

Household networks and the security of mutual indebtedness in rural Kazakhstan*

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In theory, the Soviet system was supposed to provide a relatively equitable means for distributing material goods and services. In practice, however, the state failed to provide an adequate supply of consumer goods or an impartial rendering of services. In response to these shortcomings, Soviet citizens were forced to rely on extensive social networks to gain access to certain goods and services. They frequently used personal connections 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.¹

In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, the scope and practice of social networking is changing, as the state makes the 'transition' from a command-administrative economy to a market-oriented economy. On the one hand, social networks are no longer crucial for obtaining certain goods and services. The development of transnational commerce and the privatization of certain sectors have increased the availability of various consumer goods (including clothing, electronics, and automobiles) and the access to some services (housing, in particular). On the other hand, social networks are still vital for daily survival and social mobility in the post-Soviet economy. The disposable income of the average household has decreased dramatically with the liberalization of prices, the growth of unemployment and the deflation of state salaries and pensions. The majority of households simply cannot afford to buy the goods and services which are now available. Meanwhile, certain goods (such as benzine and gas) and services (such as day care) are becoming less accessible, while other services (such as higher

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education and quality health care) are still obtained largely through personal connections.

This article examines the ways in which rural Kazaks use household networks for daily survival and social mobility in the post-Soviet period. While studies of household survival strategies often focus on sources of income and the production of food, I argue that productive activities are just one part of a more comprehensive household strategy. In post-Soviet Kazakstan, where access to certain goods and services often requires personal connections, household networking activities are equally important for daily survival and often contribute towards productive activities. To understand the context of this argument, it is necessary first to describe the research setting and to define the parameters of Kazak households and household networks. Then I briefly explore how household networks are created and maintained through the reciprocal exchange of gifts and hospitality. Finally, I examine several ways in which household networks are manipulated daily in order to obtain services, information and cash.

The research setting

Anthropological field research provides a valuable tool for understanding how rural Kazaks are actually experiencing social and economic change. In 1994 and 1995, I lived with a rural Kazak family for 13 months while conducting research for my doctoral dissertation. Situated in the northern half of Southern-Kazakstan oblast near the banks of the Syr Darya River, the village is the administrative centre of a dry steppe region which specializes in the production of Astrakhan sheep (*qarakol qoi*). As a regional centre, the village is relatively large in terms of population and fairly diverse in terms of tribal lineages.² While several dozen different Kazak lineages are represented in the village, 95 per cent of the 8,200 residents are Kazak.³

During the course of my research, I conducted interviews with over 100 rural families. The people I spoke to had a variety of occupations: a large number worked for one of the region's state farms—as shepherds, farmers, tractor drivers and farm administrators; some worked for the regional administration—as accountants, economists, archivists; some provided state services—as teachers, day care workers, librarians, doctors and judges; and finally, some did not work for the state at all—the merchants, the private farmers and the unemployed.

For decades, the Kazaks living in this village have pursued a complex strategy: the majority of households have combined the wages of at least one state employee with the domestic production of vegetables and livestock. In the post-Soviet period, state salaries have become insufficient and unreliable and households have been forced to expand and diversify their survival strategies. Many have turned to alternative sources of income, such as speculative trade, private farming, private herding or handicraft production. Simultaneously, most households have increased the production of food for domestic consumption. In particular, households with adequate sources of water have been cultivating larger portions of their 'garden plots'.⁴ And households which can no longer

afford to buy bread after the subsidized prices were liberated have been baking their own bread. Despite these efforts to reduce expenses, some of the poorest households in the village have been forced to sell their livestock for cash. As a result, these households have lost an important source of meat and dairy products.⁵ In addition to pursuing these productive and consumptive strategies, Kazak households have been occupied with various networking activities which contribute to their overall well-being.

Households, household networks and household strategies

In order to understand the dynamics of household networks in rural Kazakstan, it is necessary to define the boundaries of households and the social foundations of household networks. Although household membership by definition is based on residence, cross-cultural studies of households suggest that the boundaries between households are not always easy to define.⁶ Household membership may change frequently,⁷ and the physical boundaries of the household may not correspond to the basic units of production, distribution, consumption and reproduction.⁸

In rural Kazakstan, the household is a salient unit. Everybody I interviewed lived in a household with at least one other person, with most households containing two or three generations of kin. In one village, for example, the 1990 village council survey (of 186 households) documented 76.3 per cent nuclear family households, 19.4 per cent extended family households, and 1.6 per cent joint family households.⁹ The perception of distinct household units is reinforced by Soviet (and post-Soviet) administrative procedures, such as the annual household surveys conducted by the village council, and by the Kazak language, which contains several different words for the household (*ui-ishi*, *zhanuiya*, *otbasy*, *shangyraq*, and *aulet*).¹⁰

Although Kazaks themselves view the household as an important social and economic unit, it is difficult to define the analytical boundaries of the Kazak household for two reasons. First, rural Kazaks, especially children and young adults (both married and unmarried), often live with their relatives for weeks, months or even years. For example, during the year and a half that I lived with one village family, there were five permanent household members and eight temporary residents (other than myself) who lived there for varying lengths of time. All of the temporary residents were relatives as opposed to guests, and thus (with the exception of two infants) they were expected to contribute something towards household production during their stay.¹¹ They had different reasons for staying in this household. Murat, the nephew of the household head, lived with the family during his last year of high school. This living situation helped Murat's widowed mother provide more for her younger children and helped his uncle take care of his livestock. Another nephew, Aidos, hoped to migrate with his family from their small village to the central administrative village. Since his uncle lived in the larger village, it was natural that Aidos and his family chose

to live with his uncle's family for several weeks while he searched for employment. During this period of time, his wife helped out with the housework.

Second, the Kazak household, defined in terms of residency, is *not* always the basic unit of production, distribution, consumption and reproduction. Sometimes, parent and child households or the households of two or more brothers perform some of these functions collectively. For example, sons who have established their own household may contribute part of their income to their parents' household. Parenting, or the social reproduction of children, is another activity which does not always correspond with household boundaries. According to Kazak custom, a couple's first child (whether a boy or a girl) should be presented as a gift to the father's parents. In addition to being a strong statement of filial respect, this custom corresponds to a cultural preference for having children in every household. It also gives the young couple more freedom in their first years of marriage.

Some families still follow the custom of child fostering. Actual practice usually depends on whether or not the younger couple are willing to give up their child and whether or not the boy's parents are willing to take on the added responsibility.¹² Children raised by grandparents are always aware of their biological parents' identity, but they are expected to address them as 'sister' (*apzhe*) and 'brother' (*aghai*). They always retain strong ties with their biological parents and often switch households when they get a little older or when one or both grandparents die. One 17-year-old girl, for example, was raised primarily by her grandparents although she frequently met with her parents who lived in a nearby village. When she was 13, her cherished grandmother died and she went to live with her birth parents and younger siblings. She had a difficult time adjusting to the new situation because she was no longer the youngest, indulged child (*erke*). Instead, she was expected to be more responsible and to set a good example for her younger brother and sister.

Even when some activities, such as income pooling and child fostering, blur the boundaries between related households, there are other activities which do correspond to household boundaries. One house I encountered clearly illustrates this point. The house is now occupied by the descendants of Baidabek, a deceased patriarch who once lived there with his two wives and their children.¹³ When Baidabek was still alive, the two wives managed two separate households in different halves of the same duplex-style home. Unlike the typical Kazak home which has a single door, this unique house had two entrances, two indoor (winter) kitchens and separate living areas. When I met the family, only one of the two wives was still alive and the house was still occupied by two separate households, headed by two of Baidabek's grown sons. There were 12 individuals in one half of the house and nine individuals in the other half. Although the two households shared a common courtyard, a garage and a summer kitchen, they maintained separate gardens and livestock pens and they prepared and consumed meals separately on a daily basis.¹⁴ Thus, on a daily basis, the production, preparation and consumption of food tend to reflect and reinforce household boundaries.

Social networking is another activity which clearly illustrates the boundaries between households. In rural Kazakstan, social networks entail a web of social relationships based on one or more of the following criteria: kin relations, tribal affiliations, marriage alliances, geographical proximity, shared schooling, shared workplace, and friendship. Kazaks maintain these networks by granting personal favours, presenting gifts, hosting dinner parties and feasts, and supplying voluntary labour.¹⁵ Although individual household members may perform some of these activities, their actions benefit the entire household. In other words, Kazaks consider the balance of favours and gifts between households, not individuals. For example, if a female guest presents a gift to the groom's mother at a wedding feast, it is understood that the gift is an exchange from one household to another household.

Theories of social exchange provide models for understanding the reciprocal exchange of gifts, favours and hospitality.¹⁶ According to these theories, the recipient is morally obligated to make a fair return to his or her benefactor, but the nature and the terms of this return are not agreed upon in advance. In a study of urban women in Turkey, Jenny White argues that: '[I]abor and services are given not in expectation of return, but rather in expectation of indebtedness.'¹⁷ In other words, social relations based on indebtedness provide a form of insurance for individuals and households. This line of argument effectively explains why rural Kazaks put so much time and energy into their networks. My Kazak 'mother', for example, frequently told me with great pride that she and her husband have a large number of acquaintances in the region. As I watched her over the months, I realized that this was not a trivial comment, as I had first assumed. Rather, the maintenance of their network of acquaintances is her primary occupation. The job description for this 'occupation' includes the following activities: regularly attending dinner parties and feasts, making sure that appropriate gifts are presented for various occasions, responding to various invitations to help out with household or feast labour, and taking part in informal social delegations. Although Kazak women typically perform more of this 'household service work', Kazak men also engage in household networking activities by providing some feast labour, attending feasts and dinner parties and participating in informal social delegations.¹⁸ By performing these activities, both men and women actively perpetuate relations of mutual indebtedness with other households in their network.

The term 'household networking strategy' refers to the different ways household members create and use social networks to their advantage. Unfortunately, the general term 'household strategy' has several limitations. Feminist scholars, for example, correctly point out that it is wrong to assume that any aspect of a household strategy is based on the consensus of all household members.¹⁹ Individuals are social actors, but households are not. Individuals within a particular household are likely to have conflicting self-interests. For example, a married woman may want to maintain a strong tie with *her* natal household, while her husband may prefer to 'invest' their household resources differently. It is also wrong to assume that a household network equals the sum total of all

household members' social bonds. Some but not all of these social bonds overlap. In reality, a social bond established by one household member may or may not be at the disposal of other household members.

Finally, the concept of a 'household networking strategy' also erroneously implies calculated behaviour. On the one hand, I am convinced that household members are *sometimes* conscious of their attempts to pursue and manipulate certain links within their household network for instrumental gain. Occasionally, I did hear people explicitly state what they intended to get in exchange for a specific favour or gift. But, on the other hand, I do not imagine that any household member would be able to sketch out a comprehensive 'household networking strategy' which specified exactly what they expected to receive from whom. In fact, many network links are maintained primarily on the basis of friendship or kinship. In order to avoid the impossible task of classifying social relationships as 'friendship-motivated' or 'interest-motivated', I define the term 'household networking strategy' broadly as any intentional *or* unintentional actions which serve to extend and maintain social relationships, as well as the deliberate manipulation of these social bonds. The following two sections of this article examine the various ways that Kazaks create and maintain their household networks and the ways in which they manipulate these networks in the post-Soviet context.

Maintaining networks

Through the reciprocal exchange of hospitality and gifts

One of the primary ways that rural Kazaks maintain (and extend) their household networks is through the constant exchange of hospitality and gifts with other households. Kazaks take great pride in their hospitality. One elderly man loved to tell me how the Kazak nomads of the past would routinely open their homes to strangers who were passing by. Not only would they provide the guest with a place to stay, but they would also slaughter a sheep in his honour. Although the nomadic Kazaks were settled during collectivization and many traditions have been abandoned, this custom, he insists, has continued to the present: 'Maybe in Almaty or in Shymkent there are some Kazaks who do not know better. But here Kazaks always invite strangers into their homes, and if they can afford it, they will slaughter a sheep as well. How does this compare to your customs in America? What would happen if I flew to New York and knocked on a stranger's door?' His words were very truthful. Families do arrange formal dinner parties in order to entertain a first-time guest. And, for this occasion, they will slaughter a sheep and present the head to the guest of honour, if they have the financial means to do so. Hospitality is also exchanged on a daily basis when Kazaks invite their neighbours and kin into their homes for tea. These invitations are extended equally to men and women, as they pass by on the street or drop by for an errand. Depending on the time of day, such invitations may turn into an informal invitation for lunch or dinner.

Periodically, each household will also invite a large number of guests to their home for special occasions. A large feast (*toi*), for example, is generally held to celebrate an elder son's wedding or a younger son's circumcision. At these events, a household typically invites their entire social network, the size of which may range from 200 to 800 individuals. These joyous feasts, which are organized during the summer and fall, go on for several hours as guests are fed a number of traditional dishes and entertained with music and dancing. Smaller but substantial feasts are also held for a child's birth, adult birthdays, and housewarmings. In addition to these festive occasions, large numbers of guests are received in homes for religious observances, such as the daily breaking of the fast (*auyz ashar*) during the month of Ramadan, and solemn occasions, such as funerals and memorials. Whether the occasion is a small dinner party, a large celebratory feast, or a more solemn occasion, the Kazaks always prepare large quantities of food for their guests. In rural Kazakstan, all of these acts of hospitality form the basis for other forms of reciprocal exchange.

Life-cycle feasts, in particular, also provide opportunities for household members to exchange gifts, thus further reinforcing existing ties to other households. Besides attending the feast and presenting a toast in honour of the occasion, guests are expected to present a gift to the host household. Standard gifts include clothing, material, woven rugs, felt rugs, livestock, jewellery, electronic goods, and cash. The value of the gift varies depending on the socioeconomic status of the household and the relationship between the two households. The exchange of gifts symbolizes the social relationship between guest and host households.²⁰ In most cases, the two households have previously exchanged gifts on other occasions. By presenting a gift, the guest household confirms that its members wish to maintain a relationship with the members of the host household.

Through the reciprocal exchange of labour and social services

Household networks are also maintained when household members donate their labour and time to other households. Rural Kazaks frequently invite their kin and neighbours to help them with daily tasks or special occasions. Life-cycle feasts provide an opportunity for both men and women to donate their labour to another household. A large feast takes several weeks of planning and several days of intensive preparation. Dozens of volunteers are needed to set up the tables, to prepare a large variety of food, to serve the food, and finally to clean up. These volunteers are recruited from several different social groups. Households which belong to the same tribal lineage as the host household perform the bulk of the work, although neighbours, co-workers and classmates also donate their time.²¹

Labour contributions vary by gender, age and social status. The men's responsibilities include building the feast tent, setting up the large cooking kettles, slaughtering and butchering the livestock, and cooking barbecued shish-kebabs (*shashlyq*). Men also help the women arrange the tables and help them

serve food and alcohol during the feast. Younger men and boys might help with some of the food preparation by chopping carrots or cooking fried dough. The women, especially those who have married into the tribal lineage (collectively referred to as *abysyn-azhyn*), are responsible for the more time-consuming tasks of food preparation. For a typical feast, the women are responsible for baking bread, rolls and cakes, preparing fried dough and meat-filled pastries, making salads and appetizers (such as fried fish, horsemeat sausages and boiled chicken), and cooking several main courses (such as soup, pilaf, steamed dumplings (*manti*) and boiled dumplings (*pelmeni*)). It is implicitly understood that these labour contributions will be repaid in one form or another.

There are many other opportunities for the members of one household to provide labour for another household. Women and children in particular are invited to help other households on a regular basis. My host family, for example, experienced a shortage of female labour after their only daughter married and left the household. To compensate for this loss, the 40-year-old mother routinely invited young female neighbours and kin over to her house to help with the housework. For example, when she was preoccupied with certain tasks (such as preparing her daughter's dowry), she would invite two of her sister's teenage daughters over to the house for a few days. While Gulazhar was busy doing other things, her nieces would cook meals for the family, do the laundry, wash the floors and dust the furniture. Gulazhar also invited one of her neighbour's seven daughters over to help with almost every dinner party. On these occasions, 16-year old Klara would typically be responsible for cooking fried dough, preparing a salad and cleaning the dishes. Although Klara might be busy with these tasks until well after midnight, she would always return to her own home after the party was over.

Although these girls did not expect to receive any direct payment for their labour, their households did receive indirect benefits. For example, Gulazhar's husband travelled to Shymkent one day and used his connections to get one of her nieces into a university. And, when two of Klara's elder sisters married, Gulazhar provided generous gifts for their dowries and weddings and her husband spent two full days attending one of the weddings in a distant region. During these events, Gulazhar pointed out that they would do even more for Klara's eventual marriage.

While the labour of unmarried girls is borrowed by kin and relatives for daily housework, the labour of married women is more likely to be used for unusual tasks and for special occasions. For example, when Gulazhar's daughter got married, she needed to prepare a dowry, which includes several home-made mattresses (*korpeshe*) and comforters (*korpe*). Since she did not know how to sew very well, she relied on the help of her relatives and friends. She invited one neighbour, one co-worker and her four sisters-in-law. A few days before the wedding, these six women spent three entire days cutting, sewing and stuffing 10 comforters, five mattresses and four pillows. While they worked, they exchanged stories of upcoming weddings and shopping bargains. Gulazhar

supervised their work and made sure that they were served several hot meals and plenty of tea.

Gulazhar did not explicitly state how she would repay these women, but they all knew that they could rely on her help in the future. Since her household was relatively well off and relatively well-connected, Gulazhar tended to repay such acts of labour with generous gifts presented at culturally appropriate moments. This strategy, however, affected her reputation within the community. Because she relied so heavily on others' labour and she rarely helped others with their labour needs, Gulazhar was often criticized for being lazy and self-interested. Although she admitted that she was lazy when it came to certain tasks, she would repeatedly defend her actions by pointing out the various ways that she and her husband did help these households. In my opinion, she could afford to be like this largely because her household had the means to repay these acts of labour with material gifts and personal favours.

Kazak boys also play a contributing role in the maintenance of household networks. In particular, they herd privately-owned sheep on a rotating basis for a small informal association of households. Each 'sheep shift' (*koi kesek*) involves an informal alliance of 20 to 30 neighbouring households. Over 80 per cent of the households in the village keep privately-owned livestock. At night, the animals are kept in pens and shelters within each household compound, with the exception of some horses and camels which are kept, tethered or free, on distant pastures in order to save the expense of buying grain or barley. During the day, some of the privately-owned livestock are literally set loose on the streets to graze, while others are herded in specific pastures by herders. While a household must pay a herder a monthly fee per cow for cow-herding, they do not pay for sheep-herding services. Instead, they join an informal sheep-herding alliance. On a rotating schedule, each household takes a one day turn or shift where they are responsible for herding the entire group's sheep. This task is generally performed by adolescent and teenage schoolboys, who herd the sheep on foot or on horseback.

There is yet another way that households can maintain (and extend) their social networks. The members of one household may help another household by participating in an informal social delegation. There are a number of occasions when a household needs to organize a small informal delegation. For example, after a woman gives birth to her first baby, the paternal grandmother invites several dozen women to a cradle feast (*besik toi*). The maternal grandmother is expected to bring the cradle (*besik*), in addition to an array of clothing, furniture and toys for the newborn infant. Several weeks before, she creates an informal social delegation of three to four women who help her 'carry' the cradle. Although her other female friends may attend the feast and present a small gift, each of the women in the delegation is responsible for providing one large item, such as a tricycle or a stroller. In order to strengthen the reputation of her household, the maternal grandmother will try to select women who can afford expensive and prestigious gifts. By helping to 'carry' the cradle, these women provide a great service that must be repaid in the future.

Most of the other informal social delegations revolve around marriage practices. For example, in order to 'arrange' a marriage, the groom's household must organize a small social delegation to visit the bride's household. During this dinner party, the groom's parents ask the bride's parents if they will permit the marriage of their daughter. If the bride's parents accept the offer, then the couple are officially betrothed and the parents move on to discuss the wedding arrangements. In many cases, the bride and groom have selected each other and this visit is a mere formality.

Not all marriages in this region, however, can be defined as 'arranged marriages' (*quda tusu*). In fact, over half of the marriages in the village are formed when the groom 'kidnaps' the bride.²² Some of these 'kidnapped' brides are co-conspirators in their kidnapping, while others are truly kidnapped against their will. The 'kidnapped' brides who help plot their own kidnapping do so for a variety of reasons. For example, they may want to speed up the marriage process, they may want to marry against their parent's wishes, or they may want to stifle gossip about a premarital pregnancy.

Immediately after a bride is 'kidnapped', the groom's parents must dispatch an informal social delegation of three or four individuals (excluding themselves) to the bride's family to explain what has happened to their daughter and to deliver a cash apology (*keshiru*). This particular social delegation can be quite dangerous, as the bride's parents may be very angry to hear the news. As soon as the bride's parents learn of her whereabouts, they must then quickly organize a second informal social delegation (excluding themselves) to spend the first night with the bride at the groom's house.

Both types of marriage are generally followed by at least one wedding feast and two in-law parties (*qudalyq*). Both the bride's family and the groom's family are expected to sponsor an in-law party. For each party, the guest household is expected to arrive with an informal social delegation of eight or nine individuals (both male and female). During the party, the host household uses the opportunity to introduce their new in-laws (and their social delegation) to the core members within their social network. The in-law party goes on for nearly 24 hours as the guests are treated to three to four separate dinner parties, sponsored by the host household and several key members within their social network.

Although participation in these informal social delegations demands time and, in some cases, material resources, this is an important networking activity. Individuals who provide these social services can expect to receive similar help in the future. In addition, they have the opportunity to extend their own household networks by meeting people whom they have never met before. The people they encounter while participating in an informal social delegation may have access to coveted information, goods or services.

So far, I have focused on the ways in which household networks are maintained through the reciprocal exchange of hospitality, gifts, labour and social services. This, however, is only a partial account of how household networks are used in the daily lives of rural Kazaks. It is also necessary to consider the ways in which household networks contribute to daily survival and

social mobility. The next section examines the way that households manipulate their networks for these purposes.

Manipulating networks for daily survival and social mobility

Social networks are manipulated on a daily basis for a variety of purposes. Households that are able to cultivate an extensive network based on strong reciprocal bonds are invariably better off. As in the Soviet past, access to certain goods and services requires personal connections and the knowledge of how to use these connections. Regarding daily survival, social networks are important for gaining access to high quality medical care. In principle, the village hospital treats all patients on an equal basis, and it would be impossible to argue that the village doctors are unwilling to treat a patient simply because he/she did not present a gift to the doctor. However, it is possible to argue that those who have strong social ties with the hospital employees and/or present some kind of gift to their doctor receive more attention. For example, after one woman gave birth to her first child, her mother prepared a large kettle of rice pilaf and had this small feast delivered to the hospital for the doctors and nurses in the gynaecological wing. Although many of these medical workers were already giving her daughter special attention because they were friends of the family, this feast was a way to guarantee that this special coverage would continue for the next few days until her daughter was released. In this regard, the situation parallels the situation in the United States where those individuals with medical insurance reputedly receive better and prompter care than those without.

Network ties to medical workers can be manipulated in other ways as well. Doctor's excuses, for example, are useful for receiving a paid sick day or for getting out of compulsory military service. I met one young man, for example, who spent a few days every year in a hospital in order to get a doctor's slip that would exempt him from military service. His family's connection was willing to sign the form, but only if he was physically in the hospital for a certain number of days. Quality medical care also depends on having acquaintances who have access to medicine and medical supplies. If certain medical supplies or medicines are in short supply, those who have strong ties with the local pharmacists will have a greater chance of receiving these items.

Regarding social mobility, households need personal connections in order to get their children into institutes of higher education and to secure employment. Here I will focus only on how networks are used to get children into institutes and universities. Although some people claim that this practice is common throughout Kazakstan, the universities and institutes in Southern-Kazakstan oblast have a particularly bad reputation for accepting bribes. Some villagers defiantly told me that their own child did not 'need' connections in order to get into the university because they scored highly on the entrance exam. Other parents were more willing to admit that high scores were not a certain guarantee that their child would get into the university. The village parents defensively added that students from rural regions routinely performed lower on these exams

than students from urban areas. In their opinion, it was necessary to have direct or indirect connections to a university administrator who accepts bribes in exchange for admission slots. By using these connections, they felt comfortable that they were decreasing the risk involved in the admissions process. Those who did not have direct acquaintances with university administrators would rely on individuals within their network who did have such connections. These middlemen were also provided with a 'gift', such as a sheep, for this service. Ironically, a family's connections played a primary role in determining which university a child would attend and which specialty they would pursue. One high school student could barely understand why I asked her what she *wanted* to study at the university. Her parents had connections with the medical school in Almaty and therefore she would study medicine.

Transportation is another service that is important in the post-Soviet period. The village is serviced daily by several buses travelling to Shymkent or Turkestan. I heard a number of people complain about the increased cost of public transportation, as well as the increased cost of benzine for those who were fortunate enough to own their own car. Villagers also mentioned that they were less likely to visit kin and friends who lived far away. At the same time that many people are becoming less mobile because of the costs, some villagers are becoming more mobile because of the opportunities. In order to cope with the high rates of inflation, the delays in government paychecks 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.

The new class of merchants is difficult to characterize. In Almaty, they range from the pensioners who sell cigarettes and alcohol on the street corner to the debonair young businessmen who drive expensive foreign cars and manage several private shops. In the village, the merchants vary in the following regards: how far they travel to buy their goods (in foreign cities, at wholesale bazaars, in the regular bazaars of nearby cities, or from a personal acquaintance); where they sell their goods (at home, in the bazaar, in their own private shop); and the volume of their trade. Although the village merchants are fairly diverse as a group, they all require transportation to move their goods from one market to the next. While village merchants compensate for these costs by charging slightly more, it is difficult for merchants who are operating on a small volume to make a profit after factoring in the cost of transportation. One way that some merchants can cut costs is to manipulate personal ties with transportation workers. One merchant, for example, was able to travel freely on a public bus operated by one of his kinsmen.

The new class of merchants also rely on their household network to provide them with information about prices in different markets. It was not uncommon to be at a wedding or an in-law party and hear a long conversation about the prices for various goods in distant cities. Such information was crucial for merchants to make informed decisions about their business.

In addition to gaining access to certain services, social networks are used to

obtain cash. In the post-Soviet period, state salaries are not keeping up with inflation and are rarely if ever paid on time. Villagers are barely able to make ends meet. Very few people choose to take loans from the new commercial banks, because the interest rates can be as high as 150%. Fortunately, it is socially acceptable for friends and neighbours to ask each other for small short-term loans. Many of these loans are requested for social emergencies. When a household is making preparations to sponsor a life-cycle feast, it is almost inevitable that loans will be needed. In 1994, the food, alcohol and other expenses for a modest feast cost about 50,000 *tengge* (approximately US\$800). Virtually none of the households in the village have that much cash on hand. However, it is a known fact that the gifts which are received during a feast pay for most of the feast expenses. Therefore, people are willing to lend money to their kin and neighbours for feast expenses.

Women may also borrow money to pay for their daughter's dowry or to pay the bridewealth for their son's bride. One day, for example, I watched a middle-aged woman go door to door collecting small sums of money for a bridewealth payment. Those who loan money write down records of each loan on a piece of paper. If they themselves are in a financial bind, they may place pressure on the other party to repay the loan as quickly as possible. Sometimes, the debtor may take an additional loan simply to repay the original loan. Loans which are not repaid shortly after this initial request can cause considerable strains on a social relationship.

There is another way for Kazak households to obtain cash from each other which is less likely to damage personal relationships. In the anthropological literature, this method, which has been observed in various forms in Africa, Asia and Latin America, is referred to as a rotating savings and credit association.²³ People have developed this practice in a variety of situations: when they do not have access to banks, when people do not have enough money to put into a bank, or when they cannot afford the banks' high interest loans. In rural Kazakstan, these informal institutions work in the following manner. A fixed number of households (about 10–12) agree to participate in the association. Some groups only allow female participants, while others invite married couples to participate. The groups might form on the basis of kinship or some other criteria. Every month, one of the households sponsors a dinner party which is attended by all of the other participants. Each guest is expected to bring a specified amount of cash (varying from US\$10–20). The amount varies from group to group, but each member is expected to contribute the same amount.

The total sum received covers the expenses for the dinner and theoretically provides enough money for the hostess or hosting couple to buy something special for themselves. Most participants have specific items which they are saving for. In one group, for example, each married couple was planning to buy an imported acrylic rug. In the post-Soviet period, these imported rugs, usually from Pakistan or Belgium, have become prestige items. In other groups, each female participant was saving for something different, including a fur coat, a television and a couch. Throughout the dinner party, the participants all 'wash'

(*zhuu*) the eventual purchase by consuming several bottles of alcohol. It is important to note that rural Kazaks rarely buy consumer goods for their own personal enjoyment. Most household income is spent on basic survival, the entertainment of guests, and gift exchange. By participating in these savings associations, they are able to save money to purchase expensive items without appearing to be frivolous.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates the various ways in which Kazak households maintain and manipulate their household networks in the post-Soviet period. Household networks are maintained through the reciprocal exchange of hospitality, gifts, labour and social services. These networking activities involve large investments of time and labour. By pursuing these activities, Kazak households are able to create strong ties with other households. These ties involve relations of mutual indebtedness, where each party is obligated to help the other party in times of need. In this way, household networking provides an effective means of social insurance during a time when the future is very uncertain. In addition, household networks are necessary for obtaining certain services, such as higher education and quality health care. Finally, household networks can be invaluable for obtaining cash in an economy where interest rates are extremely high.

Notes and references

1. The journalist Hedrick Smith provides numerous accounts of the ways in which Russians 'pull strings' (or use '*blat*') on a daily basis. Smith, *The Russians* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976).
2. The word 'tribe' here refers to a higher level of organization (i.e. Qonghyrat, Dulat) than 'tribal lineage' (i.e. the Sanghyl and Manghytai lineages of the Qonghyrat tribe). It is important to point out that Kazaks refer to both levels of organization as *ru*, while many Western scholars call them 'clans'. In a survey I conducted of 100 households, 30 different tribal lineages were represented. A great deal of the lineage diversity can be explained by the fact that some women have married 'into' the village from outlying areas where different tribes and tribal lineages predominate. Lineage diversity among men is not nearly as strong. The vast majority of men (and their daughters) belong to various lineages of the Qonghyrat tribe of the Middle Horde. Others belong to the lineages of the Arghyn, Qypshaq, Naiman and Dulat tribes.
3. Russians, Uzbeks and Tatars also live in the village.
4. It is important to distinguish 'private plots' (or 'garden plots') from 'private farms'. During the Soviet period, rural families were able to receive private plots (usually 0.15 or 0.20 hectares) where they could build private houses, keep private livestock, and if there was sufficient water, grow fruit and vegetables. In one nearby village, for example, 178 of 222 households had such private plots. Beginning in 1988, the government began to grant larger plots of land (about 5 to 10 hectares) to a new class of 'private farmers' or 'peasants'. The exact amount of land received depends on the type of land requested (residential, agricultural or pasture) and the number of household members. In Kazakhstan, the term 'private farmer' is applied equally to those who grow crops and those who herd livestock.
5. Between 1989 and 1994, the number of households without any livestock increased from 12.7 per cent to 17.3 per cent. In the beginning of 1994, the average household had 8.73 privately-owned sheep and goats, 1.45 cows, 0.33 horses, 0.03 camels, and 5.82 chickens.
6. Robert McC. Netting, Richard R. Wilk, and Eric J. Arnould (eds), *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
7. In some West African societies, for example, high divorce rates and child-fostering practices cause household membership to be so fluid that the household as a unit of analysis provides more complications than advantages. See Jane Guyer, 'Household and Community in African Studies', *African Studies Review*, Vol 24, No 2/3, 1981, pp 87-137.

8. In some cases, family members live together in a household, but they do not act together as a collective unit. In other cases, the household is part of a larger economic collective—the inter-household network. For example, see Carol Stack, *All Our Kin Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); and Rhoda Halperin, *The Livelihood of Kin: Making Ends Meet 'The Kentucky Way'* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). Mary Weismantel, moreover, argues that the overlap between residence and function changes over time in the Columbian Andes, where the boundary between parent and child households emerges and develops gradually. Mary Weismantel, 'Making Breakfast and Raising Babies: The Zumbagua Household as Constituted Process' in Richard Wilk, ed., *The Household Economy: Reconsidering the Domestic Mode of Production* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), pp 55–72.
9. The annual household surveys include records of the age, education level and occupation of all household members; the number of privately-owned livestock; the amount of land belonging to the household; and the number of rooms in the house. These records also indicate the birth of new household members and the departure of older household members through marriage or migration. In labelling the households, I use the term extended family household to refer to households where more than one conjugal pair of different generations (i.e. parents and their married child) live together and the term joint family household to refer to households where more than one conjugal pair of the same generation (i.e. two married brothers, their wives and children) live together. Households where a single (typically widowed) grandparent was living with a nuclear family were classified as a nuclear family households.
10. Although anthropologists distinguish between the kin-based 'family' and the residence-based 'household', Kazaks often use these terms interchangeably for both the household and the family. In my dissertation, I elaborate on the different connotations and contexts of each Kazak term. See Werner, *Household Networks, Ritual Exchange and Economic Change in Rural Kazakstan* (Indiana University, PhD dissertation, 1997).
11. In the villages of Southern-Kazakstan oblast, young children are expected to help with household production by the time they reach the age of five or six. At this age, young girls in particular learn to serve tea, to clear tables and to keep an eye on sleeping infants. As they grow older, young boys are taught to care for the livestock and work in the gardens, while their sisters learn to clean the house, wash clothes, prepare meals, milk cows, and work in the gardens. When youngsters stay with their relatives, they are expected to perform the same tasks that they typically do at home.
12. One young couple was determined to raise their own child even though the paternal grandparents insisted that the baby belonged to them. After several weeks of tension, relatives and neighbours helped convince the older couple that the younger couple should be allowed to keep their baby. Not all grandparents, however, want this responsibility. Grandparents who have already received a grandchild from another son are generally less interested in taking on another.
13. Regarding polygyny, Kazak customary law corresponded to Islamic law, permitting a Kazak man to have up to four wives, as long as he was able to provide equally for each. This practice was banned by the Soviet government in the 1920s with a series of other 'patriarchal-feudal' customs. For the most part, this practice has been abandoned. Although I heard people talk about several polygynous marriages which were formed in the pre-Soviet and early Soviet period, I only met one elderly, rural man who had two wives.
14. It is important to note that some of the activities associated with livestock production, such as the daily herding of sheep (described below), involve inter-household cooperation.
15. This is very similar to social networking practices (*guanxi*) described in several recent ethnographies of China. See Mayfair Yang, *Gifts, Favours and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Yunxiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); and Andrew Kipnis, *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self and Subculture in a North China Village* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
16. See, for example, Peter Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (New York: Wiley, 1964); and Anthony Heath, *Rational Choice and Social Exchange: A Critique of Exchange Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
17. Jenny White, *Money Makes Us Relatives: Women's Labor in Urban Turkey* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).
18. I borrow the term 'household service work' from Ursula Sharma's study of social networking in India. Sharma, *Women's Work, Class and the Urban Household: A Study of Shimla, North India* (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1986).
19. See, for example, Diane Lauren Wolf, *Factory Daughters: Gender, Household Dynamics and Rural Industrialization in Java* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp 12–23.
20. The logic behind gift exchange is elaborated in the classic work by Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W.W. Horton, 1990).
21. While there are a number of people in the position to help, there is one important social group which

CYNTHIA WERNER

cannot be recruited for help. A household's in-laws (*qudalar*), including more distant in-laws, are invited to attend all feasts (and funerals) as honoured guests.

22. Elsewhere I have described contemporary marriage practices in more detail. See Cynthia Werner, 'Marriage, markets, and merchants: changes in wedding feasts and household consumption patterns in rural Kazakhstan' *Culture and Agriculture*, Vol 19, Nos 1,2, pp 6–13.
23. Shirley Ardener and Sandra Burman (eds), *Money-go-rounds. The Importance of Rotating Savings and Credit Associations for Women* (Washington: Berg Publishers, 1995).