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The Eighth Annual Nava'i Lecture in Central Asian Studies:

MARKETING GIFTS: ECONOMIC CHANGE IN A KAZAKH VILLAGE

by Cynthia Ann Werner*

In March 1994, I rode in a chauffeur-driven Volga for the two-hour drive from the city of Shymkent to the village where I would conduct research for the next year and a half. I was traveling with a young Kazakh woman and her vivacious mother-in-law who had adopted me as her "American daughter." The car was loaded with goods, including several sacks of potatoes and carrots, many bags of candies, dozens of flat breads and one live sheep. In addition to delivering me safely to their relatives' home in the village, the two women were returning to the older woman's native region for a special mission. It was the month of Ramadan and the older woman's husband was sponsoring a feast for the daily breaking of the fast. It was her responsibility to supervise the women's labor and to ensure that everything went smoothly. Although she and her husband had left the village forty years earlier, they continued to use such opportunities to maintain strong ties with relatives in their native village. On subsequent journeys to and from the village, I was frequently used as a courier to transport goods and news between the two households.

It was exactly these sort of kin ties that I hoped to explore more during the course of my research. I was particularly interested in how rural Kazakhs were responding to the so-called "transition to a market economy." I initially proposed to study how the privatization of agriculture would affect inter-household relations and household survival strategies. I wondered whether kin ties would become more or less important in the post-Soviet period.

From the policy maker's perspective, the transition to a market economy involves a number of things: the adoption of a new currency, the liberalization of prices, the expansion of foreign trade and the privatization of state-owned enterprises. But, for those actually experiencing the "transition, " it involves much more than the subtle change that the word "transition" implies. The vast majority of the people I met in Kazakhstan have witnessed a sharp decline in their standard of living. This is best understood simply by comparing the annual inflation rate, which was approximately 1200% in 1994, with the state salaries, which barely increased in comparison and were frequently paid several months behind schedule. Virtually overnight, household savings and expected pensions became worthless.

Throughout the drive, I wondered how these changes were already affecting the village which I call Qyzylqum. Founded in 1931 during Stalin's violent campaign to sedentarize nomadic pastoralists and to collectivize agricultural production, the village is now the administrative center of a rural region devoted to the production of the Astrakhan sheep. Currently, there are about 8, 200 people living in Qyzylqum. Over 96% of the residents are Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs. Although the majority of villagers are Kazakhs, they do belong to several different tribal lineages, or sub-ethnic groups. They all live in homes with electricity. Some also have telephones and refrigerators. None of the homes have running water. About sixty percent of the adults work as employees of the state. In addition to working on nearby state farms, the residents work in several different administrative buildings, a hospital, a cultural palace, a post office and telephone station, a department store, a museum and three schools. The villagers have never relied exclusively on their state salaries for survival. Most families grow fruits and vegetables and raise privately owned livestock on their small "kitchen" plots. Their products are used for subsistence or sold for cash. Some families also profit from the sale of handicrafts, such as felt and wool rugs.

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As we approached Qyzylqum, I searched for any visible signs of economic change. I had some basis for comparison, as I had passed through the same village less than two years before on the way to nearby historical sites. Most things appeared to be the same, including the large busts of Marx and Lenin which were still standing outside the main administrative buildings. Across the street, however, something was strikingly different. The number of merchants at the local bazaar had more than doubled. And, the selection of goods they were selling had expanded to include clothing, packaged foods and other goods from Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

In this regard, Qyzylqum did *not* appear to be any different from Almaty, Shymkent, or perhaps any other town in the former Soviet Union. In both Almaty and Shymkent, I also noticed that there were many more merchants than before and they were selling a wider selection of goods. In order to cope with the high rates of inflation, the delays in government salaries and the growing rates of unemployment, many individuals have turned to speculative trade. In general, this involves the purchase of brand-new consumer goods in bulk with the intention of reselling at a higher price. In the Soviet period, such activity was illegal as the state controlled the production and distribution of all goods. Anybody who was involved with speculative trade in the past was either profiting at the expense of the state or illegally selling goods from the West. Small neighborhood and village bazaars did operate in the past, but the commodities were limited to used consumer goods or fresh produce (grown on "kitchen plots" or dacha gardens). In the post-Soviet period, speculative trade has become necessary, acceptable, and ubiquitous. It is necessary because many of the former distribution channels were disrupted with the breakup of the former Soviet Union. The status of speculative trade has also changed in recent years. Most people recognize that it provides many people with a much-needed source of income. As I quickly learned, the villagers thought the only people who were benefitting from the post-Soviet "transition" were the merchants. In contrast, few people thought that it was worth the effort to receive small parcels of private land from the state farms.

The new class of merchants, however, is difficult to characterize. In Almaty, they range from the impoverished pensioners who sell flowers, cigarettes and alcohol on the street corner to the debonair young businessmen who drive expensive foreign cars and manage several private shops. In Qyzylqum village, the merchants vary in several ways, including how far they travel to buy their goods, where they sell their goods, and the volume of their trade. Some merchants travel to foreign cities (including Moscow, Tashkent, Dubai, Istanbul and Mashhad, Iran) to buy their goods, while the majority purchase goods from local bazaars or through personal connections. Some sell goods daily at the bazaar while others sell goods less regularly out of their homes. For some, trade is their primary occupation while for others, this is something they occasionally resort to in order to earn a quick profit.

From my point of view, it seemed ironic that the bazaar merchants were able to make any profits when everybody I spoke to was finding it more and more difficult to afford basic necessities. I wondered how many people in the village could afford to buy silk dresses from Turkey which cost almost two times the average worker's monthly salary. And, how could anybody afford to buy a factory-made rug from Pakistan which cost even more? As I spent more time in the village, I came to realize an important difference between Kazakh and American consumers. In Kazakhstan, few people were buying goods for their own personal consumption and enjoyment. The relative success of the merchants could only be explained by investigating the circulation and consumption of goods *after* they left the bazaar.

The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai suggests that scholars can learn a lot about social relationships by tracing what he calls the "social life of things." This is definitely the case in Kazakhstan where people invest in social relationships by exchanging goods. Rather than being used directly for consumption, many of the goods exchanged in the bazaar became the objects of further exchange during ritual festivities. To begin, food and alcohol are often purchased by the hosts of a large feast or dinner party. In general, Kazakh families prepare elaborate meals for guests but eat very simple meals - such as soup, bread and tea - when there are no guests. Thus, much of the food and alcohol purchased at the bazaar is presented to guests, either at small dinner parties or large feasts.

Other goods, including livestock, clothing, cloth and rugs, are often purchased by those who need to present a gift at a life-cycle feast, such as a wedding or a circumcision feast. Each household invited to a feast is expected to show up with a gift. There are a wide variety of feast gifts, including cash, livestock, carpets, felt rugs, clothing, cloth, electronic goods, jewelry, and for the wealthiest, automobiles. In addition to goods presented to the sponsors of a feast, a large number of goods are purchased by parents in connection with their children's weddings. This includes items exchanged in a daughter's dowry and the gifts exchanged between new sets of in-laws (*qudalar*). A girl's dowry generally includes a full set of clothing, a full set of dishes, a few pieces of furniture, and some rugs. Parents are very competitive as they compare their daughter's dowry with that of their neighbors and friends. Kazakhs are also competitive about the gifts exchanged between in-laws at matchmaker parties. The relatives of the bride and groom try to outdo each other in the exchange of in-law gifts (*kiit*), which includes livestock, clothing, and money. Those who give more gain in terms of prestige and status.

Not all gifts, however, are purchased at the bazaar. In Kazakhstan, it is culturally appropriate to recycle gifts which were received in the past. It is common for people to stockpile the gifts they receive so they can reuse them. Numerous times, I have observed Kazakh couples as they try to decide collectively what they will present as a gift during an upcoming feast. More often than not, they choose to recycle something they already have on hand, such as an unused coat or a sheep. When making their decision, they consider whether the object's value is appropriate for the recipients and the occasion.

It is important to note that the original owners of the gift have little concern about the suitability of the gift or its future use. This is clearly illustrated by the fate of young camels in Kazakhstan. For centuries, the camel served as an important source of transportation for the nomadic Kazakhs. Camels were also an important source of milk, and fermented camel's milk is still served today at large feasts. Today, although camels are still considered to be a valuable animal (and therefore make nice gifts), the average Kazakh family has little desire or use for a camel. A single camel farmer in the region produces enough camel's milk for all of the feasts. Even though the average family does not need or want a camel, the sponsor of a feast is very likely to receive at least one camel as a gift.

Since camels are relatively difficult and expensive to keep, the new owner will either recycle the camel as a gift or try to sell it to a neighbor who needs such a gift as soon as possible. As a result, young camels are constantly being loaded onto trucks and sent from one home to the next.

Even though it is possible to recycle gifts, people do not always have the appropriate gift on hand. When this is the case, the object of gift exchange must be purchased at the bazaar. In the post-Soviet period, with the high rate of inflation, feasting and gift exchange have become increasingly expensive. In a survey of one hundred village households, the majority of rural Kazakhs stated that over half of their household income was spent on gifts. Custom dictates that a household should present a gift to the sponsors of every feast they are invited to. In 1994, a typical feast gift - a sheep - cost about a quarter of the average state farm employee's monthly salary (but this salary was rarely received on time). Since some people were participating in several events a week, it is not hard to imagine how expensive this could become. Among the village elite, there is a growing preference to include "imported" goods in girls' dowries and in-law gifts. This is especially true for material and clothing, and for cash, where American dollars are considered to be more prestigious than the Kazakh tang. This trend has made the costs even higher as imported goods are always more expensive than their Soviet equivalent.

When I interviewed bazaar merchants about their activities, I was fascinated by the fact that some of them actually became merchants in order to afford all of the gifts they needed to buy. In other words, they did not necessarily want to become an entrepreneur. They simply wanted to maintain their pride and status within the village. "Gulnara, " a fifty-five year old schoolteacher, for example, only started to trade goods shortly after one of her daughters was "kidnapped" by her boyfriend. Since Gulnara and her husband were completely surprised by the elopement, they did not have a dowry prepared beforehand. I was surprised to hear that she did not have very many things tucked away because she had six other daughters, three of whom were at a marriageable age. Gulnara needed a lot of cash quickly in order to make all the necessary purchases for the dowry and the in-law gifts. Although her family had received the equivalent of about 75 U.S. dollars in bridewealth from the groom's family, villagers were spending about four times as much on dowry expenses. The difference between dowry and bridewealth changed in the post-Soviet period. Since the dowry consists of goods and the bridewealth consists of cash, inflation was driving up the costs of dowry at a higher rate than that of bridewealth.

Out of sheer desperation, Gulnara decided to try her luck selling things at the bazaar. In her first effort, she bought a sheep in Qyzylqum, slaughtered it, got on an overnight train to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and then sold the meat in one of the Tashkent bazaars (where the prices for meat are higher than in Kazakhstan). Her expenses included the train ticket, the taxi from the train station to the bazaar, the original cost of the meat, and her time. Gulnara did not have to worry about the meat spoiling because there is a special refrigerator on the train for merchants like herself. It only took her four hours to sell all of the meat. In one day, she made a net profit of 300 *tengge* (about five U.S. dollars). This amount was approximately one-fourth of her monthly salary from the school, which had not been paid for several months. Her initial outing was relatively successful, so she decided that this would be something she would do periodically for cash.

After spending several months in the village, it was clear that the relative success of the merchants could only be understood by looking at the dynamics of gift exchange and feasting. Yet, an important question remained unanswered: why were the Kazakhs spending so much money on gifts and feasting when the economic crisis was making it more and more difficult to survive. Their economic behavior seemed to be completely irrational. As a "special guest from America, " I was invited to attend all of the feasts that my host family participated in. At first, I participated in feasting activities without much enthusiasm, regarding them as a recurrent, tedious distraction from my research on privatization. I remember many times arriving home physically exhausted, having long surpassed my level of tolerance for heavy foods, loud music and drunk men. However, when I finally started to get beyond the issue of my personal enjoyment, I realized that the economic and social significance of these events was immense. I became so intrigued with the economic aspects of feasting that I changed the focus of my research from agricultural privatization to gift exchange and feasting.

In Qyzylqum, dozens of large feasts were held each year. Every weekend, during the summer and fall months, several different households sponsor their own outdoor feast to celebrate the life-cycle event of one or more household members. The largest feasts are held in honor of a son's circumcision or marriage, but fairly large feasts are also sponsored in celebration of a child's birth and an adult's fortieth or sixtieth birthday. Since the sponsoring household invites their entire network of relatives and friends to join the festivities, most feasts are attended by several hundred guests.

In addition to the financial expenses, the feasts take a lot of time and labor. The events require a great deal of inter-household cooperation, so households are continuously involved in either hosting their own feast or assisting their relatives and neighbors in such an endeavor.

An important objective of my research is to offer an explanation for these seemingly excessive feasts. The Kazakhs themselves provide two different, yet complementary, answers. The first explanation is associated with a fear of public shame. It would be shameful, they say, if a family decided not to celebrate their son's circumcision or to provide their daughter with an elaborate dowry. The second explanation entails a need or desire for reciprocity. As one woman put it, "We need to take a gift to their wedding today to ensure that they will bring a gift to our son's wedding in the future." The logic of this argument also involves a desire to avoid the shame that her family would incur if nobody were to bring gifts to her son's wedding. This stated fear of public shame illustrates the perceived detriments of not participating in ritual activities, but does not suggest the advantages of doing so.

My own explanation as to why the Kazakhs are continuing to spend so much of their time and money on feasting and gift exchange takes into account the social advantages of feasting. I explain the advantages of feasting by stressing the importance of strong household networks. By providing opportunities to exchange food, labor, gifts and toasts, the feasts are the principal social institution through which Kazakh households maintain and extend their social networks. According to Kazakh custom, social status and power is achieved largely through displays of hospitality and generosity. During ritual celebrations and exchanges, both host and guest households have the opportunity to demonstrate their generosity and thus build and maintain social networks.

In Kazakhstan, these household networks are manipulated daily for various economic and political purposes. Throughout the former Soviet Union, personal connections were used in a variety of contexts: to obtain consumer goods, to find housing, to get a job, to advance in one's career, to receive quality health care, and to get children into the university. In rural Kazakhstan, households also rely on their neighbors for a number of smaller favors, such as small loans and borrowed labor. In Kazakhstan and the other republics of Central Asia, these social networks were cultivated largely through feasting and the exchange of gifts. Through the constant exchange of gifts and favors, Kazakhs invest in social relationships. These social relationships give them a sense of security, which one anthropologist (White 1994) refers to as a "security of mutual indebtedness."

The post-Soviet transformations have brought about change in many aspects of social life, including feasting and networking. But, the importance of strong social networks has persisted. Although consumer goods have become more readily available for those who can afford them, access to many services, is still obtained through personal acquaintances rather than financial means alone.

Although every household has a reserve network of kin and some households have inherent demographic advantages, household networking should be regarded as an activity that requires decision, choice and skill. For example, a household with limited resources may decide to provide labor help and a minimal gift during the circumcision feast of a relative so they may provide an expensive gift for the local administrator's son's wedding. Feasts and gift exchanges are not simply traditions that the Kazakhs blindly follow. Instead, the feasts and gifts are opportunities for actors to manipulate their standing in the social hierarchy. And, for this reason, Kazakhs invest a lot of thought, time and energy into their feasting habits.

Naturally, different households participate at varying levels in the continuous circuit of feasts. The adult members of all households are routinely invited to the feasts of close relatives, neighbors, colleagues and classmates. There are two factors, however, which influence the frequency of household feast attendance. The first factor is related to the demographic life cycle of the household. Households headed by middle-aged couples tend to be more active than those at other stages. Beginning with the circumcision of their sons and accelerating with the marriages of their children, middle-aged couples need to have strong social networks in order to pull off successful feasts of their own and to deal with everyday problems. They maintain their networks by providing labor and gifts for others' feast and by frequently inviting guests to their homes.

Younger couples are just beginning to develop their own independent social networks. Economically, they are still dependent on their parents. They have less time and money for feasts and usually attend only the weddings of their classmates and close relatives. Like the younger couples, elderly couples are largely dependent on middle-aged couples for their survival needs. As a result, they no longer have the same economic motives for participating in feasts. For the elderly, feasting is mostly a social activity. Moreover, around the age of sixty, an older couple will sponsor their last feast, perhaps for their sixtieth birthday or for their youngest child's wedding. A few years later, most elderly stop attending the evening feasts. Instead, they arrive at the host household during the afternoon and enjoy a few hours socializing and eating with old friends.

The second factor influencing the frequency of feast attendance is social position. People with power and influence, such as local government leaders and the new class of wealthy entrepreneurs, have the largest social networks. Their networks even extend into surrounding regions and into the nearby cities. As a consequence, they are the most vigorous feast attendees in the community. Some elite attend as many as a hundred events per year. Since they are considered to be wealthy, they are expected to provide a larger gift than the average person. During a feast, these individuals are always ushered to a position of honor at a head table in the "back" of the feast grounds. This parallels the position of honor (*tor*) within Kazakh homes, which is always the furthest position from the door. These special guests are also among the first to be invited to share a toast. In the summer and fall, it is not uncommon for such people to juggle invitations to several different feasts on the same day. The duration of their stay at any one feast is an important indicator of the host household's status. If influential guests leave early, most likely to rush off to another feast, it negatively affects the reputation of the feast by implicitly suggesting that the other engagement is more important.

Since wealthy villagers are constantly giving gifts, it seems likely then that they would suffer economically. However, the contrary is true. To begin, their expenses on gift exchange are balanced by material gains they receive from their positions of power. More importantly, the wealthy generally make a handsome profit when they hold a feast of their own, for all of their generous gifts over time must be reciprocated. Unlike the gifts received by the poor, which may or may not match the feast expenses, the gifts received by the wealthy go well beyond covering the expenses for the feast. One local leader, for example, received three automobiles, dozens of horses and camels and other gifts when he invited over six hundred guests to his son's circumcision feast. Thus, rather than redistributing wealth, the feasts in Kazakhstan seem to promote the accumulation of wealth among the wealthy.

Economically, poor households are at a great disadvantage. In the post-Soviet period, they are continuing to sponsor feasts, but their feasting patterns are changing. Their feasts are becoming smaller and less expensive than before. And, they are presenting other households with gifts of lesser value. They are also delaying their wedding feasts for longer stretches of time, as well as having a greater number of combination feasts, where two sons have a single wedding feast. Among poor families, I often heard expressions of regret and resentment concerning the high cost of ritual exchange. They are aware that the financial resources they spend on gifts are needed for basic survival. But, they also realize that participation in the feasting provides them with social benefits and preserves their family pride. So, like the elite households, they continue to attend and sponsor feasts.

Although they are invited to fewer feasts and are permitted to give gifts with smaller economic values, the resources poor households expend on gift exchange are more likely to come at the expense of the family's basic nutritional needs. In this regard, young children suffer more than their parents because they are rarely included in the festivities and only receive a handful of candies and peanuts that their mother brings home. And, when poor households need to sponsor their own feast, the gifts they receive are less likely to meet the costs of the feast. As a result, poor households are forced to rely on their relatives to come up with the necessary financial resources. These debts serve to further relations of inequality in the village.

In conclusion, my research shows that it is impossible to understand how rural Kazakhs are responding to economic change without considering the role of gift exchange and feasting. Rural Kazakhs are adapting to the economic "transition" in a distinctive way, simultaneously incorporating the principles of a market economy, perpetuating the significance of gift exchange and feasting, and strengthening the role of tight household networks. Kazakhs accrue several advantages from feasting and gift exchange. Since these activities help Kazakhs develop strong household networks, they are an important part of a household's survival strategy. In the post-Soviet period, those who can afford to exchange more gifts seem to be faring better than others.

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