

WOMEN AND THE ART OF HOUSEHOLD NETWORKING IN RURAL KAZAKSTAN

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In early March 1994, I rode in a chauffeur-driven gray Volga for the two hours drive from the city of Shymkent to the village where I would conduct research for a period of thirteen months.¹ I was travelling with a young Kazak woman and her middle-aged mother-in-law who had only recently adopted me as her “American daughter.” Although they both lived in the city, they were returning to the older woman’s native village on a special mission: to prepare for the following evening’s daily breaking of the fast in relation to the Islamic holiday of Id-ul-Fitr. Her husband would be the sponsor of the event and it was her responsibility to supervise the women’s labour and to ensure that everything went smoothly. A secondary concern was to deliver me safely to her sister-in-law’s house where I would live as a “niece” while doing field research on household economies and economic change in rural Kazakstan.

After arriving in the late afternoon, we unloaded the goods that we had taken with us in the car, including several sacks of potatoes and carrots, many bags of candies, dozens of flat breads, and one live sheep. My Kazak “mother,” quickly mobilized a group of women and girls who all worked

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late into the night preparing pastries, salads and main dishes. Oddly enough, none of the volunteers were fasting themselves. They were middle-aged and younger women who claimed that they would not start doing the daily prayers and annual fasting required of Muslims until they reached the age of retirement.

I felt some awkwardness among these women for a variety of reasons. They were very curious about my presence and consequently asked many questions about my life. Their main concern was how my parents could have permitted their sole unmarried daughter to travel alone to Kazakstan. Rural Kazak women tend to marry and have their first child between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two.² I was a few years older and yet unmarried. Since I was having some difficulty understanding their spoken language, my Kazak mother had to become my official spokesperson. She explained how I had become part of her family and how I intended to live in this village and write about Kazak cultural traditions.

Throughout the interrogations, I was the only person in the room who wasn't chopping vegetables or kneading dough. My occasional offers to help were rejected by the women who emphasized that I was an honoured guest and could not be allowed to help. Despite feelings of guilt, I was somewhat relieved because I was not particularly eager to reveal my low level of domestic abilities. Instead, I decided to try out my official role as ethnographer. While sipping tea in front of the working women, I started to scribble notes about the day's events into my fancy notepad.

The day I arrived in the village, the women were preparing a small feast dedicated to the local elders who were fasting. Throughout the year, I watched and sometimes helped these and other women make similar preparations for dozens of other social gatherings, including circumcision feasts (*sundet toi*), wedding festivities and feasts (*qyz uzatu toi*, *betashar*, and *uilenu toi*), matchmaker parties (*qudalyq*), birthday parties, baby showers (*besik toi*), housewarming parties, funerals (*olikti shygaru*) and memorials. Although Kazak men may help with some of the preparations, women and girls do the vast majority of the physical labour involved with feasts.

For a long time, I could not understand why Kazak women went to such great efforts so frequently to pull off such lavish feasts. This was especially difficult to understand because the average standard of living in Kazakstan, like all the former Soviet republics, was dramatically decreasing. During the period of my research, the majority of families rarely had cash on hand for

basic necessities, as the government salaries were several months' delinquent and inflation rates were continually increasing. Nevertheless, they continued to hold and attend large feasts where expensive gifts were exchanged.

This essay explores the crucial role that women play in the dynamics of feasting and ritual exchange in post-Soviet Kazakstan. Ceremonial feasting and ritual exchange have long intrigued anthropologists and they have explained these events from both social and individual perspectives. The Kula exchange among South Pacific Islanders, elaborated by Bronislaw Malinowski in the 1920s, and the Potlatch ceremonies among Northwestern Indian tribes are among the best documented examples of ritual exchange. These cases have been analysed and reinterpreted by successive waves of anthropologists working within various theoretical paradigms (Malinowski 1922 (1961); Mauss 1990; Damon 1993; Rosman and Rubel 1971 (1986), 1978; Leach and Leach 1983).

Descriptions of ritual feasting and gift exchange in Muslim societies are also abundant. Studies of Muslim women (see, for example, Abu-Lughod 1993, Tapper 1978; Dorsky 1986; Doubleday 1988; Dragadze 1994), in particular, contain lengthy accounts of wedding traditions and ritual feasting from women's perspectives. However, only a few studies of ritual in Muslim communities (Marx 1973; McAlister 1990; Werbner 1990) provide thorough analyses of the motives and mechanisms involved in the ritual economy. This is surprising when one considers the large amount of financial and labour resources that are expended on ritual events in many Muslim societies. This essay contributes to this subject by exploring why rural Kazaks seek to invest so much of their time, energy, resources and reputations to feasting. Before turning to the economic aspects of Kazak feasting, the basic elements of a Kazak *toi* are outlined.

BASIC FEATURES OF A KAZAK TOI:

The Kazak *toi* is defined as a feast or banquet in honour of some special event, such as a wedding or a circumcision.³ There are several separate rituals for such important events, but the *toi* is the core ritual where the family's entire network of relatives and friends are invited to celebrate the family's happiness. A marriage, for example, also consists of mutually-hosted parties for the "matchmakers" or "in-laws" (*qudalyqtar*), the "unveiling of the bride" (*betashar*), and the official registration of the marriage. It is in these rituals that the event's uniqueness can be found. In contrast, the content of a *toi*, including the gift exchange, is nearly identical whether the occasion is a circumcision, a wedding, a birthday or a

housewarming. In fact, for economical reasons, it is not uncommon for families to have a combination *toi* that celebrates the circumcision of brothers or cousins or one boy's circumcision and his grandfather's sixtieth birthday. The only exceptional *toi* is the cradle feast (*besik toi*), a *toi* exclusively for women, which cumulates with a series of superstitious rituals to ensure that the *besik* will guarantee the baby with health and happiness.

In rural Kazakhstan, *toilar* are held outside the host family's home in a clear area where special tables can be set up, seating a total of 100 to 800 guests.⁴ Generally, the guest tables are lined up perpendicularly to the far side where the guests of honour sit and the near side where the announcer's table and the musicians' stand are situated. If the event is a wedding, the guests of honour are the bride and groom, the "best man" and the "maid of honour"; the four youths are perched inside the half shell of a yurt, the felt tent which served as the primary form of housing for the nomadic Kazaks. If the event is not a wedding, the head table is often reserved for the most influential guests, such as local government leaders, state farm directors or wealthy relatives.

Each feast demands a great deal of financial resources and preparations. Indeed, the primary cause for delaying a wedding feast is lack of cash. In August 1995, I attended a modest wedding feast that required 50,000 *tenge*, or about 800 dollars, for food, alcohol and other pre-*toi* expenses. Once the family had gathered enough cash, mostly in the form of interest-free loans from friends and relatives, the feast date was set, nearly 200 invitations were hand delivered and the actual preparations began. As they had predicted, most of their expenses, including future expenses on elaborate gifts for the bride's family, were matched by the gifts received during the *toi*.

After attending several feasts, it became easy to discern the socio-economic status of a family by comparing their feast to others. Naturally, there is a competitive nature to both feasting and gift-giving. In accordance with custom, Kazak families take great pride and enhance their status by being more hospitable and more generous than others. Wealthy families, for example, impress their guests with imported candies, expensive prizes, and professional entertainers. Prior to the circumcision feast for the state farm director's only son, the boy's mother travelled all the way to Iran in order to purchase large quantities of candies, decorative serving dishes and valuable gifts. Poor families, on the other hand, are forced to "save" money by inviting fewer guests, providing less expensive appetizers, and serving dishes with less meat.

Although wealthy families may pay "caterers" to do the table arrangements,

to cook *shashlyq* and to serve food, most rural families rely exclusively on the volunteer efforts of their neighbours, classmates and relatives. Organizational meetings are held prior to a feast, during which volunteers are commissioned by the host family to take leadership roles. Throughout the feast, women's labour is crucial, because they do the majority of the food preparation and cleaning. It is not uncommon for working women to miss work and for schoolgirls to skip school in order to prepare for a close relative's feast. During a *toi*, three to five hot dishes are served in addition to a large variety of cold appetizers and pastries. The women are also obliged to prepare and serve meals earlier in the day for the volunteer workers, as well as a large number of elderly guests who choose not to attend the late evening's festivities.

Large feasts are always held on the weekends. They begin in the afternoon or late evening and last anywhere from four to eight hours.⁵ The late summer and early fall is the most popular time for feasts, because the weather is nice, the livestock are fat, and there is a great variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. It is often the case that a wedding feast will be held several months or even a year after the marriage actually took place. Similarly, a circumcision feast is held at least a month after the child is circumcised.

Before the guests arrive, the tables are garnished with the a variety of cold foods, including bread, pastries, chicken, fish, horsemeat sausage (*qaxy*), fruit, salads, nuts and candies. After the guests appear in large masses, the announcer (*tamada*) directs them to specific tables, as defined by their relationship to the host. Unlike Uzbek feasts, men and women sit together at the guest tables. As soon as the guests are seated, they are served tea and may begin nibbling on the assorted appetizers. Shortly afterwards, the first of several hot dishes is presented.

At this time, the feast activities officially begin. At weddings, the first event is the formal entrance of the bride and groom, who are slowly led through the aisles and eventually to their table by a couple of dancers who are moving to a fast-paced wedding song (*zhar-zhar*). At circumcision feasts, the young boy is similarly paraded through the guest tables while mounted on a horse or young camel. The feasts continue with a small prayer by an elderly person, either the family's grandparent or a local Mullah. After these events, the announcer armed with a microphone begins to invite the guests individually or in small groups up to the front area. Over the course of several hours, each and every guest is called in order of importance from a list prepared earlier by the host. As the guests approach the front table, the

announcer jokes and teases them and then persuades them to say a few words in honour of the occasion. Since most of the speeches are repetitive, the general audience does not listen attentively. Instead, most tables maintain their own rounds of toasting complete with alcohol consumption.

The audience does, however, show a little more interest in the gifts that are usually presented during the speeches. Gifts may be given either upon arrival or later during an invited toast. The method of presentation depends on the type of event, and more importantly, the type of gift. There are a wide variety of *toi* gifts, including cash, livestock, carpets, felt rugs, clothing, material, electronic goods, gold jewelry, and (for the wealthiest) cars. Suits and jewelry, for example, are always presented by women to the guest of honour during a speech. Gifts of livestock, on the other hand, are not presented during the speeches, with the exception of a horse presented to a man on his birthday. In this case, the recipient is forced to mount the horse and briefly ride by all the guest tables. Those who give exceptionally large gifts may be immediately presented with a counter-gift.

After a small group of guests finish their toasts and gift giving, the announcer instructs them to dance to a song played by live musicians. When the song finishes, a duo is typically singled out for a prize, such as a headscarf or a shot of vodka, for their fine dancing abilities. Then, they thank the announcer for this prize, and he calls up the next group of guests. And, so the feast continues until the last meal is served and the last toasts have been given. By this point, many of the guests have already gone home or on to another feast.

KAZAK GIFT EXCHANGE IN PRACTICE:

Prior to a feast, a married couple decides what type of gift they should give another household and then they present the gift as a gift from their entire family. If elderly parents or married children living in the same household receive a separate invitation to a particular feast, then they would be expected to provide a separate gift.⁶ Since women are more aware of the family's finances and the potential gifts on hand, they often put more input into the gift-giving decisions. Although the decisions are mutually made, women are responsible for presenting gifts to host families, with the exception of livestock gifts. In slight contrast to Kazakstan, gift exchange and household network maintenance in other Muslim societies (Tapper 1978, McAlister 1990) and in northern India (Sharma 1986) are described as an exclusive domain for women. In Kazakstan, women dominate these activities, but men also play a role by helping to decide what gifts to give and by providing some labour help during feasts.

The gifts exchanged at ritual feasts symbolize social relationships between households (Mauss 1990; Marx 1973; Werbner 1990). In most cases, the giving household and the receiving household have already exchanged gifts on other occasions. The current gift simply demonstrates that the giving household seeks to continue the relationship in the manner of gift exchange, as well as other forms of social cooperation. The feast provides an opportunity to confirm this social relationship.

As Werbner (1990) and Marx (1973) note, it is also possible to terminate a social relationship by not providing a gift at the appropriate time. This rarely happens. It is not uncommon, however, for Kazak households to give less than what the receiving household expects. Sometimes, this is done intentionally, while other times, it is for purely economical reasons. Regardless of the cause, such exchanges are a recurring subject for women's gossip as well as a source of inter-household conflict.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, Kazaks are very concerned with determining the value of a gift so they can pick out the appropriate counter-gift in the future.⁷ Like Americans exchanging gifts during Christmas (Miller 1993), Kazaks have culturally informed notions of quantitative equivalence in gift giving. There is no specified gift to give for a certain occasion. The type of gift often depends on what the family has on hand. The value of the gift, though, depends on gifts and services received from the other household in the past, and on gifts or services that may be needed in the near future. On the one hand, mutually exchanged gifts of equivalent value signify relationships based on equality. On the other hand, an excessive gift may be used to establish a degree of power over the receiving household. For example, a household that repeatedly gives more than it receives in material gifts may expect the receiving household to help out with gifts of labour or a personal favour.⁸ This is even the case when the excessive gifts are perceived to be acts of altruism by both households because the exchange partners are close relatives living under different economic conditions.⁹

The nature of gifts in Kazakstan is not comparable to certain societies where gifts and commodities are distinct and non-transferable. Unlike the armshells and necklaces of the Kula exchange in the South Pacific, the goods exchanged in the Kazak ritual economy are not eternally gifts; they can exist as either commodities or gifts. Moreover, all gifts have some practical value and all gifts can be recycled. During the course of a lifetime, a good may be involved in multiple exchanges, alternating between being a

gift and a commodity.¹⁰ A felt rug, for example, may enter the world in Household A where it is produced by a small group of women. Household A may think about selling the rug at the bazaar, but family members hear that the prices are low. Instead of selling the rug, Household A presents it as a gift to Household B during a wedding feast. Household B has no need for the rug so the family members choose to sell the rug at the bazaar for 500 tenge to Household C. Household C then presents the rug to their relatives in Household D who are struggling to put together their daughter's dowry prior to her wedding. Household D already has the required number of felt rugs for their daughter's dowry, so they choose to save the rug for a while; a month later, they recycle the rug as a gift to Household E during a housewarming party. And, so on and so on. In a series of transactions, the rug converts from a gift to a commodity, and from a commodity to a gift. During the gift exchanges, the giving households are not concerned with the way in which the felt rug is eventually used. For them, the meaning of the gift can be found in the transaction itself.

THE RITUAL ECONOMY AND THE ART OF HOUSEHOLD NETWORKING

In addition to understanding the unstated rules of gift exchange, it is important to know why the Kazak ritual economy has persisted throughout the Soviet period and into the post Soviet period. Soviet scholars, such as Poliakov (1992), blame traditionalism and Islam. Poliakov, for example, argues that these "Muslim traditions" have prevented Central Asians from being effective contributors to the modern state economy. His explanation unfortunately fails to explain how individuals have benefitted from participating in the ritual economy and how these "traditions" have changed over time.

Ritual feasts and exchanges have continued to play a significant role in Kazak society because there is a strong relationship between the ritual and the non-ritual economy. This relationship is best observed through the creation, preservation and manipulation of household networks. According to Kazak custom, social status and power is achieved largely through displays of hospitality and generosity. During ritual celebrations, both host and guest households have the opportunity to demonstrate their generosity and thus build and maintain social networks which provide them with material benefits in the non-ritual economy.

Just as these informal networks are celebrated during ritual events, they are manipulated in daily life. Household networks and networking provide a

valid explanation to explain why some households are faring better than others in the non-ritual economy. As in the Soviet past, access to goods and services are often obtained through personal acquaintances rather than financial means alone. For example, current opportunities to receive land from the state farms are very limited and good connections are essential. It is therefore not surprising that the village intelligentsia and elite are receiving greater portions of land than the state farm workers.

Although each household has a reserve network of kin and some households have inherent demographic and economic advantages, household networking should be regarded as an activity that involves decision, choice and skill.¹¹ For example, a household with limited resources may decide to provide only labour help during the circumcision feast of a relative so that they may provide an appropriate gift during the wedding of a village elite's son. Ritual feasts and gift exchanges are not simply traditions that the Kazaks blindly follow. Instead, the feasts and gifts are opportunities for actors, particularly social climbers, to manipulate their standing in the social hierarchy. And for this reason, Kazaks 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. All households are routinely invited to the feasts of close relatives, neighbours, 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 with middle-aged couples tend to be more active than households 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 survive in the non-ritual economy. They maintain these networks largely through the exchange of female labour and ritual gifts. One of the most important household networking strategies for middle-aged couples is the marriage of their children to families who have powerful networks. The marriage bond serves to link the networks of in-laws (*qudalar*). It is not surprising then that parents hope to be involved in the selection of their children's mates and often arrange the marriages with influential friends.¹²

In contrast to middle-aged couples, 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. If the couple lives with the boy's parents, which is often the case, the young wife may remain busy at home completing household chores and caring for her children and her husband's younger siblings while her husband's parents attend feasts. Additionally, her labour may be used for the older couple's networking purposes.

Elderly couples are also largely dependent on middle-aged couples for their survival needs. As a result, they no longer have the same economic motives for participating in the ritual economy. For the elderly, feasting is mostly a social activity. 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, which they perceive to be loud and monotonous. Those who are particularly religious may also object to the high level of alcohol consumption at the evening feasts. Instead of attending the evening feast, the elderly arrive at the host household during the afternoon and enjoy a few hours socializing and eating with old friends. This includes the women who are no longer expected to put in long hours toward feast preparations.

The second factor influencing the frequency of feast attendance is social position. People of 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 attenders in the community. When they attend a feast, they are seated at the best table and served more quickly. In return, they are expected to provide a larger gift than the average person. During the *toi* season, it is not uncommon for such people to juggle invitations to several different feasts on the same day. If for some reason they are unable to attend a feast, they are expected to arrive as a special guest at a later date in order to present their gift.

It seems likely then that people of influence suffer economic losses from their constant gift-giving. However, the contrary is true. They actually make a handsome profit when they hold a feast of their own, for all of their generous gifts over time must be reciprocated. Additionally, their expenses on ritual exchange are balanced by material gains they receive from their positions of power. Therefore, it can be argued that people of influence benefit both socially and economically from the ritual economy.

Is the same true for poor households? Do they also benefit both socially and

economically from feasting? Economically, the poor are at a great disadvantage. Although they are invited to fewer feasts and are permitted to give gifts with less economic value, the resources poor households expend on ritual 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 mothers bring 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 wealthier relatives to come up with the necessary financial resources. Their relatives intercede because their prestige is also at stake. The resulting debts serve to further relations of inequality among related households.

Socially, it is possible to argue that poor households enjoy some benefits from feasting. To begin, feasts provide them with some opportunity to increase their social standing, albeit gradually. But, more importantly, feasting "reinforces values of cooperation, reciprocity and communal responsibility" (McAllister 1990). And, poor households constantly benefit from the perpetuation of these values. Neighbours and relatives, for example, regularly provide poor households with small gifts of extra food and hand-me-down clothing. Members of the poor households, in return, make themselves available to their generous neighbours when they are preparing for feasts and special guests. Finally, during the lengthy preparations and festivities involved with a *toi*, a great deal of information is exchanged that is beneficial for daily survival. During my stay, for example, rural Kazaks typically compared the prices of goods in their village and the surrounding cities of Turkestan, Shymkent and Tashkent. This was not idle conversation. It was quite common for both men and women to travel to other markets in order to make profits from speculative trade or to save money on the large purchases for their daughters' dowries.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE AND THE RITUAL ECONOMY

Since the beginning of *perestroika*, political and economic policies in Kazakstan have brought about the potential for change in the Kazak ritual economy. Without understanding the motives and mechanisms involved with feasting, one might even predict the demise of the Kazak ritual economy during the post-Soviet period. After all, in the presence of low salaries, the mustering of financial resources for rituals has become much more difficult. And, compared to the Soviet period, there are many new alternatives for investing resources, such as the pursuit of private business and private farming.¹³

Despite economic hardship and perhaps because of it, I would argue that economic and political reforms in post-Soviet Kazakhstan have made the Kazak ritual economy even more viable than before. This is because household networks have become increasingly important for daily survival. Most rural households have become more subsistence-oriented and these activities require a great deal of cooperation between households. In Kazak society, ritual feasting is the primary method used to build and maintain the necessary household networks. The labour and gifts exchanged at feasts are reciprocated in future feasts and in other aspects of life. All gifts, therefore, are given in expectation of some return. From the Kazak perspective, only a reckless person would choose not to continue participating in the ritual economy.

Having explained why the Kazak ritual economy will survive the post-Soviet transitions, it is important to examine how economic and political change has been affecting ritual exchange patterns. One of the greatest changes has been the inflow of new goods in the ritual economy. The introduction of a market economy has saturated local markets with new goods. During the Soviet period, the selection of consumer goods in rural areas was not very large and the goods were almost exclusively of Soviet origin. In the post-Soviet period, many of these Soviet goods, the majority of which are produced outside of Kazakhstan, are no longer available at state stores. Instead of these goods, the rural Kazak consumer is now faced with a huge assortment of imported goods from China, Turkey, Pakistan and India. Several informants have suggested that the flood of new and interesting products in the local bazaar is probably the only positive outcome of the Soviet Union's demise. Accordingly, Kazak consumers have adapted their tastes to the new goods and have started to include these imported goods in their gift exchanges. This is especially true for gifts of material and clothing where there is a strong preference for "imported" goods. Another example is cash gifts, where American dollars are viewed as a much more prestigious gift than the Kazak tenge.

Economic change in Kazakhstan has also affected the level of socio-economic differences between households. Some households, such as the private farmers and merchants, are responding to the economic crisis by becoming more entrepreneurial and profit oriented, while others are becoming even more dependent on their private livestock and small gardens. Social stratification has affected feasting among both the wealthy and the poor. During a period of rapid change, the financial status of a household is often unclear to outsiders. The elite in the Soviet period are

not necessarily the elite of today. Feasts and gift exchange provide the ideal opportunity for the former elite to confirm their position in society and for social climbers to demonstrate their true place in society. I would argue that feasting and gift-giving among the elite have become more competitive and more expensive due to the process of social stratification and the emergence of imported goods.

On the other side of the social spectrum, the poor households are continuing to sponsor feasts, but they are having smaller and less expensive feasts 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. 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 expend on ritual are needed for basic survival. But, they also realize that participation in the ritual economy provides them with social benefits and preserves their family pride. So, like the elite households, they continue to attend and sponsor feasts.

A final source of change in the ritual economy evolved with the official revival of Kazak national culture. During the last years of the Soviet Union and throughout the post-Soviet period, the state has legitimized a variety of previously banned social customs. In connection with the ritual economy, circumcisions and circumcision feasts have become in vogue, although they were strongly discouraged by the Soviet state as barbaric practices with Islamic content. In the past, rural families did not stop circumcising their sons, but they did keep the celebration to a small family gathering. Local government leaders, in particular, did not want to bring attention to the fact that they were circumcising their sons. Ironically, it is the local elite today who have sponsored the largest feasts.

Another social practice that has been recently restored with great vigor is the horse sport known in Kazak as *kokpar*. In recent years, *kokpar* events have become an integral part of a large feast. The sponsor of the feast provides the prizes for one particular *kokpar* match, which may be held the same weekend of the feast or several weeks later. The game involves two large teams with up to 300 riders who fight in a large field for control over a goat carcass which must be dragged to a goal. The player, not the team, who scores a goal receives a prize, such as a baby camel or a sheep.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the economic and political changes that have occurred in Kazakstan since the fall of the Soviet Union have done little to decrease the importance of the ritual economy. Change in economic structures has heightened the importance of strong social networks. As this essay has demonstrated, Kazak women play a key role in the art of household networking. They are the primary providers of labour during feasts and they dominate the decision-making process in regard to gift-giving. This important social role has been previously ignored in the scant Western literature on Central Asian women. In a frequently cited article, Martha Olcott (1991), for example, describes Central Asian women as the blind followers of traditional practices which have predetermined their social role from birth. The women I met in Kazakstan did not match this description. They were active social agents striving toward specific social goals. Young girls, for example, were attempting to influence their parents' choice in marriage arrangements, and if that failed, they might plan for their own kidnapping with a secret boyfriend. Middle-aged women were mostly concerned about their family's well-being and the future of their children and they used their participation in the ritual economy to achieve these goals.

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ENDNOTES:

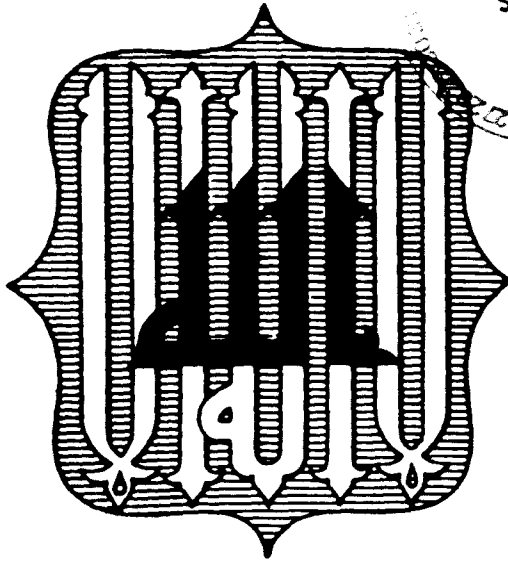
1. Field work in Kazakhstan was carried out from July to August 1992, from November 1993 to December 1994, and from February to August 1995. Out of a total twenty-two months in Kazakhstan, I spent thirteen months in one particular rural region of Southern Kazakhstan oblast (formerly Shymkent oblast). These research visits were generously sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, the International Research and Exchanges board, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University and the Center for Global Change and World Peace at Indiana University.
2. In a survey of 100 households, I gathered complete data on the age at marriage and child bearing for 157 Kazak women born between 1924 and 1977. For these women, the average age of marriage was 20.1 years. Only 11 women married before the age of 18, and only 10 women married after the age of 24. Most women give birth to their first child within the first few years of marriage. Reproductive data for rural Kazaks was examined more extensively in an earlier paper entitled "Gender, Household Dynamics and Reproductive Behavior in Contemporary Rural Kazakhstan," presented at the Conference on Population, Family and Gender in Muslim Central Asia and the Middle East, Bogazici University, May 31 - June 24, 1995.
3. Elizabeth Bacon (1966) and Ingvar Svanberg (1989) also provide description of Kazak feasts. Bacon's work compares feasts among various Central Asian groups in pre-Soviet and early Soviet periods. Svanberg's work discusses rituals among Kazak migrants in Turkey.
4. *Toilar* in the cities are held either at home or at banquet halls in restaurants, hotels or workplaces.
5. In the pre-Soviet period, large feasts sponsored by Kazak tribal leaders may last several days (Winner 1980).
6. Before attending a feast, I would often ask my family what I should take as a gift. For most occasions, they would tell me that it was not necessary for me to bring a gift as I was an outsider and I was attending the *toi* with them. Eventually, I stopped asking, as I understood that I was only a temporary visitor and I would never be holding a *toi* of my own where a return gift could be presented. However, I felt a bit guilty attending feasts empty-handed. Since I always took photographs at the feasts, I started my own custom of presenting the host families with these color pictures after I had them developed in Almaty. Sometimes, I would even use my Polaroid camera, although this was a dangerous activity that I didn't enjoy. Regardless, these photo gifts were always well-received.

As time passed, my family surprised me by sometimes asking, "What are YOU going to take today as a gift to the *toi*?" They didn't ask for every feast; they only asked if I had received a separate invitation and the host household had helped me a lot or provided me with gifts on other occasions. For these occasions, I would present a separate gift in addition to the photographs.
7. This was particularly evident when I presented people with goods from the United States that were not available in Kazakhstan. Some people were practically obsessed with getting me to divulge the actual price of items.
8. This practice of providing an excessive gift at a feast in expectation of a returned favor in the future has also been described in socialist China (Yang 1994).

9. Richard Wilk (1993) argues that altruistic and self interested motives are never mutually exclusive, even within households or between related households.
10. These ideas are inspired by Arjun Appadurai's edited volume (1986), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*.
11. The recent literature on household economies within economic anthropology encourages scholars to explain variations between households by examining relationships within the household. See, for example, Richard Wilk (1989).
12. The parents are not always successful in choosing their children's marriage partners. It is very common for rural Kazak boys to "kidnap" their brides. Sometimes, the brides are co-conspirators in their own kidnapping. In other cases, the bride might not even recognize her kidnapper, but she "stays" because her reputation will be tarnished if she refuses. Further, bride kidnappings often involves the agreement of the boy's parents, but rarely involve the knowledge or consent of the girl's parents.
13. In a study of Soviet Buryat collective farms in the 1970s, Caroline Humphrey (1983) suggests that the Buryats, a people that share a nomadic heritage with the Kazaks, began to increase their expenditures on ritual feasts and gift-giving during the Brezhnev years because there were limited uses for money in an economy where social services were provided, consumer goods were largely unavailable, and private household economies were officially restricted. Interviews confirm that a similar process occurred in Kazakstan. The current lack of cash savings suggests that it is likely that more changes will occur in the ritual economy.

THE ISLAMIC QUARTERLY

A Review of Islamic Culture



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Volume XLI

Number 1

FIRST QUARTER 1997

THE ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTRE
146 PARK ROAD - LONDON NW8 7RG - ENGLAND