

Living with the Dead: Transgressive Mortuary Practices in Samegrelo, Georgia

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Abstract

In Samegrelo, Georgia, mourning relatives are challenging the boundaries between the dead and the living. Families share food, houses and a lasting relationship with their dead relatives, actively including them in everyday lives and refusing the idea of the deceased belonging to the past; this understanding of where the dead belong, are materialized and tangible in everyday mundane activities, by elimination of divided spaces and inclusion of the dead as suitable and active family members. My thesis is about almost complete elimination of such blurry boundaries by parents in case of the tragic death of their children, especially sons. Since in the Georgian society this behavior is understood as transgressive, this paper will try to explain how these transgressions happen. In the moments of tragedy, concepts of parenthood, familial ties and generational expectations come in tension with the reality of death. This research is about studying what appears to be strange in order to learn about the rules, I will argue that Megrelian transgressive acts are facilitated by existent social norms and institutions, simultaneously challenging and exposing the basic organizational structure of social norms, and strengthening ideas about gender hierarchy and kinship relations.

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Introduction

I am in Zugdidi, largest town in the region of Samegrelo, Georgia. In the middle of the living room there is a grave of a young man, Kako, who died 23 years ago. Decorated with many flowers and personal belongings, the whole house looks like a large shrine. Behind the curtains there is a small bedroom where his mother Nana and aunt Marina of the dead young man sleep at night. The grave is a centerpiece of the room, behind the grave there is a shelf full of bottles of expensive alcohol arranged in order, gifts from friends to Kako after his death. In front of the grave there is a plasma TV, Kako's aunt Marina tells me that this TV is specifically for her nephew to catch up with the news; I see a computer tablet among many synthetic flowers and his pictures decorating the grave. Both, Nana and Marina repeat a few times that all these acts are make-believe, but they engage with them nevertheless. I visited the family two days after Easter and Nana brings red Easter eggs for me and my gatekeepers, "play egg tapping with Kako," she says. Egg tapping is an Easter tradition in Georgia and many other Christian countries, played by every member of the family several times over the Easter period where each participant tries to break opponent's Easter eggs. We all take Kako's Easter egg, tap against ours and we all lose against him. Nana is quite eager to see his son "win."

In the modern world, Christian death and disposal of the body have been dominated by secularized, "commercial and bureaucratic interests" (Tony Walter 1996). The journey from hospital to funeral, or crematorium, is mostly secular with an exception of funeral which is led by clergy (Walter 1996, 94). Walter explains that often, especially in Protestantism, funerals are organized by funeral directors, who take over the whole procedure and limit the involvement of the family and religion, hence funeral management seems to be just another commercial business in capitalist state (Walter

1996, 95). Death and funeral, considered as private matters in many modern western societies, are communal and Christian in Georgia; family members organize the process, community is actively involved in communal mourning that lasts for a few days called *Panashvidi*, and relatives, friends and acquaintances visit the dead and comfort the mourning family members; in some villages, neighbors and family friends also participate to dress the dead. Since public space is highly influenced by Orthodox church, religion is present immediately after one's death through many rituals leading up to funeral: special candles have to be brought from church and lighted, prayers have to be read to dead and clergy plays a dominant role in cleansing, burying and commemorating the dead. Community and church regulate how the bodies are disposed after death; crematorium has never been used in Georgia, as bodies should be buried. Social norms regulate what is proper way of grief, and expectations are high especially toward women who have lost their children or husbands, as they should remain in half-mourning state and wear black till the end of their lives, there are high expectations in the community of prolonged relationship between the dead and the living and survivors should organize many feasts, visit the graves on special days, pray for the souls of the dead and remember the dead during celebrations.

In Samegrelo mortuary rituals are reinforcing the dominant structures, norms and ideas in this society and once the rules of “proper” funeral and bereavement are violated, it exposes what social norms are in place. There are some Megrelia families that have their own methods to take care of their dead family members without complying to the common mortuary and burial rules – they treat dead as if they were alive. Common perception among Megrelian population and especially among Georgians outside Samegrelo is that family members actively disobey the commonsensical and religious rules of proper burial and mourning. According to commenters on the videos that has

been spread on social media and according to some of my interviewees, relatives are “torturing the poor souls” and “preventing the souls to enter the heaven” and many believe that the relatives are acting “against Orthodox Christian traditions,” while others state, that these traditions are “extreme,” “backward” or “the death and the tragedy has driven them crazy”¹ (Tbilisi Forum 2013). Divergent practices include preserving the body of the dead without burying, burying the dead in the living room, living in the graveyard among the family members’ graves, or setting up constructions in the graveyard which closely resemble houses or churches.

There is another group halfway across the world, in an Indonesian village, where the dead reside inside their family homes and their dead bodies are often treated as if they were alive. As of today, an intensive research has not been conducted in the Indonesian village, only a few news media channels have covered the story. Yet, the reports conclude with the explanation behind such acts² (BBC News 2017); the authors argue that Animism, the belief that all objects have a soul, is the major reason for such rituals, it is a common method to cope with the tragedy in the village and overall, this tradition seems to comply with common rules existent in the village (Zand 2017).³ However, despite similarities between two practices, Megrelian practices are considered extremely abnormal. In other words, Georgian case is intriguing because while death rituals are supposed to function as social reproduction mechanism in Georgian society, Megrelian practices seem to pose a threat to social norms and social cohesion, and in the eyes of many Georgians, threaten the

¹ <https://forum.ge/?f=25&showtopic=34569225&st=60>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-39603771>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knBnQUsj2xo>

dominant authority of the Orthodox church; while, at the same time, solidify the common idea about Megrelian strangeness within Georgia.

Samegrelo is one of the two provinces in the administrative region of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti. The region has been deeply impacted by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Samegrelo had agrarian and industrial importance in socialist times (Regional Media Map of Georgia 2005). In 1990s Abkhazian conflict turned Samegrelo into the land of turmoil since Samegrelo shares a border with Abkhazia. As of today, compared to the 2002 population statistics, population has decreased in the administrative region by 29%⁴ and reduced to 330 000 people, about 2/3 live in villages (Geostat Report 2016). Many people migrate to the capital of Georgia Tbilisi from Samegrelo, some people migrate abroad, most often to Russia.

My mother's side of the family is Megrelian, I have spent few summers in Samegrelo in my childhood; there I have been a witness of Megrelian weddings and funeral feasts, which were some of the first weddings and funeral feasts of my conscious life. My father's side of the family is from the Eastern Georgia and since my last name is not Megrelian, people who had no idea about my Megrelian identity have shared their distaste with Megrelian people, their thoughts of Megrelian culture as strange and different from the rest, sometimes presenting it as a culture that should be feared for because of their alleged "separatism." I am a "halfie" (Abu-Lughod 1991), simultaneously belong and do not quite belong to Megrelian community, which gave me the sense of familiarity with the culture, and also enough distance to be intrigued and confused by things at times. During my fieldwork I had to question activities and rituals because certain things did not

⁴ http://census.ge/files/results/Census%20Release_GEO.pdf

make sense to me, as an outsider. For my informants it was important that I had ties with Samegrelo, and since most of my interviews were based on mutual trust between me, my gatekeepers and informants, my Megrelian identity was very crucial for the research and on the other hand, away from Samegrelo, I had experienced how others view this community.

In this paper I will try to understand, why do such “transgressive” practices take place in Samegrelo? In what sense are they transgressive? What are the reasons for public outrage against such rituals? As mortuary and funerary practices tell us more about the living than the dead (Pearson 2000, 3), I want to understand, what does the dynamics around rituals tell us about this society? Megrelian death rituals stand on the intersection of many different issues. However strange they might seem, they are shaped by the negotiations between different structures, violating certain norms and siding with the others. Death in Georgian culture does not result in the end of the relationship between family members, dead are often visited, being talked to, symbolically shared meals and drinks with. Megrelian families push these blurry boundaries even further that question their intent in various different levels. For some, transgressions are viewed as “primitive” waiting to go extinct in the time of progress and development, others think that Megrelians violate Christian rituals, hence, pose a threat to “true Georgianity,” some perceive the relatives to be unable to face death and develop deep psychological troubles because of the tragedy. In every case, these practices are understood to disobey “the normal way” of living, belonging, dying or mourning.

I also want to understand how do these rituals strengthen kinship relations, gender structure and notions about “bad” death? Rituals seem to go against many rules, yet in other ways they are embedded in other dominant structures. For example, gender of the deceased dictates how important is one’s death and how intense the mourning should be. Families who practice “unusual”

rituals I am studying, also comply to these rules, transgressive funerals and practices are overwhelmingly for males. The transgressive practices also conform to generational expectations, they are constructed for sons by their parents; expressing the idea that they treat alive the dead who were supposed to be alive in the first place. This way families bring back the order, that was disturbed by premature death. Mothers are expected to struggle the most after the death of their children because they are women and they are supposed to have the strongest bond with their children. I will show that bereavement practices are gendered in order to maintain well gender roles and reestablish women's place as a mother.

In the literature review I will review the main existent framework on death and cultures of mourning and relate it to Megrelian context. I will speak about different structuring mechanisms: modernity, gendered lives, kinship relations and religion, that come in tension with each other in the moments of a crisis. I will explore the reasons for the backlash against Megrelian Families. For many Georgians the practices are misunderstood and construed as negligence of Orthodox Christianity, therefore the denial of "true Georgianity," for others, these practices are the signs of "backwardness." I will try to establish general concepts that I will be using throughout the thesis and I will argue that Megrelian practices are agency of Megrelian families, that negates certain social norms and maintains other structuring mechanisms; In the second chapter I will talk about general practices in Samegrelo and in Georgia that blur the boundaries between dead and living. Next, I will demonstrate importance of materiality in mortuary rituals, especially food, as medium to strengthen bond between survivors and keep ties between dead and living; grave as a site also plays an enormous role to maintain the bonds. In the end I will argue that material culture around death also translates into communicating with the others one's material wealth, which is often

misinterpreted in case of transgressive rituals since its message is often very ambivalent for many Georgians. In the third chapter I will describe my main subjects – Megrelian families that treat their dead as if they were alive; then I will explain that these practices are a response to the disrupted order caused by premature deaths; I will argue that Megrelian practices maintain structuring mechanisms, such as generational expectations and gender hierarchy. In the end I will explain why these practices are transgressive in Megrelian context, reintroducing ideas on order and structuring.

This research serves social and anthropological importance in various different ways. First, this case study will try to explore transgressions in order to expose the dominant structuring mechanisms and explain, what popular ideas, norms and discourses organize life in contemporary Georgia; second, through this research I am trying to give a voice to the community that is often ridiculed, feared for and criticized; third, I would also like to contribute to the literature on death, a universal phenomenon that has been a subject of the earliest literary works and still continues to fascinate the humankind.

Chapter 1 – Literature Review

This chapter engages with the broader literature on to show what Megrelian practices transgress and what are reasons behind the disapproval and outrage among many Georgians. I will show that distaste with Megrelian mortuary practices are caused by general anxiety toward Megrelian identity and other popular discourses, such as ideas about death, grief and modernity. I will also try to demonstrate how Megrelian mortuary transgressions expose different structures in this society. This case will demonstrate that agency of Megrelian families does not entail complete independence from existent structures, it is a negotiation between different rules and norms that come in tension with each other in times of tragedy; families are transgressing certain rules: designated spaces for dead and living, funerary rituals, etc. or reinterpreting mortuary practices in different ways, while simultaneously strengthening ideas on gender hierarchy, kinship relations and sense of order over death.

1.1 Death and Society

Literature about death is highly influenced by a Structuralist anthropologist Robert Hertz. He was Emile Durkheim's student and Durkheim's ideas had a large impact on him. In the book *Suicide* Durkheim looked at higher suicide rate among Protestants compared to Catholics or Jews and argued that different societies have an impact on suicide, therefore, suicide that was considered to be a personal and individual psychological occurrence, is actually highly influenced by social factors (Durkheim 2002). Similar to Durkheim, Hertz discusses death as never a mere physical or a biological event, the opposite is true, perception of death, mortuary rites and nature of grieving process are shaped by societies (Hertz 1960); he points out that death means more than the “visible

bodily life of an individual,” it disrupts the social continuity of the group (ibid., 77). Robert Hertz and Arnold Van Gennep (1960) imagined death similar to birth or marriage, transitions from one state to another and in return, society’s change of an attitude toward the person; both authors demonstrated that death of a person requires an intermediary period for detachment of an individual from the group and repositioning of the society. Hertz also argues that society and dead person’s place within the group dictates what individuals should do or feel when the person dies (Hertz 1960, 83-85).

Similar to Hertz, Nancy Scheper-Hughes further explains that grief itself is not a personal act. This idea has been argued by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995), he wrote that similar to other rituals connected to death, expression of grief is not spontaneous or individual activity, but it is determined by society. Sheper-Hughes wrote about lack of sadness among Brazilian mothers who have lost their infant children in the community where infant mortality is incredibly high (Scheper-Hughes 1992). She argued against the notion of Brazilian mothers concealing their true feelings, as it is often viewed by westerners; she also criticized the idea that human instincts are suppressed through culture. Instead, in the example of rural Brazil, she claimed that even though some societies consider certain feelings to be “natural,” such as bereavement when one’s child dies, in reality, what one feels during someone’s death is highly controlled by societal expectations, is dictated by the community and different social aspects.

Megrelian transgressive and “ordinary” mortuary and bereavement practices demonstrate that one’s death generate different feelings according to the dead person’s place within a society; in Samegrelo age and sex are general dominant markers of one’s importance, they signal what members of a society should feel; societal understanding of one’s place even shapes the intimate

feeling of family members, it affects different members in different ways according to societal expectations of the nature of relations between a family member and a dead person, for example, mothers are supposed to be affected the most when their children die.

In the book *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (1982), Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry examine what makes the death “good” or “bad” in the body of literature about death, as well as their own research and make an argument that “good” is the kind of death that demonstrates control over biology. They explain that death is often presented as part of a repetitive cyclical order of life followed by birth and *vice versa*, which creates the sense of order over the unpredictable nature of death. When death conforms to this model, it is considered to be “good,” and when it fails to follow this prototype, threaten the order and especially, the regeneration of life, it is considered to be “bad,” in other words, they argue that in many cultures mortuary rituals often correspond with the continuity or discontinuity of the kinship lineage. The authors offer other criteria to define “bad” death for different cultures, however, most relevant principle for defining “bad” death for my case is connection to the fertility of the deceased, where “the “bad” death represents the loss of a regenerative potential” or sometimes threat to fertility altogether (Bloch and Parry 1982, 16). Hansjörg Dilger, drawing from Bloch and Parry’s analysis, argues that in Tanzania HIV/AIDS are regarded as “bad” because of the threat it poses over the young people and is “connected to uncertainties about the future of whole families and communities” (Dilger 2008).

In Georgia the most visible comparison of the impact one’s death will generate is age; in Samegrelo, like in many societies, death is perceived differently according to one’s age: death of old people could be considered “timely” and sometimes even reason of light humor, especially in a retrospect. For example, our neighbor remembered death of my mother’s grandmother who died

on the day of that neighbor's wedding day. She kept speaking of the irony and her husband's family members' funny reactions when they heard of the death of their next-door neighbor. On another occasion, a different neighbor told us about death of an elderly man who lived nearby. Since neighbors had to participate in dressing the dead in their funerary clothing, she was lingering her stay at her house to say condolences to the family because she knew she would have to participate in dressing the dead neighbor. However, later she discovered that other neighbors have also delayed their arrival to the house and in the end, they all had to participate in dressing the dead man. The story was hysterically funny at times and nobody seemed to mind, even though everybody, except me, knew the dead person very well. Whereas, mentioning the death of young people was always met with deep sighs and regretful nods, whether someone actually knew the dead individual close personally.

Another aspect of one's importance mirrored in mortuary practices is sex. Javakhishvili and Butsashvili, using the example of domestic violence, demonstrate that there is the uneven power distribution between men and women in Georgia (Javakhishvili and Butsashvili 2018). During my fieldwork unequal dispersal of power is visible upon examining the design of graves. Wealthiest graves are constructed overwhelmingly for males, including buildings that resemble castles, statues on the top of the graves and construction that look similar to churches. Not surprisingly, it is not uncommon to see graves for the women who are still alive, tombs have been made for both, husband and a wife when the husbands died, including the tombstones for the living wives. I have seen the grave that awaits a living husband next to his wife only once in my 23 years of living in Georgia. Graves without women's corpses also point to the fact that women are of secondary importance.

Javakhishvili and Butsashvili (2018) also refer to older studies to show that for many Georgians women's place is inferior to men's even in domestic sphere, where man is supposed to be a decision-maker and a head of the family, this is even true among many people who agree with gender equality. Sumbadze arrives at a similar conclusion, she demonstrates that sometimes even those who openly subscribe to the idea of egalitarianism between men and women reveal discriminatory attitudes toward women and their idea of equality does not exclude man's superiority (2018); men remain decision-makers that allow women to live a certain way. The "unusual" practices I am researching in this paper are predominantly performed for young men, which also demonstrates that mortuary practices carry in themselves a certain worldview about gender hierarchy and roles, much like Hertz argued (1960); male are superior to women, worthy of the most lavish graves and their death is worth challenging certain dominant ideas in this society.

1.2 Backlash Against Megrelian Mortuary Practices

Megrelian "transgressive" practices are met with outrage from fellow Georgians, and arguments against them come from different popular discourses that sometimes intersect. Some critics incorporate death and funerals in the discourse of development and progress. Ideas about social progress dominate Georgian discourse and some think of the Megrelian rites as outdated and primitive. Maia Barkaia shows that (Barkaia 2018) labeling others "socially backward" was incredibly popular in socialist Georgia, this categorization was commonly used against people who believed in God, but it was especially frequently used toward Muslims in Adjara. Nowadays the notion of "uncivilized" is often used in opposition of European (Tskhadadze 2018). Nowadays ideas of progress are sometimes used to discredit Christianity all together, in other occasions, the term "uncivilized" is referred to the practices that do not seem to coincide with Christian ideas and

appear to be “pagan,” born before Christianity. Those who argue against Megrelian burial practices come from both camps, such practices are called either “pagan” or non-modern and backward as an opposition of European progressivism.

Modernity is also incorporated in the debate through medicalization of death and grief. Hallam, Hockey and Howarth argue that in western societies continuation of relationship between widows and their dead husbands, which entails speaking with the dead, or feeling their presence are often viewed as transgressive behavior from “dominant medical discourse that prescribes giving up relationships with the dead as the recommended panacea for grief” (Hallam et al. 1999, 131), these relationships question or weaken the boundaries between life and death, hence, threaten social stability (ibid., 125-126). Speaking with the dead and maintaining some kind of relationship with the dead is a usual practice among Georgians. However, when it came to relatives living with the dead or caring for dead person’s body, conversation with my gatekeepers, my mother, her cousin, and our neighbors, demonstrated how medicalized understanding of grief is dominant in Georgian discourse as well, even if boundaries are different from western societies. When speaking of the families, my gatekeepers, who visited families with me, mentioned family members’ psychological difficulties and “inability of coming in terms with the reality of death,” similar ideas were expressed in the comments section below the videos or forums on “unusual” mortuary rituals.⁵ Many commenters stated that mothers “need help from a psychologist,” “mothers have a fragile

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3B4fuKU8-k>

mentality” and “parents have gone insane from sorrow” (Tbilisi Forum 2013; Qartuli Videoebi 2013).

Most often, however, Georgians outside Samegrelo criticize the rituals because of its “improper” nature, declaring practices as a blasphemy and violation of Christian rules. Despite public spaces and the transformation of such spaces in Post-socialist countries to be contested between competing actors (Gurchiani 2017; Grant 2014; Humphrey 2005), among them Georgian state and Orthodox church, the discourse about places, things, events being Orthodox Christian is not the end in itself. The national identity, referred as “True Georgianity,” implies in itself Orthodox Christianity (Gurchiani 2017; Batiashvili 2017) and vice versa. Therefore, the rituals that don’t comply to Christian rules, are understood to lack “true Georgian” quality and might even pose a threat to Georgianity for many people. Much has been written about the homogenous nature of Georgian identity politics, which completely excludes several groups in Georgia; Mathijs Pelkmans has explained how Adjara, a Muslim region in Georgia, has been a clear example of the identity politics. Popular narrative circulating among Georgians is that Adjarans’ Muslim identity has been forced onto them, whereas deep in their heart their true religion has always remained Orthodox Christianity; instead of reevaluation of what it means to be “true Georgian,” Muslim nature of Adjarans was questioned and redefined (Pelkmans 2006). Tamta Khalvashi also writes on identity politics in her doctoral dissertation, she demonstrates that Adjarans feel shame because they are Muslim and therefore, “less Georgian” (Khalvashi 2015).

Famous Georgian triad “Language, Fatherland, Faith,” the phrase used in the 19th century by famous Georgian writer and thinker Ilia Chavchavadze, he never intended it as a slogan and contradicted in his later works has become the main marker of Georgian identity (Kiknadze 2005,

12). Much like Adjarans, Megrelians have also been under scrutiny because Megrelian language serves as a dominant indicator of their identity. In 2016 translation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Prince" in Megrelian language caused massive outrage among Georgians, many were ridiculing Megrelians, some were angry that they were emphasizing Megrelian identity. Few years earlier Megrelian Wikipedia became the reason for public backlash, some yellow magazines blamed Megrelians for separatism (Gogoladze 2013), while on Church.ge, an Orthodox forum and Tbilisi Forum, one of the largest forum platforms in Georgia many people concerned for Megrelian threat, posts on these forums range from 2008, since the creation of Megrelian Wikipedia, to today⁶ (Orthodox Forum 2008). While not much has been written about Megrelian language, it is evident in public discourse that because of Megrelian cultural and lingual pride, Megrelians are often under the suspicion for wanting to be something other than Georgian and reject to remain within the borders of the Republic of Georgia. Batiashvili writes that Megrelian is even referred as a dialect by some linguists since they are afraid that by admitting the truth Megrelians might pose a separatist threat (Batiashvili 2017, 7). Similar to Megrelian Wikipedia, "unusual" burial practices are understood as yet another declaration of Megrelian difference from the rest.

Katherin Verdery, in her book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, states, that she views nationalism more as part of kinship relations, ancestors, cultural valuables, rather than about state-making, territorial or legal matters; she uses examples of dead bodies of political leaders to unfold the nature of political order in post-Soviet transformation (Verdery 1999). Graves and mourning practices are meant to communicate something to the others

⁶ <http://church.ge/index.php?showtopic=3509&mode=threaded&pid=505633>

but similar to political dead bodies in Verdery's book, Megrelian graves and grieving process are also subjected to multiple readings and meanings to different actors. Megrelian culture is characterized by the dramatic expressions of happiness and sorrow in general. Mourning carries a message to the other Megrelians about being a good parent, family member, relative and most of all, being a good member of the Megrelian society following a heavy grieving process. My godfather's wife did not leave her house for two years after her husband's death. Our neighbor in Samegrelo only ate plum sauce for 40 days when her sick grandson died. None of these practices are widespread, hence, they might be quite ambiguous for those who are not members of Megrelian community, but for Megrelians these were clear signs of grief. Therefore, for the close community, transgressive practices also reestablish family's status, including a place of the mother who lost the only son. Practices are also interpreted as political, blamed to undermine Orthodox Christianity; going back to Mathjis Pelkmans and Tamta Khalvashi, the homogenizing power of the state and of Georgian citizens controls and suppresses variations that do not fall into the "Proper Georgian" category. These practices are also incorporated in the discourse on modernity, a strong structuring mechanism to declare something as "backward" and should be replaced by progress. One interprets these practices differently according to their background and beliefs. Mary Douglas's classic book *Purity and Danger* she talks about transgression as a sign of danger. Impurity is linked with the lack of order and violation of the patterns (Douglas 1979). Megrelian practices seem to introduce danger by transgressing the social norms of "proper" burial and bereavement, as well as blurring distinctions between death and life.

1.3 Structure and Agency

Hence, Megrelian rituals are a site of exposure for several different social norms or structuring mechanisms and tensions between them. Society dictates whose death matters more and different feelings are generated according to one's importance and relations with the others, societal norms control what counts as a crisis and tragical death and Megrelian families that engage with transgressive rituals conform to this understanding, yet, they stretch out the boundaries of "norms" and "rules" of mortuary rituals. Relatives negotiate between different social norms and structures that seem to clash with each other, created in the moments of crisis. This way, families use their agency to maintain certain types of structuring mechanisms, such as ideas about gender hierarchy and kinship, while interpreting or neglecting the others, such as mortuary practices or Orthodox Christianity. To understand what I mean by agency, I will first have to briefly explain how I view structures. Giddens imagines structures as rules and resources which are put into use by production and reproduction (Giddens 1984, 16), in other words, he imagines nature of structure to be dialectic, where reenactment of certain rules contributes to the existence of such rules in the first place. Following in the footsteps of Giddens, Sewell imagines structures as dynamic phenomenon that are outcome of social interactions (Sewell 1992, 16-19). He argues that each society consists of different societal structures that are never homologous, function with different logic and sometimes clash and conflict with one another. Both, Giddens and Sewell think of agency to be contingent to structures; Sewell argues that the meaning of rules or, as he calls, 'schemas' and resources are often ambiguous which leaves space for not only enacting the schemas in social life but also interpreting and transforming them. According to these authors, acts that support and sustain norms or subvert

and interpret them are one's agency. In this paper will be using social rules, norms and structures interchangeably.

Megrelian families do both, they help to strengthen certain structuring mechanisms, while disobeying other rules and stretch boundaries between dead and living further. There are generational expectations of who should be dying and who should be creating the future, expectation within Georgian culture that relationships have to be cherished between living and dead; death does not result in the end of relationship between family members, these ideas are maintained by transgressive practices. Moreover, mortuary rituals are gendered acts; hence, funerary and grieving practices are also intimately shaped by the gender structure and help maintain it in place. While Megrelian practices seem to be individual acts that undermine certain values, it is easy to see that they are, in fact, shaped by the society. These families' denial or interpretation of common burial and bereavement rules are also part of the structuring mechanism. Hertz argues that if someone's death is extremely tragic, usual rituals might be neglected and transitional period might never end (Hertz 1960, 85). Megrelian transgressions also take place in case of a devastating death; they strengthen the ideas about what is normal and what is a tragic event because they are reactions to transgressive death, death that is unusual, should not have happened; death that deserves a different, exceptional treatment.

1.4 Methodology

For the research I lived at my relatives' house in Darcheli, Samegrelo for 2 weeks with my mother. My mother was a middle-person to reestablish the links between me and Megrelian People I once knew in a limited time period. She also accompanied me as a translator, since I understand very

little of Megrelian and sometimes I could not fully follow spontaneous conversations. My relatives, on the other hand, were necessary connection to the village-people in Samegrelo, since I wanted to find families that were willing to speak with me and gain their trust in just a few days. The fact that my close relatives lived in Darcheli was one of the main reasons why I decided to visit that village specifically; another reason was that I had been in the village before and some families could potentially remember me from my childhood; reminiscing about early 2000s turned out to be a good starting point to bond with some of my informants. Third reason for choosing this village was that Darcheli is located near the disputed border of Abkhazia and although I did not end up interviewing anyone who lost relatives in the war, it seemed that the general narrative did blame war and post-war period for the many tragedies.

Very soon I discovered that I could not conduct interviews on my own, without my gatekeepers, informants did not trust me; my mother, my mom's cousin and some of our neighbors became usual participants of my interviews. Gatekeepers would generate trust, pushed the conversations forward and help me understand phrases that were said in Megrelian. I conducted six interviews in Darcheli, I had to conduct in-depth unstructured interviews in some cases and structured interviews in other cases. Out of four women I talked to, two of them had lost sons to drugs, one of them had lost a little grandson in a car crash and one informant's brother-in-law was murdered. Before I interviewed people, who transgress the rules, I wanted to understand what is considered as a "normal" grieving process at first. The other two interviews were with men, they were cousins who lost their sons in a car crash. Our encounter was spontaneous, my gatekeepers and I had visited the graveyard to see the unusual construction villagers were talking about and met families there.

Along with interviews, I was a participant-observer. During my stay I became a witness of many unplanned conversations about death: my second cousin had died in a car crash, he was a member of the family I visited, his death was an everyday presence in the house; some of the guests who visited us had also lost their close family members and death was an unavoidable subject for them; on my visits with neighbors they were very enthusiastic to share their own stories and ideas on death. Apart from interviews, I visited different graveyards several times. In total, I visited 4 graveyards, two in Darcheli and two in Zugdidi for general observations on graves. The time that I visited Darcheli was also strategically chosen. Easter-time is considered to be the time to remember the dead, hence, I had an opportunity to observe families visiting their ancestors' graves on Easter. At home I also witnessed certain rituals that are performed around Easter.

During the second half of my stay I conducted in-depth unstructured interviews with three families that are the most famous for their “unusual” death practices in Georgia. I interviewed a woman who lost her son in a car accident, she built the house in the graveyard and lives next to her son's grave. I interviewed mother and aunt of Kako, family that I described in the introduction and I also conducted a shorter interview with a mother who never buried her son and still cares for him after 23 years. Although none of the families knew my gatekeepers personally, their presence helped me to ease the questions because all of them were Megrelian; as the conversation progressed, they discovered common acquaintances and opened a little bit more. I also heavily draw information from the conversations my gatekeepers had after the interviews, after every interview they discussed among themselves what they thought of the practices, death and the family.

In the end, I also used articles and TV program reports on internet that introduced me to the families in the first place. I analyzed the content of the articles and reports, as well as the comments sections

on their page and on Facebook. In total, I analyzed 3 TV program reports, that was shared and spread by different news websites, forums and youtube channels, I also analyzed comment sections of the youtube videos, and forum posts, as well as 2 magazine articles and comments. I had two criteria for selecting materials: a) I chose the articles and reports that talked about the informants that I interviewed and b) I chose the articles and videos that had comments sections in order to analyze reactions to them. Hence, I excluded all printed yellow magazines and media.

Chapter 2 – Material Death and Ambivalent Mortuary Practices

In this chapter with the examples of food and material culture around the dead I want to show that boundaries between dead and the living are blurry in Georgia; food serves not merely as a medium to maintain social ties between the survivors but it mediates to maintain connections with the dead. I would also demonstrate that families that are considered to be following the “proper” rules sometimes push already blurry boundaries even further. In the end, I will show that graves, food and other material culture around death has been incorporated in conspicuous consumption of post-Soviet space, beside the connection with the dead, they are also meant to communicate with the living one’s material and social status. Although, when it comes to transgressive practices, symbolic meanings are so ambivalent that beside the immediate community of the families, many Georgians interpret rituals as ancient and backward.

2. 1 Food, Commensality and Familial Bonds

In Samegrelo, especially after the tragic events, death sometimes does not result in the finality of one’s agency. Through small practices, relatives try to stay in contact with their dead, keep them alive and active in mundane daily affairs. I arrived in Samegrelo on Wednesday. Thursdays before the Easter are devoted for cooking a special wheat based dish *korkoti* or *tsandili* for the dead ancestors and family members. The same day a plate of *korkoti* is taken to the graveyard and placed on the table next to the grave, most graves have special tables for such occasions. *Korkoti* is also placed on dinner table with sweets, fruits, bread and lighted candles and it is served to the family members. Beside Easter Thursday, there are several days throughout the year when *sakurtkhi*, the feast for the dead is prepared. Several times Orthodox priests have told me that *sakurtkhi* is not

supposed to be a meal for the dead that is brought to the grave, families should bring the food to church or give it away to the poor, these activities should serve as a reminder to pray for the dead. However, in Samegrelo I have witnessed several families perceiving this day differently, it was a ritual to bind the dead and the living. It was a tradition that allowed them to stay in contact with the dead by providing food for them.

Food is not merely to satiate one's hunger, apart from simple biological need, it functions as social means for a community. Commensality, or the act of eating together, functions as a tool to strengthen social relations between kin (Fischler 2011; Chee-Beng 2015). In Georgia relatives and friends of the dead share many meals together, such as funeral day feast, ninth day after one's death feast for the immediate family, feast on the fortieth day after the death, shared feast one year after the death and *sakurtkhi* feasts for the close family. Apart from socialization, these meals have a religious implication and are often perceived as one way to help the soul of those who have passed. In Georgia food and alcohol also serve as one of the main mediums to maintain the relationship between the dead and alive. On Easter Monday in the Eastern part of the country families visit graves to have a meal with their dead relatives, they bring food to the graveyard, make toasts and remember their family members. Families leave Paska bread, Easter eggs and pour alcohol on the graves. In Samegrelo instead of Easter Monday families visit graves on Easter, instead of having a feast on relatives' graves, families only bring candles, sweets, Easter eggs and alcohol and put them on the table near the graves, alcohol and food remain as essential means to keep the relationship with the dead (picture 1). Since this tradition is very widespread, those who have moved out of the village or the region often go back to their birthplace to honor their ancestors.



Picture 1. Easter visit. Captured by the author

2. 2 Material Remembrance

Dead family members have to be remembered during the family gatherings. On every celebration feast, such as birthdays, weddings, get togethers, the toastmaster must toast the ones who have passed away. In a short documentary on Georgian mortuary practices, a woman mentions, “until I am alive to remember my parents, they are also alive, once the dead don’t have the people to remember them, that’s when they are die”⁷ (Asatiani et al. 2011) During my fieldwork my mom and I were considered to be members of the family and to strengthen our relationship the whole family, the four of us, my mom, my uncle, my aunt and I, always ate together; we would always drink wine, vodka or cognac with every dinner and lunch and make toasts for our gathering, family

⁷ <http://www.daazo.com/film/d5333908-ec73-11e0-a45c-0050fc84de33>

and dead relatives in the family. The center figure of the toasts was my uncle's only son who died 17 years ago in a car crash at the age of 21. In Georgia dead family members are also commemorated by their pictures on the walls and it is common to display the pictures of the dead. The house that I lived in had no pictures on walls except for the pictures of those who have passed in the recent years. I have noticed the same tendency in the houses that I visited throughout my fieldwork, everyone I interviewed at home had pictures, usually their headshots, of the dead relatives in living rooms even if the rest of the walls were bare. Living are constantly surrounded by their dead family members to keep their memory alive.

Kako's aunt, Marina told me about another interesting tradition, in earlier years she and her sister would lay Kako's clothing on the top of the grave and change them according to different seasons. This ritual was inspired by a Megrelian tradition to lay clothing on top of one's bed after the person is death, which was called a "sign" or *nishani*, two other informants have admitted that they have also practiced this ritual in the earlier years of their children's death. Remembrance is very closely tied to material culture, and different objects mediate and encourage close connection of family members.

Some of my informants have told me that apart from *sakurtkhi*, they would provide food for their dead sons as an everyday tradition. Often the meal is later consumed by the family members. Dodo, a woman who has been living in the graveyard for the past 9 years has been brewing coffee each morning for her dead son "I do it every single day. Next morning, I drink that coffee and bring him a new cup." Nana has been sharing food with her son since 1990s "we still do, every single day," says Kako's aunt. Lilly, another woman whose only son died a few years ago admitted to me that for a year she would prepare food and place it on the dinner table where her son would have sat.

Alongside food and alcoholic drinks, some people even light cigarettes and leave them on the tombstones if a person liked to smoke. Chee-Beng distinguishes different types of communal meals and uses the term domestic commensality to describe the phenomenon of sharing meals with family members; domestic commensality is the most basic experience that helps to form and maintain family links, providing food is also one of the primary means of care within the family (Chee-Beng 2015). The practice of providing meals to the dead relatives or dining on dead family members' graves is by no means merely sacral offering to the dead, it could also be viewed as domestic commensality, as it functions to cultivate the strong bond between dead and alive family members.

2.3 Megrelian Graves

Grave is an important sight for the grieving relatives. Material world, such as sites and objects help us to remember and structure our memories (Radley 1990). While pictures at home function as constant reminders of the dead, grave sites and burial places extend beyond remembering the past, many people in Georgia keep going to the graves of their relatives and friends, especially of the young people's graves, because they perceive this to be maintaining relationship with the dead. Many Georgians speak of those who have passed as if not much has changed. Grave sites are very important for the maintenance of the bonds. Most parents that I interviewed or encountered with during my fieldwork visited graves of their children weekly, and sometimes several times per week. My mom's another cousin who visited us to give us information about my main informants, had lost his daughter to illness twenty-six years ago and despite living forty minutes from the village where his daughter is buried he still looks after her grave. Lilly has told me that she visits her son's grave almost every single day.



Picture 2. Graveyard in Zugdidi. Captured by the author

Samegrelo’s graveyards differ from other parts of Georgia, many graves have a roof and look similar to houses or little churches from the outside. Some graveyards look like a neighborhood with little gardens or sitting areas (picture 2). From the inside, many such graves have tables, electricity and beautiful chandeliers (picture 3), chairs and a wall that resembles a corner of a house; sometimes there are special spaces to display the belongings of the dead. Since families visit their dead relatives frequently, some mourning relatives have admitted that their thinking behind setting up graves this way was for their own comfort, “my wife would spend her entire days here,” says a man who lost a son in a car accident 9 years ago and later lost his daughter to an illness. “I had to build the walls, bring the sofa and a table, sometimes she would stay here overnight.” While other Megrelians explain the design of their family graves differently, “there was this popular belief that rain should not touch the dead,” says my mom’s cousin Izo. Our neighbor tells me another

explanation, “in the 1990s some tombs had been robbed and families would construct fully closed buildings to protect the thievery.” While this certainly holds true for some families, it was rare to see completely closed off and fully covered graves. In addition, the last two explanations do not clarify why walls of the graves look like the interior design of normal houses. Every single interpretation also fails to explain why large, beautiful chandeliers would hang in the roof of many family graves, or why graves need beautiful gardens. It seems that family members are purposefully creating spaces very similar to homes in the designated areas of the dead and these spaces are extension of homes that function as liminal places where family members spend a long time alongside the dead to cry, speak to the dead, bring the younger members of the family to get acquainted to their ancestors and to meet and communicate with other visitors of the grave.



Picture 3. Chandeliers on graveyards. Captured by the author

Objects and artefacts carry symbolic meanings and communicate messages with others (Roth 2001). Similar to the other parts in Georgia, graves often serve as indications of one’s wealth in

Samegrelo (picture 4), even if the owners are not very rich. Statues, marble tables, incredibly well constructed structures and well-maintained gardens cost a lot of money and time to build and preserve. In 1990s and early 2000s it was pretty common to bury people with their belongings, clothing and everyday necessities in Samegrelo. My neighbors told me how they witnessed their neighbor being buried with several expensive bottles of alcohol. They also remembered that their relative was buried with a cell phone and his family would call him up until the battery ran out. Obsession with material goods to communicate one's wealth with others can be observed till this day. I was surprised to see a lot of nice cars in the small village, which is considerably poor; later my gatekeepers have noted that some of these people could barely afford food, even if they owned nice cars.



Picture 4. Graveyard in Zugdidi. Captured by the author

2.4 European Reception Dinners

Parents who live with their dead sons also have to spend large amount of money to care for the dead or build new houses suitable for co-living. Dima's mother mentioned large feasts that she organizes at least two times a year to offer to her son's friends and relatives; Marina told me about Koka's funeral feast, in the times of severe scarcity and food shortage, Kako's funeral offered the guests a big meal variety "people were so surprised when they saw this much food; and we had so many guests." Marina also told me about the hardships her family faces when they were building

Kakos' house in winter, the family was wealthy enough to rent large electricity generators in the 1990s, during the shortage of electricity, "our nearby houses would also have power because of us." Marina's son even bought Kako a gift after his death, which served as a community car in neighbors' funerals, weddings and special occasions for years.

Although material culture around death communicates message about one's economic status, messages that Megrelian transgressive practices communicate are much more ambiguous for Georgians, much like Russian villas of "new Russians" (Humphrey 1998). For my gatekeepers and many Georgians outside the immediate community, symbolic meaning of the practices was interpreted in various ways: as a sign of family members' unstable mental state, as violation of Orthodox Christian rules, violations of the designated spaces, as a symbol of these family's backwardness etc. In other words, although material goods related to death have been part of conspicuous consumption, in case of transgressive practices, other reading and interpretations of the rituals come first and one's economic status gets ignored or becomes reason for distaste, as one of my gatekeepers mentioned later that day, "it felt like Kako's aunt was almost showing off." I believe that showing one's material wealth was also a way for this family to disprove widespread opinion about their backwardness, Marina wanted to demonstrate that the family had access to uncommon resources when nobody else did and they did not deserve to be called "uncivilized," as they have been called by many Georgians. This was especially obvious when Marina talked to us about birthday feasts and wedding receptions.

Several birthdays, wedding receptions and celebrations have been held in the house after Kako's death, Kako's friends have gotten married in the house, next to their friend's grave; and as Kako's aunt makes sure to clarify, "all the receptions were very European." In Georgia and most of post-

Soviet space, Europe often functions as an imaginative space. Edward Said described the symbolic space to be perceived as homogeneous entity, knowledge of such spaces is subjective and falsified on the basis of imagined values and images of the particular space (Said 1978). As explained by Yurchak (2006) and Seliverstova (2017), in 1980s Soviet Union and post-Soviet countries such entity was “the Imaginary West” (Yurchak 2006) that presented the idea of better life conditions.

Following the same idea, Tamar Tskhadadze presents the idea of “Georgian difference,” which entails misconstrued notions of Georgia’s backwardness and European progress, where evil is completely deleted from the west (Tskhadadze 2018). Although these ideas are not completely mirrored in Kako’s family, it is still obvious that although Europe is much more attainable for the citizens of post-Soviet countries today, it did not lose the imaginative power to signify progress and development for many Georgians, and it often functions as a synonym for “civilized” or “more civilized” than Georgia. The term “European receptions” was being used by Kako’s aunt to contrast it with the allegations against this family of being backward because of the unusual burial. Throughout our conversation and in other interviews that I have seen of the family, she tried to signal several times that despite accusations, her family is, in fact, civilized. Before we left the house, Nana served us coffee and Kako’s aunt mentioned that this was special coffee from abroad. The term “abroad” indicated that coffee was automatically better, more expensive and it was a subtle way to emphasize the how modern the family was to possess foreign goods.

Mortuary practices and remembrance of the dead are very material in Samegrelo. Grave functions as a primary site for remembrance, food and commensality keeps family bonds between dead and alive. Materiality helps to maintain ties between two worlds, but it is also being used as a medium to show one’s wealth. Sometimes showing material wealth is a direct response to the accusations

that families who practice transgressive rituals are “uncivilized,” but for many people outside Samegrelo, lavish graves, plasma TVs, cars and chandeliers are interpreted differently, these symbols of material wealth have become important signs of the families’ backwardness.

Chapter 3 – Transgressive Practices

In this chapter I want to speak about the nature of transgressive practices. We will see that for the families, religiosity and religious beliefs do not stand in opposition to transgressive practices. Rituals that my informants engage in reaffirms gender roles and kinship relations. The practices demonstrate destroyed faith in the future that was caused by death and readjustment to the new reality. I will also show how these practices might be transgressive in other ways, especially in Samegrelo. The center of my research are five families. Three of the families have been interviewed several times by yellow magazines, popular TV shows and internet news channels, while the other two families were recommended to me in the field. I will also refer to other interviewees whom I interviewed in Darcheli to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between what is considered to be “normal” and what is thought to be transgressive.

3. 1 Religion and Transgression

I met Jgushias in the graveyard, Levan’s mother, father and nephew and Giorgi’s father. Fathers are two cousins who lost their male sons twelve years ago in a car accident. Four people died in that car that day. The cousins decided to bury their sons next to each other and construct beautiful structures over the graves. The space in front of the graves look like someone’s garden at home, there are beautiful flowers, someone spends quite a lot of time here to keep the garden clean and pretty. I speak with Levan’s family first, his mother, father and a little nephew came to visit him. The construction reminds me of church and Levan’s father explains that it was a deliberate decision, he adds that before 2006 he did not have a clear understanding of what religion was all

about, “I started going to the church since this happened and now I pray for him and I fast every time. I want to help my kid in any way.”

Religion becomes an important part of everyday lives after a tragic accident. Manana, my mother’s cousin, who lives near Darcheli, lost a little grandchild in a car accident few years ago and that was the beginning of the family turning to religion, “after Andria’s death, the father of the child would lie in bed all day, without communicating with anyone but his friend, a priest spoke to him and he believed that there was a hope, that his soul is still alive. We do everything for him now, especially his dad is very religious.” Lilly also tells me what happened after her son died. She used to be a working woman, a nurse in the hospital for years. Soon after she retired her son passed away because of drug addiction. She turned to religion after his death and tries to live like a Christian Orthodox woman to help his son’s soul. When I asked him if he heard of families who live in the same house as their sons, she told me that she has and she would have also moved to the graveyard if her son’s grave had a roof. Some Families told me that they turn to religion for hope to help their children who need help. By living religiously, they believe that they participate in bettering the conditions of their children. For some families, religion is not only belief of life after death, which gives them anticipation of meeting with their kids after death, it is also a way to take care of them as a parent. It helps them to maintain their place as mothers and fathers and in a way, continue parenting.

Against the widespread idea among the criticizers of such practices, majority of the families that practiced “unusual” burials or rituals are religious. Family members go to church, converse with priests, fast and read prayers for the dead. They also do not view their practices to contradict Orthodox tradition. This is certainly true for Giorgi’s family. Levan’s father explains that it was

his cousin's idea to construct a building that resembles church because he is very religious (Picture 5). Koka's family, who is more widely talked about and criticized, has been visited by priests regularly, "almost every major church leader has visited this house, except for the patriarch," says Marina. On Facebook and news channels majority of the readers expressed their opinions that Megrelian families should go to church or get advice of a priest. For them, if one is engaged in these practices, they must be acting out of lack of knowledge or deliberate negligence of Orthodox Christianity. Many comments also showcased the idea that if the families lived a religious life, it would automatically appease their tragedy. In reality, families who engage in transgressive practices do not necessarily perceive their practices to stand in opposition to Orthodox Christianity.



Picture 5. Levan and Giorgi's graves. Captured by the author

It immediately evident that Giorgi Jgushia's family is wealthy and prosperous. Although the grave is similar to Levan's, the walls are fully covered with glass windows, there is a leather couch next

to the grave, I have seen similar-looking couches in the kitchens of Megrelians and there is a beautiful chandelier hanging from the roof. From the inside, this place looks like a room with a twist. There is a diary on the table, where visitors write their thoughts and wishes to the dead, I also sign it (picture 6). A few years ago, another tragic event occurred in this family, the sister of Giorgi, Natali, died of illness. She is buried next to her brother. Their father used to be a businessman who spent most of his adulthood in Russia, away from the family in order to run his business. In his monologue to me and my gatekeepers he regretted being apart from his children in order to save and build a big house where nobody lives today.

Giorgi's father mentions that his wife stayed on the grave often and he decided to build the glass walls all around the grave, "my wife... She is a mother and it is even more difficult for her, she carried them in her body for nine months... She would spend all days and nights here." Two things give hope to the family, religion and their little grandson who lives in the capital of Georgia. Giorgi's father thinks that children would give him more strength to live, "my cousin is better off, he has other kids, grandkids... Who do I have? Both of my kids are dead and my grandson lives in Tbilisi, hundreds of kilometers away and I rarely get to see him." Many grieving parents have emphasized the role of other kids or grandkids in the family to help them cope with the death of their sons and daughters. It was a common conception among others whose only children died, that they would have had better lives after the tragedy if they had to take care of other kids or grandkids. Lilly and Diana regretted that their children did not have an offspring that would give them hope for the future.



Picture 6. Giorgi and Natali's grave. Captured by the author

3. 2 Death of a Son

In Samegrelo, the unusual graves are constructed almost exclusively for sons of the family by the parents. Many of them were either the only children or the only sons within the family. These men died in their teens, twenties or thirties, most of them were unmarried and many did not have children. While death is always a part of social reality and there are certain functions in place to reassure the maintenance of the structure, these are not instances of “good” death (Bloch and Perry 1982), these occurrences are tragedies that challenged the whole idea on typical order of life cycle. These instances are not ordinary death of old people, who have participated in reproduction, lived a long life and now refrain from an active participation into the social relations, these are the death of younger males, who are considered as the future heads of the family and occupy an active and dominant role within a society and a family. The death of a young man without children disrupts

the existent social structure because he is not supposed to die, it messes up the cyclical order of life. It also matters how one dies, car accidents and murders were unfortunate events that ended young lives abruptly. Certain kind of death is connected to shame – such as drug use; only those families whose children died of drug overdose did not mention the reason of death, I found out from other sources. Other families spoke about their sons' death on their own, without me asking about it. Premature death is “bad death” which threatens their imagined future; and some people have to come in terms with the idea that their family line will cease to exist.

While some parents claim that having another child would have helped the grieving process, Mzia tells me that her granddaughter was one of the main reasons why the family decided to preserve the body of the dead son. Mzia's family never buried the body of Jemal, they keep his preserved corpse in the family grave. Their son died of drug overdose. For 8 months he was in a coma and the family had to take care of him, which continued after his death. Mzia tells me that up until recently she would visit her son every single day to take care of him, now it is a difficult task since she is in her late 60s and her husband is very sick. Mzia would change Jemal's clothing and preserve his body with special medical alcohol. It was a normal occasion to take her little grandchild to her father's grave, “we did it for her, my husband said that the daughter should know her dad, she was very little. She is 23 now and she says that this is how she got to know her dad, she has thanked us for that.” The family would often have birthdays and celebrations next to the son's grave. The dead son remained part of the family.

Families have incorporated their deceased children into their daily lives in other ways. Diana's son Dima died in a car accident ten years ago. He was an only son of his mother, Diana who decided to sell her house in Zugdidi and move to the graveyard. With the help of her close relatives she

could construct a house on top the grave. Her house has a large marble table for her son's visitors and big feasts. She has two beds, little storage for food, furnace, armchairs and many pictures of her son (picture 7). Diana's sister did not want to leave her alone and moved in with her. Sisters live with a few dead people since Dima was buried in a family grave. "We had an amazing bond. Everybody could see. His father died young and it was only him and me. Sadly, he never got married or had kids." Diana sees her move to the graveyard as a logical continuation of her relationship with her son, "we continue to live together, just like before his death."



Picture 7. Living with the dead. Captured by the author

Kako's family also lives with the dead. Marina told me that Kako was killed in Russia by criminals by mistake. Kako was 25, only child of Nana, his father had died when he was just a few months

old. He was the future hope for his mother. Nana spent days and nights at the graveyard after her son's death. Marina tells me that Nana would wake up at night and go to the graveyard for months, which was one of the main reasons for deciding to bury Kako in a house, the second reason was neighbor's dream. Kako's aunt told me that the family's plans of building a church in the name of Kako changed after their neighbor had a dream where Kako asked to build him a house. Relatives built him a house instead and moved his body from the graveyard to his new home in less than 40 days in winter. Dreams have been a recurring theme in relatives' narratives throughout my fieldwork. Khutsishvili's book explains that in Georgian culture deceased communicate with the living through dreams, sometimes they warn their relatives, other times they demand something from them (Khutsishvili 2009). Most of my informants did not see their dead relatives regularly in dreams but paid attention to their messages on the rare occasions had a dream. Mzia mentioned that at first, she would preserve her son's body with a special ointment but later she saw in the dream how to make home-made alcoholic liquid and has been using that instead.



Picture 8. Alcohol bottles and a plasma TV. Captured by the author

In cases of all five families, they are taking care of their male sons, with the exception of one family whose son and a daughter died, although the grave was already constructed long before the daughter's death. It is true that, on general, in the 1990s and 2000s more males died in a younger age than females and young generation of 1990s is sometimes referred as a "lost generation," but as I have shown earlier, death of a young male is also considered of a higher importance that deserves more attention than of a woman's. Woman is expected to wear black throughout her life when her child dies, in many regions women also wear black till their death after their husband die. This marks them publicly and reinforces the ideas of mourning process being gendered. According to societal expectations, women, especially mothers, are supposed to struggle the most. Sumbadze

argues that mother and children form stronger bonds than spouses or fathers and children (Sumbadze 2006; Sumbadze 2018). This gender division is very much prescriptive, in Georgia women's main purpose in life should be motherhood. She demonstrates that domestic sphere is understood to be reserved for the women, men should be main supporters of the family (2018). Barkaia writes that this tendency is not new, Soviet Union, that was supposed to emancipate women, did push some women to workplaces but their work doubled because they had to take care of their children and family as well (Barkaia 2018).

After the death of their only children, Megrelian mothers are trying to reestablish their place in the society and carry out the woman's most important task in this community, being a mother. Woman's identity is not simply reproduction but being an ideal mother and caretaker for her children, even if they are grown-ups. Mothers and children maintain their bond throughout life and Megrelian mothers continue their care and relationship even after death. These mothers, especially the mothers of the single children, were losing their place in the society, but Megrelian death practices reaffirmed the hierarchy, reestablishing their place. It must also be noted that both, Diana's and Nana's sisters have moved in with them and help provide and care for the sisters and deceased nephews. Diana's sister works, and Nana's sister Marina is in her eighties but she receives money from her son who lives abroad. Diana is also supported by her brother who lives nearby, Lilly's brother and sister-in-law also helped her to make a grave for her son. Siblings and kinship ties seem to play an enormous role to care and help the grieving, however, it is the sisters who physically moved in the same house as their mourning siblings. This interesting detail also helps us see how caring women can be.

Georgian church also communicates ideas about how the gender hierarchy should function, reaffirms and influences the gender values of Georgian society. It wants to reestablish the notion of women being inferior to men. The most recent 2015 NDI poll shows⁸, Illia II, the patriarch of Georgian Orthodox church, is the most trusted public figure in Georgia. In his publications on patriarchate.ge and his epistle Illia II has announced that a man should be the head of the family since “one body cannot have two heads.” Later in the same epistle he stated that women should wash the feet of their husband (Illia II 2012)⁹ He has rephrased the same idea about gender hierarchy several times, when he spoke of what makes a happy family he said, “there should be a hierarchy in the family and the head should be a husband, according to God” (Illia II 2017)¹⁰. These ideas are restated by Sumbadze’s respondents even if they believe that they believe in egalitarianism between men and women (2018).

There are other mortuary rituals that reaffirm the prescribed spheres for women and men and dictate their roles. On *panashvidi* after saying condolences to the family members, women usually remain inside the house, with the dead body and other family members, while men stand outside to greet the guests. In the house it is normal for women to cry and mourn loudly, while men usually stay silent, do not cry and speak about various different topics while standing outside. This also maintains the idea that women should be primary mourners. Women’s lower place in the gender hierarchy was also reaffirmed by a story Mzia told us. She admitted that the decision not to bury

⁸ <https://www.ndi.org/Georgia-poll-release2-May-2015>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2tPTiv1DMA>

¹⁰ <http://patriarchate.ge/geo/katolikos-patriarqi-ilia-ii-bednieri/>

her son's body was made by her husband, and although she did not like the idea, she had to comply. However, the caretaker for her son for twenty-three years has been Mzia because that's what is expected from a woman. She had to carry the burden of changing clothing for her son and preserving him with special alcohol. Although the husband wanted to keep the body for a few years, body is not buried more than twenty years later. Mzia tells me that three years after the death of her son, her husband went to jail and she could not make a decision to bury the son without husband's approval.

Earlier in the paper I have talked about the practice of putting a "sign" on the bed and Mzia admitted that she would regularly change the clothes of her son. Although, both deal with the same objects – clothing, I believe that "sign" is a completely different ritual. While *nishani* served as an intimate object of remembrance, clothing that deceased wore in their life evoking memories, I believe Mzia's practice is an attempt of reaffirming the mother's caretaker role and incorporating the deceased in mundane everyday activities, such as getting dressed in different attire.

Four of my gatekeepers, my mother, her cousin and our two neighbors, a sister and a brother in their twenties accompanied me with these five families. They have attended my interviews and listened to my informants. These graves and grieving parents had such an impact on them that they would often discuss their opinions amongst themselves. After we had visited every family that I wanted to interview, all of us were sitting at a large dining table for a coffee and my neighbor noted that he could not believe we had coffee in Kako's house, "I mean, his body is right there, I could not touch any food." The argument, that his body is buried did not change his opinion. Then my mother noted that although she did not think Kako's mother has psychological problems, as one would assume if they heard their story, Kako's burial was still extremely strange. It was more

peculiar than Diana living at the graveyard; other agreed. I questioned, what was the difference between these burials and upon a few moments of silence, my mother said, “Diana lives among the dead, while Kako lives among the living.” Everyone also agreed that strangest of all was Jemal’s case. We did not get a chance to see his grave, the mother was not willing to show, but we had seen it on the internet. My gatekeepers mentioned that not burying the body was indeed a very bad decision. My neighbor, the girl in her twenties, mentioned that mother was “torturing a soul,” repeating the familiar narrative, others said that they felt uneasy while thinking of unburied body.

Every single one of my gatekeepers were Megrelian but they also felt uncomfortable upon seeing the graves. I believe, that the reason for unease among Megrelians is the violation of boundaries (Douglas 1979) between dead and alive. It is clear that in Samegrelo and in Georgia, generally, boundaries between the dead and the living are much more malleable and blurry than in many western societies, yet these connections are always controlled by the living. The discourse of the Orthodox church and ideas about modernity might also play a role in forming the “normality,” the bigger issue for my informants was the violation of boundaries. My gatekeepers’ comments hinted that Megrelian practices are transgressive because death, as something unwanted, enters everyday life in Mzia’s, Nana’s and Diana’s family and death is unavoidable in their daily lives. Moreover, Jemal, Dima and Kako are in somewhat liminal state, they are not memories, but not quite active agents either. Generally, Georgian mortuary rituals serve as remembrance or commemoration practices, while these Megrelian families engage with more than a memory, Jemal, Dima and Kako are neither dead, nor alive and they impact the everyday lives of their family members, which pollutes the order between life and death and creates a threat of ambiguous nature of dead.

Conclusion

When I visited Mzia and asked her for an interview, she profusely denied at first. She told me a story from four years ago, when she was approached by her acquaintance to show Jemal's grave to a relative. Mzia was ill but she could not deny a request from the fellow villager and accompanied them to her son's grave. The journalist was speaking in Megrelian to her, she and the common friend recorded the whole encounter on two cameras and days later the article appeared on an internet news channel about a mother taking care of a "mummy." Apparently, Jemal's now grown-up daughter saw the video, where her father is openly displayed and her grandmother tells the story of the family's decision to preserve the body. "The comments were horrible," tells me Mzia. "From all over the world, even Georgian migrants were writing from Canada that this is a disgrace. They were saying that we keep a mummy and that I am a horrible mother. My granddaughter wanted to kill herself and promised me that if I appear on any other news channel, she will commit a suicide." She was asked to be interviewed a several times by different news channels since then but she always denied.

I have seen the video, that's how I heard about her in the first place, I have also seen the comments. Video has been reuploaded on youtube and shared on different social media or forums. I have also seen the comments, some curse her for "being a bad mother who tortures her son's soul," or label her as "insane." Many readers comment on Samegrelo itself, some people state that being Megrelian as a "diagnosis" of this "insanity," one woman asks, "how come, all these crazy practices only happen in Samegrelo?" (Qartuli Videoebi 2013) These commenters touch upon the few subjects that I wanted to talk about in this paper. For Georgians Samegrelo is often seen as a threatening and strange place, where commonsensical rules are often violated. For some Georgians

outside Samegrelo, existence of Megrelian mortuary practices serves as an indication that Megrelians are different from the rest, much like Megrelian language does. Many Georgians believe that Samegrelo might be the next separatist region, following the example of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Some articles have also contributed to create the image of the “other,” in the yellow magazine “Gza,” after a lengthy description of Megrelian graveyards, the journalist interviews an ethnographer, who describes Megrelian mortuary practices as “pagan” and distorted versions of rituals that have nothing to do with culture or religion (Kobalia 2013).

Ideas about “proper” Orthodox Christian burial and bereavement practices also dominate in the comments section, referring to the soul that is tortured by Megrelian parents. In my childhood I have heard of a famous story about a young man who died at the age of 19, he was an only son and his father put him in honey and buried him that way in the 1990s. This story turns out to be completely true, last year his father was interviewed by a famous TV program where he told a story of his son’s reburial. He says that when the story spread, Georgian patriarch Illia II also heard about it. The father was repeatedly asked to rebury his son according to the Orthodox traditions. In the end, the father complied and allowed the delegation from the patriarchate to rebury his son¹¹ (Skhva Rakursi 2017).

The journalist who writes about Megrelian rituals, interviews a priest in the end to hear what he has to say. The priest explains why these rituals are not Christian and relatives who practice them do not allow souls to enter the heaven (Kobalia 2013). For the journalist it is a logical step to

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9NyMiUh9BY>

consult with a priest about the graves because church competes for the domination of the public space in Georgia and appears that it can successfully regulate private and public spaces. Georgian burials are communal, but also very religious, church has established its dominant role to control one's death, so much so that many Georgians get upset when someone violates the rules set by the Orthodox church. My gatekeeper neighbor who went with me to almost every interview has mentioned that if Kako's family built a church in their yard instead and buried Kako in the garden, it would be much more acceptable act for her. On the other hands, Megrelian families do not view themselves in opposition with Orthodox Christianity, many of them go to church, pray for their deceased relative's soul and think of themselves as religious. They have large crosses on the grave and designated corners for icons in the house that they cohabit with the dead. In Georgia death should comply to Orthodox Christian rules, but Megrelian families stretch the meaning of what could be Orthodox Christian and incorporate its elements without much difficulty.

Megrelian families also broaden and almost erase the boundaries between life and death. Family members, despite a strong backlash against them, reveal their agency and disobey many rules and practices, trying to create a hybrid of their own creativity and widespread rituals. We should not think, however, that Megrelian families act completely independent from the structuring mechanisms. Certain social norms dictate how one should feel like and whose death is a tragedy. Transgressive mortuary practices, however transgressive they might seem, also reaffirm certain structures existent in Georgian society, especially women's place, ideas about motherhood and the importance of a son in the family. Gendered societal expectations have been questioned by women who went abroad and became main providers for their families back in Georgia (Zurabishvili et al.

2018), Megrelian mortuary rituals are just another, more tragic example of destroyed expectations of the future and attempt to create the closest alternative.

In the end, I would like to suggest the questions for further research. I think the future research could delve in deeper into the ideas on Megrelian strangeness. Throughout my fieldwork I had to constantly see the ways Megrelian identity and community are criticized. But why does this happen? Svans also have their own language, but Svanuri is often cherished, while Megrelian language is ridiculed. What are the reasons for a difference? Research could take another turn and explore more about the loss. As I got to realize, in the 1990s a generation was truly lost in Samegrelo, both, in literal and figurative sense. Many young men died in Abkhazian war, others were murdered in the times of gangster gangs reining, some died because of drugs or car crashes (as there did not exist a functional police system to fine speed driving or drunk driving); many men and women had to go abroad to provide for their families. Many families also lost their houses and all their belongings in Abkhazia, like my mother's cousin and her family. My research was limited to the families who lost their sons and decided to cope with their loss a certain way, a future research could investigate how the rest of the society copes with the loss in day to day life: loss of a different life in Abkhazia, loss of a stable lifestyle after the collapse of the Soviet Union, distance with a family member and a loss of a generation.

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