited mainly to the labour. Others buy the wine directly from wine farmers (who usually have the best wines) or in bottles from stores; the latter at a much higher price and not of as good quality. Even a very young wine is a popular everyday drink mainly for younger people, since the grapes have not fully fermented yet and the beverage is somewhere between a grape juice and a wine – the alcohol level is low and the taste is very sweet.

For the communities that do not use alcohol, grape juice or 'flattened wine' plays the same sacred role as does wine for the other communities. The same can be said about the use of bread and baked pastry in the daily life of the Christians. For a native Georgian a meal without bread is not considered to be a proper meal. Lots of Georgians also consume a lot of sweet baked pastries both on feast days and on an everyday basis. Some of the pastries are costly, while others are very cheap so almost anyone can afford them.

The holy Qur'an stipulates food regulations for the Muslims and alcohol in every form is not allowed. However beverages such as grape juice are permitted and are held in high regard since they may be of a very high quality and very

sweet. They can be drunk on a daily basis as well as on certain feast days. Bread may be considered a staple food (as they are for the Jewish and Christian communities) and are mainly homemade. The bread is served on a daily basis and is often rejoiced in at the table where the meal is taking place.

One striking finding which emerges from the research is the fact that, regardless of faith, the origin of the family plays a great and important role in determining food and drink choices. It would appear that sometimes this is the crucial factor in determining what kinds of bread and pastries that are made within the religious communities or families, which means that links are maintained even to distant family histories. Provenance is therefore central and history is an important factor in the production or selection of bread and pastries. It seems that availability and edibility play a limited role here. Regardless of the origins of the families within the communities however, the economic means of the members always play a role. It is cheaper to make bread at home than buy it from shops or bakeries. However it is not necessarily the case that the bread and pastries are made at home only because of the cost. Flavour also plays a very important role here since it again has links with familial origins: one strives to have a taste of home. That taste cannot be bought in a store or a bakery.

Religious buildings, according to Eliade, are of great importance, because they represent a threshold between the profane and sacred worlds. One's home is important, functioning as a cultural carrier for believers, both in daily life and on feast days and festivals. The followers of Judaism make a journey between the two worlds at least once a week, as Sabbath is celebrated. The members of the Christian and Muslim communities make the same journey and back every time they enter a church or a mosque, both on feast days and in daily life.

Time is not homogeneous or continuous according to Eliade; there is the instance of the interval of holy or sacred time (the feast days), which is for the most part periodic; and there is also profane time, for example the normal time span. Feast days always take place in 'original time', which means that the believer on these occasions behaves differently before and after the feast days. During the feast days the holy dimensions of life itself are recovered to the full and the holiness of human existence is experienced as a divine creation. This means that on the feast days the believer eats and drinks the very first, the original meal of every respective and different feast day and festival. Thus, to consume food and drink is not only a physiological necessity; it is also a very important religious activity, since the believer eats and drinks what has been created by a Supreme Being. When the food and drink is consumed by the believer it is consumed in the same way as the mythological forefathers consumed it when the world was new, on the original feast days and festivals. This



means that the members of the Jewish community, at least once a week when the Sabbath takes place, eat the meal in the same way as their mythological forefathers did. It will be the same with the other annual feast days.

Christians eat the meal in the same way as their mythological forefathers every time they receive the Holy Communion at service – how many times a week or month this occurs depends on which community one is a member of, but the same is true every time a meal is eaten at home on a feast day. The members of the Muslim community also eat their meal the same way as their mythological forefathers every time a feast meal is served.

If one celebrated every feast day within the three religions in the year 2013 when this study took place the activity would cover 281 of the 365 days of the year. This indicates the importance of the feast days for the religious man. I do not mean that everyone in Tbilisi behaves in this way, but they have the opportunity to do so if they want to and they are welcome to do it if they have families and friends within the three religions. I know it is not very common within ecumenical work to work across the borders of the religions, however I think this can be done in a city like Tbilisi and that is a great step forward for the understanding of each other's thoughts and beliefs as they are expressed through foodways. It also illustrates the moments when the finest aspects of the religious and gastronomic man are combined!

**Ulrica Söderlind** has a very practical background in the restaurant business, having worked as a chief for several years before going to university. In 2006 she received her PhD in economic history with a dissertation, based on interdisciplinary research, entitled 'SKROVMÅL'. The dissertation deals with food and nutrition in the Swedish Navy during the period 1500-1800 and both historical and archaeological sources are the primary sources for the research. Apart from the doctoral dissertation, three other books and about 60 scientific articles have been published in the field of food and drink. Several of the books have been winners of Gourmand Cookbook awards in Sweden, even though the works are historical, scientific documents rather than cookbooks *per se*. She has carried out several fieldwork sessions in Georgia and in October 2014 she was awarded the Georgian Embassy Medal for her work in strengthening relations between Sweden and Georgia.

## Oral sources

Anonymous member of the Swedenborg Society, Tbilisi, 14.5.2013

Anonymous member of Word of life, Tbilisi, 20.3.2013

Bakers at the major church bakery, Tbilisi, 20.5.2013

Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze, The Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, Tbilisi,  
17.3.2013

Father Maciej Mamaj, Saint Peter and Paul's Church, Tbilisi, 17.5.2013

Father Miqael Khachkalian, Armenian Catholic Parish of Holy Grigol Illumionatore,  
Tbilisi, 22.5.2013

- Father (Monsignore) Benjamn Bethyadgar, Tbilisi, 17.4.2013  
 Imam of the Mosque, Tbilisi, 8.4.2013  
 Pastor Besarion Megrelisvili, Holy Trinity Church, Tbilisi, 11.4.2013  
 Pastor Fjodor of the Molokans, Tbilisi, 15.4.2013  
 Pastor Grigol Tsamalashvili, Sevent-day Adventist Church, Tbilisi, 12.4.2013  
 The Pentecost Church, Tbilisi, 27.3.2013  
 Priest of the Lutheran Church, Tbilisi, 25.3.2013  
 Priest Narek Kushyan, Armenian Apostolic Holy Church, Tbilisi, 13.3.2013  
 Priest student, Catholic Church, Tbilisi, 22.3.2013  
 Rabbi, Synagogue, Tbilisi, 4.4.2013  
 Rabbi Meir Kozlovsky, Tbilisi, 20.2.2013  
 The Salvation Army, Tbilisi, 26.3.2013  
 Secretary of Father Adam, Georgian Orthodox Church, Tbilisi, 11.3.2013  
 Tamar Khukhunaushvili, Protestant Evangelist Church, Tbilisi, 21.3.2013  
 Three female cooks at the Jewish restaurant, Tbilisi, 16.5.2014  
 Two Muslim students, Tbilisi, 12.3.2013 and 15.3.2013

## Bibliography

- Anderson, E. N., 2005. *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture* (New York University Press)
- Andrén, Anders, 1997. *Mellan ting och text. En introduktion till de historiska arkeologierna* (Stockholm, B. Östlings bokförlag)
- Bukhrasvili, Paata, 2003. *Dwelling in the Life and Culture of the Ancient Georgians* (Amirani, Tbilisi, without publisher)
- Civitello, Linda, 2007. *Cuisine and Culture* (New Jersey, John Wiley)
- Ekana, 2011. *Making Wine in Kvevri: A Unique Georgian Tradition* (Tbilisi, without publisher)
- Eliade, Mircea, 1963. *Aspects du mythe* (Paris, Collection idées)
- 1968. *Heligt och profant* (Stockholm, Verbum)
- Hjärpe, Jan, 1998. 'Mat, hälsa och religion. Mest om islam', *Årsbok. Föreningen Lärare i religionskunskap* (Malmö, FL), pp. 175–82
- Iosebashvili, Nana, and Julia Mikadze, 2010. *Hanukkah* (Tbilisi, without printer), translated into English by Meladze Tamar, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, 2103
- 2011. *Rosh Hashanah* (Tbilisi, without printer), translated into English by Meladze Tamar, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, 2103
- 2012a. *Purim* (Tbilisi, without printer), translated into English by Meladze Tamar, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, 2103
- 2012b. *Sabbath* (Tbilisi, without printer), translated into English by Meladze Tamar, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, 2103
- Lang, Marshall, 1956. *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints* (London, Allen & Unwin, Macmillan Co.)

- Machitadze, Zakaria, 2006. *Lives of the Georgian Saints* (California, without printer)
- Margvelashvili, Parmen, 2000. *The Temple* (Tbilisi, without printer)
- Méndez Montoya, Angel F., 2009. *The Theology of Food* (Singapore, Wiley-Blackwell)
- Montanari, Massimo, 2006. *Food is Culture* (New York, Columbia University Press)
- Silogava, Valery, and Kakha Shengelia, 2007. *History of Georgia* (Tbilisi, Publishing House of the Caucasus University)
- Söderlind, Ulrica, 2006. *Skrovsmål. Kosthållning och matlagning i den svenska flottan från 1500-tal till 1700-tal* (Stockholm, Carlsson bokförlag)
- 2010. *The Nobel Banquets: A Century of Culinary History (1901–2001)* (New Jersey, World Scientific Press)
- Soler, Jean, 1997. 'The semiotics of food in the Bible' in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan, and Penny Van Esterik (New York, Routledge), pp. 55–66
- Sukhitashvili, Dimitri, 1999. *The Coat of Christ* (Tbilisi, without publisher)
- Ware, Kallistos, 2003. *Den ortodoxa kyrkan* (Malmö, Artos)
- Westblom Jonsson, Helen, 1999. *Mat, tro, tradition* (Falköping, Liber)